

**TWO VARIETIES OF MINDFULNESS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING  
THE TREATMENTS OF SATIPATṬHĀNA GIVEN BY  
AJAAN LEE DHAMMADHARO AND MAHĀSI SAYĀDAW**

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**I hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted  
as an exercise for a degree at any other institution,  
and that it is entirely my own work.**

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## Abstract

Two Varieties of Mindfulness: Comparing and Contrasting the Treatments of  
Satipaṭṭhāna Given by Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo and Mahāsi Sayādaw

By

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Although *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, the establishing of mindfulness (on body, feelings, mind, and *dharmas*) is a key teaching in the Buddhism of the Pāli Canon, it is presented differently in the *Sutta Piṭaka* and the later commentaries. Given the contemporary resurgence in interest in the concept and practice of mindfulness, it is worthwhile to examine the divergent interpretations of *satipaṭṭhāna* that originate from these sources. This divergence can be seen very clearly by comparing the treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* given by Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo (1907-1961) of Thailand and Mahāsi Sayādaw (1904-1982) of Burma/Myanmar. Each greatly influenced modern Buddhist movements in the last century and each of their histories is certainly worthy of investigation on its own. Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw is recognized for his contributions to the establishment of the *vipassanā* movement across Burma as well as overseas through support from U Nu, the first prime minister of Burma, Ajaan Lee is credited with bringing the Thai Forest Tradition's teaching into the Buddhist mainstream in Central Thailand and beyond because of his mastery of concentration, his commitment to upholding ascetic practices, and his skill in giving *Dhamma* talks.

Given their claims to being grounded in scriptural authority, I examine to what extent their interpretations of *satipaṭṭhāna* in their treatises—especially *Frames of Reference* (1949) by Ajaan Lee and *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation* (1954) of Mahāsi Sayādaw—were actually adapted from the Canonical *suttas*’ presentation of meditation. The study begins by making a comparison of the *suttas*’ treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* with that of the commentarial literature, focusing on the points of discrepancy to enable the reader to determine which texts Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw are drawing on. It continues first with a detailed account of each teacher’s formative years and a brief historical contextualization, and second, by means of highlighting critical technical terminology used in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*, specifically, their understanding of key terms in meditation such as *sati*, *sampajañña*, *ātappa*, *anattā*, *samādhi*, and *vipassanā*. By comparing their treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, I argue that one of the main reasons why their core teachings diverge is because they draw on different foundational sources. In the areas where the *suttas*’ elaboration of *satipaṭṭhāna* differs from that of the commentaries, Ajaan Lee’s treatment is largely in line with the *suttas*, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory is deeply rooted in the postcanonical commentaries. This comparative study thereby provides more detail and depth to a history of the development of the Thai Forest Tradition and the *vipassanā* movement.

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## List of Abbreviations

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
Cv	Cullavagga
Dhp	Dhammapada
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
Khp	Khuddakapāṭha
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
Mv	Mahāvagga
PTS	Pāli Text Society
Paṭis	Paṭisambhidāmagga
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya
Ud	Udāna
Vism	Visuddhimagga
Vism-mhṭ	Visuddhimagga-mahāṭikā

# Chapter One: Introduction and Approach

“How does a monk live with himself as his island, himself as his refuge, with no other as his refuge; with the *Dhamma* as his island, the *Dhamma* as his refuge, with no other as his refuge? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in and of themselves... mind in and of itself... mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. This is how a monk lives with himself as his island, himself as his refuge, with no other as his refuge; with the *Dhamma* as his island, the *Dhamma* as his refuge, with no other as his refuge.”<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Introduction

*Satipaṭṭhāna*, or mindfulness, has become one of the most widespread forms of meditation in the present day. This practice has attracted an enormous following from all backgrounds regardless of faith or tradition, including those who proclaims an ‘a-religious/secular’ orientation. Many meditation centers have been established, and hundreds of books, articles, and manuals have been written for the purpose of promoting mindfulness. Among a growing flood of mindfulness literature, one may encounter significant disputed issues related to the interpretation of key terms, such as *sati*, *sampajañña*, *jhānas*, and *vipassanā* in the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. This makes us wonder about the underlying factors causing these discrepancies. As an attempt to tackle those issues, this dissertation will compare and contrast the treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* given by two renowned meditation teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ajaan Lee Dhammaddhara (1907-1961) and Mahāsi Sayādaw (1904-1982), whose teachings have had considerable impact on the establishment and development of the modern mindfulness movements. By comparing and contrasting their treatments, I argue that the primary foundational sources are the key factor constituting the discrepancy between teachings of these two teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> DN 16. All translations of *sutta* passages used in this study are by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu unless otherwise noted.

Whereas Ajaan Lee’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is largely based on the Pāli Canon’s *suttas*, Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is mostly consistent with the commentaries.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1.1 *Satipaṭṭhāna* in Pāli Literature

*Satipaṭṭhāna*<sup>3</sup> is one of the main teachings recorded in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, which is well preserved in canonical languages such as Pāli, Sanskrit, Classical Chinese, and Tibetan. This “heart of Buddhist meditation”<sup>4</sup> can be found as part of several formulations, such as the noble eightfold path, the five faculties, the five strengths, and the seven factors for awakening. Although *satipaṭṭhāna* is presented in all four primary *Nikāyas*—the *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, and *Aṅguttara Nikāya*—the detail of its presentation varies between *suttas*. Overall, *satipaṭṭhāna* is understood as a teaching of the way to establish mindfulness by engaging with four frames of reference—body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas*. From a traditional viewpoint, this meditative technique for training the mind to ideally keep mindfulness firmly established in a particular frame of reference in all its activities<sup>5</sup> does not operate alone. It should work hand-in-hand with

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<sup>2</sup> The commentaries here mainly refer to the sources that Mahāsi Sayādaw used as main resources, such as *The Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the *Papañcasūdanī*, the commentary to the *Majjhima Nikāya*; the *Sumaṅgala-vilāsinī*, the commentary to the *Dīgha Nikāya*; and the *Visuddhimagga*. All these commentaries are attributed to Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa.

<sup>3</sup> In many circumstances, whenever the Buddha mentioned mindfulness (*sati*) he usually referred to *satipaṭṭhāna*. In my dissertation, mindfulness (*sati*) [meditation] is replaced with *satipaṭṭhāna* [meditation]. The intention here is that readers would be aware of the fact that in the discourses, mindfulness meditation refers to the contemplation of body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas*, in which several mental qualities such as alertness, adency, or remembering to putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, are included rather than an act of “bare attention,” “being mindful,” or “being at the present moment,” as the way mindfulness meditation is taught by some modern meditation teachers. However, please keep in mind that this replacement only takes place when mindfulness is mentioned as a practice in general. In other circumstances, for example, when going with other qualities such as *sampajañña* (alertness) and *ātappa* (adency), *sati* (mindfulness) remains as itself which is more likely understood as memory or reference.

<sup>4</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A Handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha’s Way of Mindfulness* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1965), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Handful of Leaves*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2016), 181.

other factors of the noble path, such as right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), and right concentration (*sammā-samādhi*), for the purpose of knowing the mind, shaping the mind, and liberating the mind from its defilements and sufferings.<sup>6</sup>

The introduction of the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice in the *Sutta Piṭaka* seems to indicate that the instructions are explicitly intended for monastic audience, people who renounced the household life and were seeking spiritual happiness. Many were interested in the teachings that promised the elimination of their sufferings through the establishment of unconditional happiness, which was depicted in the early texts as the one that has no blame or drawbacks, and is permanent.<sup>7</sup> This is why the teachings of the Buddha in general, and *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness meditation in particular, were directed toward disenchantment and dispassion for the worldly life, so that whoever has conviction in the Buddha's *Dhamma* and practices in line with its instructions could replace a mundane happiness with a noble one.<sup>8</sup> The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, for example, clearly assures in the beginning of the discourse that: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and distress, for the attainment of the right method, and for the realization of Unbinding—in other words, the four establishings of mindfulness."<sup>9</sup>

In *Abhidhamma* literature, which is a formalized and scholastic systemization of the *Dhamma* according to particular schools' perspectives, *satipaṭṭhāna* continues to occupy a significant position.<sup>10</sup> Many Buddhists hold the view that the *Abhidhamma* is

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<sup>6</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> MN 10; SN 47.4; SN 47.41; AN 9.34: AN3.47

<sup>8</sup> AN 8.53; AN 9.34

<sup>9</sup> MN 10

<sup>10</sup> For more detail see Bhikkhu Sujato, *A History of Mindfulness*, rev. ed. (Australia: Santipada, 2012), 252–72.

the words of the Buddha, but as scholars point out, *Abhidhamma* literature was composed centuries after the Buddha's time.<sup>11</sup> In addition to recording teachings that are common to all traditions, the *Abhidhamma* also includes distinct interpretations and understandings according to the specific philosophies and principles of different schools.<sup>12</sup> There is significant variation in the treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* in the *Abhidhamma* literatures of various schools, such as Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, Dharmaguptaka, Bahuśrutīya, Puggalavāda, etc..<sup>13</sup> In comparison to the description of *satipaṭṭhāna* in the *Sutta* literature, which is relatively concise and straightforward, the *Abhidhamma*'s accounts are more detailed and diverse with additional articulations related to significant concepts, such as *sati*, *sampajañña*, *samatha*, *vipassanā*, or *jhānas*. This attention to detail demonstrates that during the sectarian period, *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness undoubtedly remained an essential practice, even as interpretations changed.

The fifth century witnessed a considerable development of *satipaṭṭhāna* within the Theravāda tradition. The commentaries attributed to Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa recorded a detailed exposition on the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. For centuries, this became a primary reference for Theravāda followers in many countries.<sup>14</sup> However, it is crucial to note that prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *satipaṭṭhāna*, or mindfulness meditation, still circulated mostly only within monastic circles. It was taught in monasteries or conveyed privately

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<sup>11</sup> For more detail on the *Abhidhamma* literature see K. R Norman, *Pāli Literature: Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of All the Hīnayāna Schools of Buddhism* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1983), 96–98; Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 45–56; or Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, and Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004), 62–72.

<sup>12</sup> Bhikkhu Sujato, *A History of Mindfulness*, 252. See also Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 47–49.

<sup>13</sup> For more detail on the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* in the *Abhidhamma* literature of different schools see Chapter 13 and Chapter 17 in *A History of Mindfulness* by Bhikkhu Sujato.

<sup>14</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 188. See Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion on the commentaries.



between teachers and students. Lay Buddhists would barely have heard of *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness practice, much less participated in mindfulness retreats or engaged in any activity related to mindfulness, such as reading, interpreting, or applying it into daily life. And, there was almost no mindfulness movement that propagated to a large scale.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.1.2 *Satipaṭṭhāna* or Mindfulness in Modern Era

Since the last few decades, *satipaṭṭhāna*, or mindfulness meditation, has flourished and become widespread throughout the East and the West. It has become so common that many people in homes, meditation centers, hospitals, and schools begin and end their day on a cushion.<sup>16</sup> The growing prominence of mindfulness meditation was asserted by Nyanaponika Thera, a well-known German monk and author of *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, that: “This ancient Way of Mindfulness is as practicable today as it was 2,500 years ago. It is as applicable in the lands of the West as in the East; in the midst of life’s turmoil as well as in the peace of the monk’s cell. Right Mindfulness is, in fact, the indispensable basis of Right Living and Right Thinking—everywhere, at any time, for everyone.”<sup>17</sup> The extensive dissemination that did in fact occur is attributed to a variety of traditions and individuals, including the *Vipassanā*/Insight meditation in the lineage of Mahāsi Sayādaw, S.N. Goenka and Pa Auk Sayādaw, the Thai Forest Traditions in the lineage of Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Chah, the Plum Village Tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, just to name a few, and many other proponents of modern mindfulness.

In addition to the traditional utilization of mindfulness—cultivation for the sake of *nibbāna*, the ultimate goal for Buddhist practitioners—the modern era witnesses the

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<sup>15</sup> Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19.

<sup>16</sup> DharmaCrafts, *DharmaCrafts Bestsellers* (Laurence, MA: DharmaCrafts, 2013), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 7.

application of mindfulness in a variety of secular fields as psychological therapy, neuroscience, and spiritual care, etc. This is due to its tremendous efficacy, which has been explored and recognized recently. In these fields, mindfulness is promoted as a remedy “for anxiety and affective disorders including post-traumatic stress, for alcoholism and drug dependency, for attention-deficit disorder, for anti-social and criminal behavior, and for the commonplace debilitating stresses of modern urban life,”<sup>18</sup> and many other problems. For instance, having attended a *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā* retreat at Mahāsi Thathana Yeiktha (MTY) meditation center, Rear Admiral E. H. Shattock, a British naval officer and one of the first Western meditators to introduce mindfulness to English audiences, said that: “Meditation is in no sense necessarily a religious one, though it is usually thought of as such. It is itself basically academic, practical, and profitable.”<sup>19</sup>

The recent development of *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness meditation, according to David L. McMahan, is that it is being privatized, detraditionalized or deinstitutionalized for it is taught detachable from the ethical, ritualistic, social and cosmological context of Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> From a different angle, this can be seen as a way to allow the propagation of Buddhist meditation in foreign contexts. As one Ajaan said when he taught breath meditation to a non-Buddhist audience, the breath does not belong to any particular religion.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, some modern mindfulness meditators, after receiving some benefit

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<sup>18</sup> Robert H. Sharf, “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (And Why It Matters),” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52, no. 4 (2015): 472.

<sup>19</sup> E. H. Shattock, *An Experiment in Mindfulness: An English Admiral’s Experiences in a Buddhist Monastery* (United States: Kessinger Publishing, 2006), 17.

<sup>20</sup> David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 187.

<sup>21</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Awareness Itself: The Teachings of Ajaan Fuang Jotiko* (Valley Center: CA, Metta Forest Monastery, 2005), 45.

from practicing mindfulness, have wanted to share it with non-Buddhists so that they could also access this technique without encountering any religious barriers. In such contexts, divorcing mindfulness from Buddhist ethical, ritualistic, and cosmological aspects seems plausible.

As mindfulness meditation becomes better known and widespread, it is worthwhile to note that although many modern meditation teachers teach *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness meditation, their theories and pedagogies are quite different from one another. For example, in *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation In Everyday Life*, a national bestseller, Jon Kabat-Zinn, a psychotherapist known for his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, which has adapted Buddhist meditation to a variety of medical and psychological applications, says that: “mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”<sup>22</sup> Mindfulness also has been interpreted as “bare attention, or present-centered awareness.”<sup>23</sup> Other meditation teachers, give differing views, for example, that “[mindfulness] is a faculty of active memory, adept at calling to mind and keeping in mind instructions and intentions that will be useful on the path.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the perspectives on the relationship between *samatha* and *vipassanā* in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness meditation are also diverse. For instance, whereas some meditation teachers propagate the cultivation of *vipassanā* while dispensing with the

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<sup>22</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), 4. See also Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment and Your Life* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2012), 17.

<sup>23</sup> Sharf, “Is Mindfulness Buddhist,” 472. See also Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 30–45; Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering*, 2nd ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), 72–89.

<sup>24</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Right Mindfulness: Memory and Ardency on the Buddhist Path* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2012), 1.

development of *samatha*,<sup>25</sup> others argue that “anyone who wishes to put an end to mental defilement should—in addition to perfecting the principles of moral behavior and cultivating seclusion—be committed to *samatha* and endowed with *vipassanā*.”<sup>26</sup> It is important to learn that many of the modern understandings of *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness meditation can be traced back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During that time, *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness meditation was revived and disseminated widely by a number of reform movements and individuals in the East.<sup>27</sup> One of the most interesting features in this revival process is that their textual grounding is different: where one largely follows the *suttas*’ teachings, the other relies mostly on the exposition of the commentaries. This is the point of divergence for Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw.

Among various contemporary meditation teachers, Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw are worthy of attention for a number of reasons. Firstly, they both are from traditions that strongly emphasize meditation training, and their teachings have been disseminated globally. The *vipassanā*/insight meditation organization is one of the biggest meditation organizations in the world, with hundreds of centers and branches in Burma (Myanmar) and overseas. Meanwhile, the Thai Forest Tradition is well known for its ascetic practice and meditation teaching in Thailand and the West. The second reason that they are worthy of closer examination is that both of them have written treatises on *satipaṭṭhāna*,<sup>28</sup> which have become primary meditation manuals for their followers and

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<sup>25</sup> Gil Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 166.

<sup>26</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Noble Strategy* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2015), 38–39.

<sup>27</sup> McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 186.

<sup>28</sup> In regard to their treatises on *satipaṭṭhāna*, it is noteworthy to keep in mind that Ajaan Lee dictated his books to listeners who wrote them down and then reviewed what they had recorded before giving permission to have them printed. His earliest treatise on *satipaṭṭhāna* was the *Four Frames of Reference* published in 1948. Others like the *Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind* and *A Refuge in Awakening*

sympathizers. Indeed, their meditation teachings and theories have, in turn, shaped the views of modern scholars and meditation teachers. In addition to these, it is because Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw themselves are key figures who have made significant contributions to the development of their traditions as they have built and established many monasteries and centers in their countries and overseas to promote meditation practice.

### 1.1.3 Mahāsi Sayādaw and the Burmese *Vipassanā* Movement

Indeed, when observing the way meditation in general or mindfulness in particular is presented and interpreted, we encounter a flood of literature of interpretations and instructions, both scholarly and non-scholarly, that more often than not can be traced back to the beginning of the modern *vipassanā* movement,<sup>29</sup> which is recognized to be early twentieth-century Burma. So far, the movement can be traced back to Ledi Sayādaw (Saya Dīa Thet, 1846-1923),<sup>30</sup> who is well known for his tremendous encouragement of the study of Buddhism among the laity, establishing centers throughout Burma for lay followers and monastics to learn *Abhidhamma* and practice meditation. A number of contemporary Burmese lay-meditation movements such as the tradition of U

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were published much later in his life. They were translated into English by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. Similarly, Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatise, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, was transcribed from the tape recording. It was published in book form in 1954. In this treatise, Mahāsi Sayādaw gave "a methodical training in the right system of *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā* (Insight Meditation through Mindfulness)." It was translated into English by U Pe Thin, a lay meditator disciple of Mahāsi Sayādaw, who was an interpreter in many *vipassanā* courses at the center in its early days.

<sup>29</sup> For more detail on *vipassanā* movement see Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995): 253–55, and McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 185–86.

<sup>30</sup> For more detail on Ledi Sayādaw see Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Ba Khin (1898-1971), which was strongly popularized by S.N Goenka (1924-2013), claim to derive from Ledi Sayādaw.<sup>31</sup>

Among the Burmese *vipassanā* meditation approaches, the “New Burmese method,” which was later known as the “Mahāsi method,” was the first to have a widespread impact on meditation practice in East Asia as well as in the West.<sup>32</sup>

Nationwide dissemination first began under the support of the Burmese government, with Prime Minister U Nu as a main patron.<sup>33</sup> In 1949, as part of the pro-Buddhist policies of the newly independent Burma, U Nu invited Mahāsi Sayādaw to Rangoon to take charge of the Thathana Yeiktha—later known as Mahāsi Thathana Yeiktha (MTY)—a new government-sponsored meditation center open to the laity. The “New Burmese method,” or the “Mahāsi method” promoted by Mahāsi Sayādaw at MTY proved to be a tremendously popular technique: since 1973, some 15,000 students are said to have trained there. Mahāsi Sayādaw’s disciples have since strongly advocated his method in many countries in Asia, Europe, and America. Influential meditation teachers in North America, such as Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Jon Kabat-Zinn, often claim their tradition in the lineage of Mahāsi Sayādaw. Today many people in the West, when they speak of *vipassanā* meditation, usually refer to the “Mahāsi method,”<sup>34</sup> or at least a system inspired by the Mahāsi method. As the Mahāsi’s *vipassanā* movement dominated and spread in several countries in the East and the West,

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<sup>31</sup> Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 54–55.

<sup>32</sup> Bhikkhu Analayo, “The Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation,” *Buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de*, October 2018, 1, <https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/dynamicsinsight.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999), 205–207. See also Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 255.

<sup>34</sup> Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 255.

much research has been conducted on this movement. Besides the pro-*vipassanā* movement, there are also criticisms of the theory and practice methods of this reform movement.<sup>35</sup>

#### 1.1.4 Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo and Thai Forest Tradition

Compared to Mahāsi Sayādaw, Ajaan Lee was not very famous outside of his home country, in this case, Thailand. However, Ajaan Lee was one of the foremost Thai forest meditation teachers of the early twentieth century, and was also reputed for his mastery of supernatural powers. Ajaan Lee was credited with bringing the Thai Forest Tradition to the mainstream Buddhists in Central Thailand and responsible for establishing a dozen temples, including Wat Asokaram, which has thousands of followers.<sup>36</sup>

The modern Thai Forest Tradition,<sup>37</sup> or the *Kammaṭṭhāna*<sup>38</sup> tradition, is a community of ascetic meditation monks that can be traced back to Ajaan Mun Bhūridatto

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<sup>35</sup> Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization, *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation: Criticisms and Replies* (Rangoon: Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization, 1979). See also L. S. Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” *The Buddhist Forum 4, Seminar Papers 1994-1996*, ed. Tadeusz Skorupski (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1996), 42–43.

<sup>36</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 3rd ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2012), 14–17. See also J. L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand* (Singapore: Inst of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 270.

<sup>37</sup> Technically speaking, there are currently two Thai Forest Traditions, namely the Dhammayut and Mahanikaya. The Thai Forest Tradition in the lineage of Ajaan Mun is the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition while the Thai Forest Tradition in the lineage of Ajaan Chah is the Thai Mahanikaya Forest Tradition. Although Ajaan Chah studied with Ajaan Mun for a short period of time, he did not officially re-ordain into the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition. However, on the websites of Metta Forest Monastery and Abhayagiri Monastery, which belong to the lineage of Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Chah, respectively, as they claim, both use the term Thai Forest Tradition to introduce themselves.

<sup>38</sup> *Kammaṭṭhāna* literally means “basis of work” or “place of work.” The term is often used to identify the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition. See also Zhiyun Cai, “Doctrinal Analysis of the Origin and Evolution of the Thai *Kammaṭṭhāna* Tradition with a Special Reference to the Present *Kammaṭṭhāna* Ajahns” (PhD diss., University of the West, 2014), 80–86.

(1870-1949) in the early twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> Ajaan Mun is said to have followed the *Vinaya* (monastic discipline) faithfully, and also observed many of what are known as the thirteen classic *dhutaṅga* (ascetic) practices, such as living off alms food, wearing robes made of cast-off rags, dwelling in the forest, and eating only one meal a day. He often looked for secluded places in the forests of Thailand and Laos to meditate and avoided the responsibilities of settled monastic life. Ajaan Mun is a highly respected teacher and believed by many to have achieved the highest stage of sainthood or final liberation (*arahant*). Although spending most of his time dwelling in seclusion, he was able to attract a large following of students willing to put up with the hardships of forest life in order to study with him; Ajaan Lee is one of his first and foremost students. Among the wilderness traditions nowadays,<sup>40</sup> the modern Thai Forest Tradition in the lineage of Ajaan Mun became well recognized since the early twentieth century. The tradition also has firmly taken root in the West, and has attracted a large number of Western students—many of whom have been ordained as monks.<sup>41</sup>

It is essential to note that among the Thai Forest Ajaans in the last century, only Ajaan Lee left writings that provided a systematic meditation theory, in this case, one in which *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness meditation is presented in great detail and in a distinctive way. Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, thus, would reveal the

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<sup>39</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 81–110.

<sup>40</sup> For more detail on the Forest tradition in Sri Lanka and Burma see Michael Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), and John P. Ferguson, *Masters of the Buddhist Occult: The Burmese Weikzas* (N.p.: Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar, 1941).

<sup>41</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Customs of the Noble Ones,” Dhammatalks.org, August 2018, 1, <https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/Writings/CrossIndexed/Uncollected/MiscEssays/The%20Customs%20of%20the%20Noble%20Ones.pdf>.



perspectives of the Thai Forest Tradition on the matter. I came to know of him through the teachings and translations of Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, also known as Ajaan Geoff (Geoffrey DeGraff 1949—),<sup>42</sup> a white American student of Ajaan Lee's most devoted disciple, Ajaan Fuang Jotiko (1915-1986).<sup>43</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu spent ten years training under his teacher until the latter passed away. This provided him a precious opportunity to access Ajaan Lee's teachings as preserved in his writings and as embodied in his close student. Through the translations of Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, English-speaking audiences can access most of Ajaan Lee's teachings, including the treatises on *satipaṭṭhāna* recorded in *Fables of Reference* (1948), *Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind* (1955), and *A Refuge in Awakening* (1961).

By bringing Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* into conversation with that of Mahāsi Sayādaw, this comparison work especially focuses on investigating the

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<sup>42</sup> For a brief introduction of Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, see Orloff Rich, "Being a Monk: A Conversation with Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu," *Oberlin Alumni Magazine* 99, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 1–4, [http://www2.oberlin.edu/alummag/spring2004/feat\\_monk.html](http://www2.oberlin.edu/alummag/spring2004/feat_monk.html).

<sup>43</sup> Ajaan Fuang Jotiko was born in Chanthaburi province, Thailand. He was orphaned at the age of eleven and was subsequently raised in various monasteries. He received full ordination when he turned twenty. Ajaan Fuang, however, was not satisfied with his training as he realized that his fellow monastics in his monastery were not serious in their practice, so he began to look for a teacher who would provide him a training more in line with what he read. Having stayed in his sect for two years, he re-ordained with Ajaan Lee when Ajaan Lee came to establish a meditation monastery in an old cemetery just outside of Chanthaburi. From that point onward, Ajaan Fuang spent almost every Rains Retreat under his teacher until the latter passed away in 1961. After Ajaan Lee's death, Ajaan Fuang was expected to become the abbot of Wat Asokaram, which had developed as a large monastery by then, but Ajaan Fuang did not want the position. In 1965, upon the invitation of the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, Ajaan Fuang spent three Rains Retreats at Wat Makut Kasatriyaram to teach meditation to the Supreme Patriarch and his monks at the monastery, but he still wandered about the countryside during the dry season, searching for solitude. In 1968, Ajaan Fuang volunteered to take care of Wat Dhammasathit, a small new monastery built in a mountainous region near the coast of Rayong province, a land donated by a laywoman with ties to the Supreme Patriarch. Ajaan Fuang became the abbot of this monastery in 1971, shortly before the Supreme Patriarch died in a car accident. He dedicated his time to teaching meditation mainly in Rayong and Bangkok. His preferable teaching style was basically one-on-one, meditating together with his students and guiding them through initial steps before letting them practice by themselves. Similar to his teacher, Ajaan Fuang was also well known for his supernatural powers, great sense of humor, and humanity. Although this lay disciple community was smaller than Ajaan Lee's and other renowned meditation teachers, they were very loyal. Ajaan Fuang died in 1986 due to a heart attack, which happened while he was sitting in meditation. For more detail see Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Awareness Itself*, i–v.

significant differences in their interpretations of *sati*, *sampajañña*, *ātappa*, concentration, the relationship between *jhānas* and *vipassanā*, knowledge constituting the awakening, indication of noble attainments, and other relevant factors in mindfulness practice. The aim of this study is to answer a series of questions as follows:

### 1.1.5 Research Questions

- (1) What are their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*? How is mindfulness employed to foster concentration (*samādhi*) and insight (*vipassanā*) in their teachings?
- (2) What are the significant pedagogical differences in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*?
- (3) Assuming that there is a consistent way of interpreting the suttanta presentation of meditation as a coherent system, how strong or tenuous are their claims that their interpretation is canonically based?
- (4) What may account for their distinctive interpretations of *satipaṭṭhāna*? Did their account of monastic training, education, and soteriological vision differ from each other?

## 1.2 Literature Review

In light of these research questions, the literature materials are selected and divided into two main parts: (1) Meditation teachings of the Thai Forest Tradition and Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, and (2) Meditation teachings of Burmese *Vipassanā* Movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth century and Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

### 1.2.1 Thai Forest Tradition and Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo

In the last couple of decades, the Thai Forest Tradition has become popular for its rigorous practice and meditation training. It has been studied by a number of scholars with different interests and approaches. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah is perhaps one of the pioneers in exploring the Thai Forest Tradition in Thailand. Similar to his previous work, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*,<sup>44</sup> the *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* also focuses more on the social aspect of this tradition. In this study, he turns his attention to examine the practice of the forest monks and their relations with the central authority, village monks, and lay community. This project, as he asserted, is complementary to the earlier volume which discusses the relations between the Thai polity and the Buddhist *Saṅgha*.

In the first part of his study, he explores in brief the stages and rewards of Buddhist meditation as recorded in the *Visuddhimagga*. Tambiah appears to agree with the *Visuddhimagga*'s stance that divided meditation into two separate paths—concentration and insight—with the latter surpassing the former.<sup>45</sup> He also underscores that one can bypass concentration to practice *vipassanā*. Tambiah also briefly discusses the supernatural powers that result from concentration cultivation. However, he not only has doubts about the supernatural achievements, but also thinks that they are hindrances and irrelevant to the path of insight meditation.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>45</sup> Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 42–44.

<sup>46</sup> Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest*, 45–47.

In this section, the discussion of mindfulness is probably one of the most notoriously misleading points due to his misinterpretation of this factor. For example, in Early Buddhist meditation, mindfulness and one-pointedness of mind are defined differently, but Tambiah seems to equate these two notions as he says: “Mindfulness, or one-pointedness of mind, is a necessary virtue, without which an adept cannot progress, because it purifies the mind, defeats attachment, helps to defeat the illusion of the self as a reified entity....”<sup>47</sup>

In addition, when examining the life and practice of forest monks, Tambiah did not explain why forest monks, according to him, rely both on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the *Visuddhimagga* as their reference sources, yet hold a view that differs from the *Visuddhimagga* on the relationship between concentration and insight meditation. In one occasion Tambiah recorded Ajaan Maha Boowa’s student saying that: “the method of *samādhi* (concentration) and *paññā* (insight) are interrelated. Usually, *samādhi* precedes *paññā*; some persons may already possess *paññā* but must develop continuous concentration fully to use it.”<sup>48</sup> In another occasion he quoted another comment stating: “In any case, wisdom and concentration are a Dharma pair that go together and cannot be separated. But basically, it is concentration of all types that aids and supports the development of wisdom.”<sup>49</sup> These teachings of the forest monk are obviously different from the treatise of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa that Tambiah has noted. Whereas the *Visuddhimagga* promotes the theory of bare insight meditation which deemphasizes the cultivation of concentration, the forest monks hold a different view that concentration and

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<sup>47</sup> Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest*, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest*, 149.

<sup>49</sup> Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest*, 152.

insight must work hand in hand to support one another. This reveals the fact that even though Tambiah's study provides an informative data of the social aspects of the forest monks in Thailand, the meditation theory of the Thai Forest Tradition still needs to be further investigated.

Another project studying the forest monks in Thailand is J. L. Taylor's *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*.<sup>50</sup> In this book, Taylor attempts to explore the Forest Tradition in Northeast Thailand and its relationship with the Dhammayut hierarchy, the Central *Saṅgha* in Bangkok. His field research in the 1980s combined with the existing anthropological literature on Thai Buddhism, as well as the literature about the Thai Forest monks provided Taylor with a comprehensive understanding of the Thai Forest Tradition starting with Ajaan Mun and his closest disciples. He divides the establishment and development of this tradition into four phases—the wandering period, settlement, national recognition, and co-opt action with the Dhammayut administrative hierarchy and popular cult.<sup>51</sup> Although his case study presents interesting points on the intense relationship between the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition and the Central *Saṅgha* in Bangkok,<sup>52</sup> it, nonetheless, struggles in explaining the mutual relationship that developed at a later period, as we will see below.

*Forest Monks and the Nation-State* is also an anthropological and historical study focusing on the social aspect of the forest monks. It examines the meditation monasteries in Bangkhunphrom-Thewet area. Taylor, based on the account of Richard Allan

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<sup>50</sup> J. L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand* (Singapore: Inst of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 65–68.

O'Connor,<sup>53</sup> notes that, during the First Reign (1782-1809), these monasteries were meditation centers, and their abbots were forest monks specializing in meditation teaching, but the connection between these monasteries and forest monks was unknown. Until the Fifth Reign (1886-1910), forest monks still dominated these monasteries. A few individuals gained respect for their ascetic practice and had a reputation for their supernatural powers, including Somdet To, his disciples Luang Puu Phuu, Phra Ong Manewt, and many others.<sup>54</sup>

Taylor seems to follow Tambiah's thesis that during this period, forest monks had positive relations with the royals in power who kept appointing forest monks to be the abbots at these monasteries. Taylor also notes that forest monasteries were established by the donations of the royals and then local people who were inspired by their practice in parts of the countryside, especially in the Northeast region. Taylor then proposes that the forest monks became a frontier that attracted local people but was also linked to the royals' pervasive patronage system in Bangkok, which was set up to help the establishment of the Dhammayut order throughout the countryside. This formed a new movement during this time.<sup>55</sup> In Taylor's discussion, one can see that he is interested in studying how the forest monasteries were established, and that their relationship with the hierarchy in the capital led to the formation of an active Dhammayut movement. To him, this is perhaps how the central *saṅgha* and political power cooperated during the reform period to spread their ideas as well as unite and renew the religion.

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Allan O'Connor, "Urbanism and Religion: Community, Hierarchy, and Sanctity in Urban Thai Buddhist Temples" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1978).

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 31–32.

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 33.

Although Taylor does emphasize the discontinuity between Ajaan Mun's tradition and the previous forest traditions, he does not deeply explore the practice of forest monks and their meditation teachings. Occasionally, he briefly mentions the word "insight meditation," but does not elaborate further. Questions such as what kind of insight meditation, how the forest monks practice it, what philosophical understanding they use to undergird such a practice, and what the differences are between the forest monks in Ajaan Mun lineage's meditation theory and those of others, still have not yet addressed in his study.

Stories about the forest monks are often vivid and breathtaking. The *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand*<sup>56</sup> is also a significant study about the lives of wandering forest monks, their practice and teaching style. It is a recollection of ten typified auto/biographies from the forest monks, which begins with Ajaan Mun and his disciples. Based on the records of these ascetic (*dhutāṅga*) monks,<sup>57</sup> Kamala Tiyanich, the author, rearranges their accounts according to different themes to reveal her subjects' views on the forest life. She covers various interesting topics, such as their practicing to cope with fear in the dense forest when they encounter ghosts, wild elephants, or tigers; how to overcome bodily suffering; the battle with sexual desire and other hardships; their relationship with the villagers and central *sangha*; and their life when the forest was closed. Additionally, through a wide variety of published materials and interviews with their successors or survivors, the author lets the voices of the insiders speak to make the readers become the storytellers' audiences. Through her lens, an

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<sup>56</sup> Kamala Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

<sup>57</sup> Also known as thudong monks.

informative image of Theravāda Buddhism in Siam/Thailand has been captured in general, and the vivid lives of forest monks of the last century are brought alive. Besides the appealing stories about forest battles and its teachings, Tiyanich also dedicates her study to the tense relationship between forest monks and central *saṅgha*. She shows her deep sympathy and support to the former and refuses the notion of a single orthodoxy within Theravāda Buddhism, which is seen through the effort of king Mongkut, the reformer, and his successors and supporters.<sup>58</sup>

However, her study also reveals an incomplete understanding of the subject and is problematic with regard to some of its claims. This has been pointed out by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu in his article, *An Essay on the Thai Forest Tradition and its Relationship with the Dhammayut Hierarchy*.<sup>59</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's essay is a supplement for the studies above, in which he provides solid arguments revealing his in-depth knowledge in the field. This is not surprising since Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu is himself a forest monk who received training in Thailand for nearly twenty years. This gave him a perspective that outsiders might not have a chance to access and provides him with sharp eyes when he analyzes these studies. Even though Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu is a forest monk, his argument appears objective. He points out that the Forest Tradition is actually a branch of the Dhammayut Order called *Kammaṭṭhāna*, or Dhammayut Forest Tradition. The relationship between the two (the Dhammayut administrative hierarchy and the *Kammaṭṭhāna* tradition) undergoes some ups and downs. Their conflicts and

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<sup>58</sup> Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*, 172–97.

<sup>59</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Traditions of the Noble Ones: An Essay on the Thai Forest Tradition and its Relationship with the Dhammayut Hierarchy,” Dhammatalks.org, April 2005. This paper was presented at the Ninth International Thai Studies Conference, Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL, <https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/Writings/CrossIndexed/Uncollected/MiscEssays/The%20Traditions%20of%20the%20Noble%20Ones.pdf>.



rapprochement are due to certain conditions over times. For example, in the early days, forest monks were forced to settle down, study the central curriculum and policy, and engage in teaching at school and administration work. The conflict between the two, however, was settled down in the 1950s through the effort of Ajaan Lee, who taught meditation to Somdet Mahawirawan (Tisso Uan), a high ranking official monk who had earlier imposed sanctions against the Forest Tradition.<sup>60</sup> By providing this supportive evidence and a convincing thesis, Thānissaro Bhikkhu brings the issue to the light, which was confusing in Tiyanich and other studies.

Even though Tiyanich, Tambiah, and Taylor somewhat touched on the meditation practice of the forest monks, they did not thoroughly analyze it. Tiyanich even claims—incorrectly—that the meditation practice of the Forest monks is *vichaa aakhom* meditation,<sup>61</sup> a form of practice that Ajaan Sao, precursor to Ajaan Mun, had explicitly repudiated. This opens up a demand for further study.

Recently, Zhi Yun Cai's project, the *Doctrinal Analysis of the Origin and Evolution of the Thai Khammatthāna Tradition with a Special Reference to the Present Khammatthāna Ajahns*,<sup>62</sup> is considered a supplement for the aforementioned studies. In her thesis, Cai has attempted to analyze a number of aspects of the Thai Forest Tradition that have not been covered in previous studies. She examines the thirteen *dhutaṅgas* and traces the origin of this ascetic practice back to the *suttas* and the commentaries; clarifies the terms of forest monk and *dhutaṅga* monk; provides textual analysis of the mantra “*Buddho*,” which serves as a meditation word widely used in the forest monks

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<sup>60</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Traditions of the Noble Ones,” 15.

<sup>61</sup> Kamala, *Forest Recollections*, 280.

<sup>62</sup> Zhi Yun Cai, “Doctrinal Analysis of the Origin and Evolution of the Thai *Khammatthāna* Tradition with a Special Reference to the Present *Khammatthāna* Ajahns” (PhD diss., University of the West, 2014).

community; and compares the techniques of breath meditation between the Thai Forest Tradition and the Canonical sources. In addition, she also discusses the development of the *mai chee*, the nun who keeps eight or ten precepts, in this tradition.

With regard to meditation practice, Cai's study mainly focuses on the techniques of the meditation that Thai Forest ajaans used and traces their origins to learn whether they are recorded in the Canon or an innovation of the ajaans.<sup>63</sup> Although her analysis provides a rich material, it has not yet captured the whole picture of the Forest Tradition meditation theory behind the breath or the mantra "*Buddho*." In addition, even though Cai discusses Ajaan Lee's breathing meditation technique,<sup>64</sup> she has not studied his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* and compared it with Mahāsi Sayādaw's.

Alan Robert Lopez's *The Buddhist Revivalist Movements*,<sup>65</sup> is a noteworthy comparison study of modern Buddhism. In his investigation, Lopez compares the Thai Forest Tradition with the Chan/Zen Tradition of China in an attempt to review the practice and overall style of these two schools.<sup>66</sup> In general, Lopez's observations tend to be on an institutional scale, rather than on an individual scale. With regard to the meditation teachings of the Thai Forest Tradition, Lopez examines the meditation mantra "*Buddho*," which to him is the primary meditation practice for cultivating concentration of the Thai Forest Tradition. Similar to Cai, Lopez argues that this method is perhaps an invention of the Thai Forest Tradition since it cannot be found anywhere in the Pāli Canon.<sup>67</sup> In addition, Lopez also blames the tradition for claiming itself an "originalist"

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<sup>63</sup> Cai, "Doctrinal Analysis of the Origin and Evolution of the Thai *Kammaṭṭhāna* Tradition," 138–92.

<sup>64</sup> Cai, "Doctrinal Analysis of the Origin and Evolution of the Thai *Kammaṭṭhāna* Tradition," 180–82.

<sup>65</sup> Alan Robert Lopez, *Buddhist Revivalist Movements: Comparing Zen Buddhism and the Thai Forest Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>66</sup> Lopez, *Buddhist Revivalist Movements*, 6.

<sup>67</sup> Lopez, *Buddhist Revivalist Movements*, 60.

while its adherents invented new techniques or adapted methods from other schools. Lopez provides an example of Ajaan Sumedho formulated a meditation called “the sound of silence.” The method is expounded in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, one of the Chan tradition’s favorite discourses, which was approved by his teacher Ajaan Chah. Lopez gives another example of borrowing when he states that Ajaan Chah felt it was fine for his student, Ajaan Sumedho, to use the method taught by Chan Master XuYun, a significant monk of the twentieth-century in China, which was working well for his student who was dissatisfied with the Burmese technique.<sup>68</sup> Lopez then concludes: “the irony is that the Forest Tradition’s less formal approach to meditation as opposed to Chan/Zen actually opens the Thai school to incorporating Mahāyāna/Chan methods.”<sup>69</sup> Even though Lopez studies several aspects of the Thai Forest Tradition and compares them with the Zen Tradition, there are areas, such as the treatment of the *satipaṭṭhāna*, one of the typical features of the Thai Forest monks, remain uninvestigated.

### 1.2.2 Burmese *Vipassanā* Movement and Mahāsi Sayādaw

In order to effectively carry out a comparison study, one must investigate both sides. For this purpose, this study will move on with the section to survey the *vipassanā* movement in Burma and the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* of Mahāsi Sayādaw.

The history of *vipassanā* meditation is examined by a great scholar in Early Buddhism, Lance Selwyn Cousins.<sup>70</sup> In his article, *The Origin of Insight Meditation*,<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Lopez, *Buddhist Revivalist Movements*, 62.

<sup>69</sup> Lopez, *Buddhist Revivalist Movements*, 62.

<sup>70</sup> Peter Harvey, “Lance Cousins: An Obituary, Appreciation and Bibliography,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 32, no.1 (2015): 1–12.

<sup>71</sup> L. S. Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” *The Buddhist Forum* 4, *Seminar Papers* 1994-1996, ed. Tadeusz Skorupski (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1996): 35–58.

Cousins, a leading authority in the West on *Abhidhamma*,<sup>72</sup> studies the Burmese *vipassanā* movement from a textual perspective. In his discussion, Cousins takes Mahāsi Sayādaw's school as a paradigm due to its enthusiastic promotion of insight and distrust of concentration. His investigation thus especially focuses on analyzing Mahāsi Sayādaw's view of concentration. Cousins argues that the momentary concentration that the *Visuddhimagga* refers to is different from Mahāsi Sayādaw's definition. Whereas the commentaries seem to state that momentary concentration is the momentary occurrence of access concentration or absorption concentration, Mahāsi Sayādaw defines it as the weakest of the three degree of concentration. Cousins also argues that the notion of liberation based on merely momentary concentration that Mahāsi Sayādaw promotes is not supported by the Canon.

Cousins subsequently examines the historical roots of the insight meditation tradition, which is often attributed to the *Visuddhimagga*, a commentary composed by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa in the fifth century CE Sri Lanka. Most *vipassanā* meditation teachers claim this as their origins before investigating any further the principles of its philosophy. In his study, Cousins, however, traces the origin of this insight meditation back to the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*,<sup>73</sup> a later canonical text but written much earlier than the *Visuddhimagga*. He also attempts to place this text (the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*) in its historical context. To him, the insight meditation tradition existed much earlier than in the *Visuddhimagga*. It could even be found in the *Nikāyas*.

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<sup>72</sup> Richard F. Gombrich, "Buddhist Studies in Britain," in *The State of Buddhist Studies in the World 1972–1997*, ed. Donald K. Swearer and Somparn Promta (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2000), 182.

<sup>73</sup> Date of composition proposed by scholars is in the late third century and the early second century B.C. See A.K. Warder, Introduction to *The Path of Discrimination*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, 2nd ed. (Oxford: The Pāli Text Society, 2009), xxix–xxxix.

Additionally, Cousins also discusses the academic work of other scholars. He tends to disagree with the view that the insight approach is precisely the innovative creation of the Buddha, whereas *jhāna* is something pre-Buddhist. By examining the Pāli *suttas*, he argues that “liberated by wisdom” seems to be taken place at least after one entering the first *jhāna*. Cousins’ monograph provides a significant reference for my research.

However, there are other aspects of Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, such as Mahāsi Sayādaw’s interpretation of *sati* (mindfulness), *sampajañña* (clear comprehension), or the three characteristics that Cousins has not examined. Cousins also has not compared Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* and that of Ajaan Lee except for his mentioning in brief the difference between the Burmese *vipassanā* tradition and the Thai Forest tradition. These will be included in my study.

Scholars also approach the *vipassanā* movement from different perspective. In the *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*,<sup>74</sup> Gustaaf Houtman portrays the establishment and rapid flourishing of the *vipassanā* network in general and Mahāsi meditation centers in particular. Houtman argues that Mahāsi’s network grew dramatically in the Burmese soil as well as overseas due to the support of the first prime minister of Burma, U Nu. This view is shared by other scholars in their studies of modern Burmese Buddhism and its relationship with the state.<sup>75</sup> As a result, *vipassanā* was promoted throughout the country, in the prisons, for

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<sup>74</sup> Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999).

<sup>75</sup> Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society*, 2nd ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 78–82. See also Donald Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) and Ingrid Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

government promotions, the mental culture and in many other fields. In his discussion, Houtman provides significant information to indicate several important aspects related to Mahāsi's meditation network. He starts by explaining how Mahāsi Sayādaw was investigated and selected by the prime minister due to his excellent learning and pure lineage, which was favored by previous Burmese kings.

In Houtman's study, *vipassanā* is also depicted as a tool for mental care particularly for those in prison. And it is placed in the context of solving a national crisis that rulers had imposed. The author also demonstrates the rapid growth of the Mahāsi meditation networks during the regime not under the U Nu's administration, and he argues that the regime had used the *vipassanā* meditation center as a tool to influence its populace.<sup>76</sup> In short, this is an anthropological study of the *vipassanā* meditation in Burma, which includes the Mahāsi tradition. Although Houtman provides solid information regarding the history of the *vipassanā* movement as well as the establishment and development of the Mahāsi meditation's networks, he has not investigated in depth Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation theory, nor does he compare it with other traditions, especially the Thai Forest Tradition to see if there are any differences between the two.

Ingrid Jordt, in *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*,<sup>77</sup> opens a new discussion on Burmese socio-political culture and political legitimacy in contemporary Burma as it was published right after the Burmese monks' mass demonstration in September 2007. In this book, Jordt examines the development of Mahāsi Thathana Yeiktha (MTY), one of the biggest meditation center networks in Burma. Through the

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<sup>76</sup> Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 198–99.

<sup>77</sup> Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

lens of an anthropologist, Jordt perceives the mass lay meditation movement as a potential base for social action, which can provide nationalist spirit and spiritual power for the Burmese people.

*Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement* contains details about the *vipassanā* meditation teachings at MTY. Her account of the center both from observing and collecting “advanced internal materials”—the so-called the voice of an “insider” of the Mahāsi’s legacy or *vipassanā* meditation pedagogical policy, as well as practitioner’s circumstances—gives invaluable information about the insight meditation movement along with Mahāsi Sayādaw’s writings. Jordt presents many significant secrets of the center’s meditation network, such as how they evaluate practitioners’ progress, the method of judging a sincere meditation report from a made-up one, the relationship between yogi and teacher, the type of advice the sayādaws give to the yogi, the sixteen stages in the progress of insight, just to name a few. In addition, she also mentions some problems that are generated by the practice. For example, many yogis were overwhelmed at certain stages of insight practice and fled from the Yeiktha. As another example, she describes how some yogis would feel despair, while others misperceived that they had attained enlightenment.<sup>78</sup>

Jordt’s study is enriched by Erik Braun’s research, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayādaw*.<sup>79</sup> In his work, Braun makes a further effort in terms of tracing the history of the early development of the mass lay meditation movement or *vipassanā* meditation movement. Braun

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<sup>78</sup> Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 61–95.

<sup>79</sup> Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayādaw* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

extensively investigates the historical roots of this phenomenon in response to the question of how and why *vipassanā* meditation has become popular and widespread. He traces this phenomenon back to Burmese monk Ledi Sayādaw, who played a significant role in making the *vipassanā* meditation accessible to the laity. This became a cornerstone for the mass lay meditation movement later on. Ledi's interest in educating the laity in *Abhidhammic* doctrines opened up an opportunity for lay people to approach the study of Buddhist texts and meditation practice, which used to be considered solely a monk's work. Braun thus argues that Ledi's most vital role lay in facilitating the possibility of this lay meditation movement. Also significant was the way Ledi encouraged the lay people to play a broader part in the religion. Braun asserts that Ledi's empowerment of the laity was a response to the modern era, or to be more specific, a challenge to the colonial presence. Ledi appears as an outstanding example of someone who modified and transposed Burmese resources to enable a new practice.<sup>80</sup> Braun's work is similar to others in the way that he looks at the phenomenon of this movement, in which Ledi played a significant role in reshaping Burmese Buddhism during the colonial time. Braun's study provides the context for the understanding of Mahāsi Sayādaw's educational background, one of the factors that shapes his meditation theory.

Juliane Schober's *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*<sup>81</sup> also provides more data for the apprehension of the mass lay meditation movement in Burma. Schober's study covers a complex historical relationship between Theravāda Buddhism and Burmese politics from the pre-colonial period to the twenty-first century. She

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<sup>80</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 150–69.

<sup>81</sup> Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society*, 2nd ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).



identifies core conjunctures, which would help understand the milieu of Burma as well as the crucial relationship between the dominant religion of the country and the ruling government.

Schober's study is based on personal fieldwork in Burma since 1980. Some of her most compelling ideas are her questions about the Weberian narrative of "otherworldly" Buddhism.<sup>82</sup> The sociologist Max Weber argues that Buddhism is inherently "otherworldly." It therefore does not have the capability of becoming a social force. Disagreeing with Weber's theory, Schober proposes that "Buddhist public acts performed by monks and laity in Buddhist societies are simultaneously—and necessarily—political and religious."<sup>83</sup> She also notices a significant fact that for a long time, Burma did not have a united *saṅgha*. Different Buddhist groups within Burma thus had different opinions about certain issues related to the *saṅgha* or the country's politics. The fragmentation of the Burmese *saṅgha*, Schober argues, led to some Buddhist groups being co-opted by modern domestic political movements, which, from certain angles, challenged the stability of those in power on a national level. In addition, Schober also highlights some of the colonial impacts on Buddhism and the state. That is, during the colonial period, Buddhism lost its support and was in the state of decline. This results in the revival and Buddhist social development that witnessed the emerging of a mass lay meditation movement.

It is interesting to learn that Schober defines *vipassanā* differently from Mahāsi Sayādaw. Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw emphasize the cultivation of the three characteristics, Schober defines insight (*vipassanā*) meditation as the cultivation of the

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<sup>82</sup> Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*, 10.

<sup>83</sup> Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*, 20.

Eightfold Noble Path.<sup>84</sup> In addition, Schober also points out the fact that some *vipassanā*'s followers take the meditation center as an escape from political suppression: "Among the country's intellectual elites, for whom public expression of ideas is severely censored, meditation has become a venue for intellectual involvement and the articulation of a pro-democratic stance."<sup>85</sup> Apart from these, Schober does not explore the theory of Burmese *vipassanā* meditation, except to note the fact that meditation became popular since the late nineteenth century, and that the lay meditation movement was exceedingly widespread during U Nu's era. This is another sociological and historical study of the mass lay meditation movement in Burma. The meditation theory or the *satipaṭṭhāna* treatment of Mahāsi Sayādaw appears to be out of its scope.

The *vipassanā* movement not only flourished across Burma and Asia, but the modern era witnessed its rapid development in the West, too. Joseph Cheah, in the *Race and Religion in American Buddhism*,<sup>86</sup> discusses the encounters between *vipassanā* propagators and their American students. He also highlights some influential figures in Sri Lanka and Burma who had a great impact on the Buddhist movements, such as Anagārika Dharmapāla, Ledi Sayādaw, Mahāsi Sayādaw, and U Ba Khin. Cheah criticizes previous scholarship for labeling these typified figures as modernists without studying their traditionalist side.<sup>87</sup> In his discussion, Cheah provides some vital information about the *vipassanā* movement and Mahāsi Sayādaw. He, however, has not covered the doctrinal aspect of the *vipassanā* movement or the insight meditation theory

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<sup>84</sup> Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*, 109–10.

<sup>85</sup> Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*, 110.

<sup>86</sup> Joseph Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>87</sup> Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism*, 36–59.

of Mahāsi Sayādaw. For instance, when he categorizes Mahāsi Sayādaw as a traditionalist, he has not demonstrated, in terms of meditation teachings, what kind of tradition—the *sutta* or the commentaries—Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory belongs to.

Another study discussing the development of the *vipassanā* movement in the West is the “*Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness*.”<sup>88</sup> In this article, Gil Fronsda1 provides an overview of the *vipassanā* movement in the United States which according to him does not have a strong connection with the meditation’s root culture. To him, this opens an opportunity for the movement to absorb other meditation traditions. *Vipassanā*, thus, may become a hub where many traditions can be seen. In his discussion, Fronsda1 briefly mentions some of the core teachings of Mahāsi Sayādaw. However, his article is more concerned about the differences—related to the philosophy, teachings, and techniques—between the *vipassanā* meditation teachers in American and its Asian institutions.

In short, many books and articles have been written on the Thai Forest Tradition and the Burmese *Vipassanā* Movement, which sometimes briefly discuss meditation theories of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw. However, none of the studies noted above have carried out a detailed comparative work to investigate the discrepancies between the respective treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* given by these two teachers. This research project is expected to fill in this void.

### 1.3 Argument and Methodology

The methodology of this study relies on a three-tiered approach: textual analysis, philosophical approach, and historical approach. By using the textual analysis and

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<sup>88</sup> Fronsda1, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 163–180.

philosophical approach, the study engages in a close doctrinal reading of the Pāli Canon, commentarial literature, and primary writings of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw such as meditation treatises and *Dhamma* talks in order to investigate the discrepancies between their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*. To broaden our understanding of their mindfulness theories, our reading also includes books written by other ajaans of the Thai Forest Tradition and teachers of the Burmese *vipassanā* movement. Secondary materials related to the issues discussed are also brought in for reference.

In my analysis, the main treatises on *satipaṭṭhāna* of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw such as *Frames of Reference* (1948) and *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation* (1954), respectively, will serve as lenses through which to examine to what extent their interpretations of *satipaṭṭhāna* are canonically based. Subsequently, the practice of comparing and contrasting their elaboration of various key concepts in mindfulness meditation, such as *sati*, *sampajañña*, *ātappa*, *nimitta*, concentration, the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*, soteriological vision, indication of noble attainments, and pedagogical approach will be carried out. This will serve as a platform to see in more detail where their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* are different from one another. Having examined each treatment and also contrasted the explanations of significant factors employed in mindfulness practice, I argue that most of Ajaan Lee's elaboration is consistent with the teachings of the *suttas*, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw's theory of *satipaṭṭhāna* is largely based on the commentaries,<sup>89</sup> i.e., the work of

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<sup>89</sup> The Commentaries referred here include: *The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta Commentary*; the *Papañcasūdanī*: A Commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya* (*Majjhima-nikāya-aṭṭhakathā*); the Commentary on the *Mūlapaṇṇāsa* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*; the *Sumaṅgala-vilāsinī*; Commentary on the *Dīgha Nikāya* (*Dīgha-nikāya-aṭṭhakathā*); the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*; the *Visuddhimagga*; and the Commentary on the *Visuddhimagga* (*Visuddhimagga-mahāṭīkā*).

commentators composed hundreds of years after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*.

For a deeper comprehension of the ways our key figures interpret *satipaṭṭhāna* in practical context, the research also goes further to trace the primary factors that might have shaped their mindfulness theories. Factors such as their primary teachers, training environments, monastic education, doctrinal reference, and the assumptions of their soteriological goals will be examined. The dissertation thus secondarily engages in a historical approach in support of its analysis. Sources such as their autobiographies, biographies, the histories of their traditions' development, and the impacts of colonialism, etc., are brought into observation.

#### **1.4 Scope and Limitations**

This study focuses on investigating the differences and points of divergence between Ajaan Lee's and Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The comparison work will discuss elements and terms that are key to their respective treatments, including *sati*, *sampajañña*, *ātappa*, concentration, *nimitta*, *pīti*, *sukha*, the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*, the three characteristics, the knowledge leading up to the awakening, and the indication of noble attainments. Major factors that might have shaped their *satipaṭṭhāna* understandings are also investigated. Other aspects irrelevant to their teachings on mindfulness meditation do not belong to the scope of this project.

This detailed analysis of their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* is mainly based on the English-translation versions of the primary writings of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw, originally written in the Thai and Burmese languages, respectively. The study, therefore, depends on the reliability of these translation sources. Even though the translations are produced by well-known figures who are experts in interpreting their works—such as

Thānissaro Bhikkhu<sup>90</sup> and U Pe Thin<sup>91</sup>—it is still inevitable to have some doubt regarding the variations in their hermeneutics in comparison to the original version. The major limitation of this research is my limited Thai and Burmese language skills and ability to discover variations between the original texts and their English translations. The limitation, however, will be mitigated to the best of my abilities by consulting more than one source when necessary to ensure the expositions are not misinterpreted.

### 1.5 Significance and Expected Contributions

The research project will provide new insights to the *satipaṭṭhāna* hermeneutical study that has been examined by a number of scholars. It will deepen the understanding of right mindfulness, one of the key factors of the noble eightfold path in Buddhist meditation. In specific ways, this comparison work will contribute to a better understanding of Theravāda meditation practice, especially, mindfulness theories developed by Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw, which might have shaped modern scholars' views on Buddhist meditation and Buddhist modernism. An investigation of the discrepancies between Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw regarding their treatments of core meditation concepts, such as *sati* (memory vs. bare attention), *sampajañña* (alertness vs. clear-comprehension), *ātappa* (ardency), *jhāna*, *vipassanā*, *tilakkhaṇa*, just to name a few, will shed new light on *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. In addition, this study also provides a more comprehensive view on modern Buddhist movements, in which the Burmese *Vipassanā* Movement and Thai Forest Tradition are taken as paradigms.

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<sup>90</sup> An adept in meditation writings and teaching who spent fifteen years training in Thailand.

<sup>91</sup> A serious lay meditation student of Mahāsi Sayādaw who was an interpreter of British Rear Admiral Shattock.

## 1.6 Structure and Content of the Dissertation

This dissertation investigates the discrepancies between Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* and that of Mahāsi Sayādaw. The research project consists of six chapters. Chapter One provides an overall study of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation from Early Canonical literature to modern reform movements. It highlights the significance of *satipaṭṭhāna* in the path to awakening set out by the Buddha in the Pāli Canon. The chapter also reviews its development in the commentarial literature before introducing its dynamic revival with multiple instantiations in the modern era. This chapter also reveals controversial issues within reform movements concerning their different theories and pedagogies in elaborating *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. This can be seen through the paradigms of two renowned meditation teachers in the twentieth century—Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw, whose lineages—Thai Forest tradition and Burmese *vipassanā* tradition—have been widely disseminated during the last several decades.

In order to illustrate the fact that referenced sources—*suttas* versus the commentaries—are the main reason differentiating Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* from that of Mahāsi Sayādaw, the dissertation first investigates the discrepancies in these sources which serve as a platform for discussing the treatments of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw as well as comparing and contrasting them. This is the work of Chapter Two. The examination reveals a variety of differences between the *suttas* and the commentaries concerning their expositions of *satipaṭṭhāna*. They are: (1) discrepancy in framing the key factors of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice (the three qualities—*sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa* vs. the three characteristics—*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*); (2) discrepancy in explaining the quality of *sampajañña* (being aware of what is happening in one's meditation vs.

clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics); (3) discrepancy in identifying the discernment factor (*ātappa* vs. *sampajañña*); (4) discrepancy in explaining the doctrine of *anattā* (developing dispassion toward the five aggregates vs. denying a permanent metaphysical self); (5) discrepancy in explaining the way to practice *satipaṭṭhāna* (concentration in tandem with insight vs. bare insight). With this as a background, the dissertation moves forward to the main discussion of the project.

This starts with Chapter Three: a discussion of Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The chapter investigates Ajaan Lee's elaboration of the four frames of reference (body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities) to illustrate how his teachings are in line with the *suttas*. The investigation also examines unique aspects of Ajaan Lee's approach to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. This can be seen by the way he explains the cultivation of *jhāna*, in which mindfulness and concentration are presented as two different aspects of a single practice. In addition to this, his exposition of the three qualities appears to be a supplement to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Here, Ajaan Lee's uniqueness lies in his explanation of the quality of *ātappa*, which goes beyond what presented in the Canon. The findings in this chapter help solve the issue concerning the question of how Ajaan Lee employs mindfulness to foster the development of concentration and discernment. Furthermore, the chapter also examines factors that might have accounted for Ajaan Lee's *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation theory, such as his training with Ajaan Mun in the forest and his formal educational background. This data review offers insight into how these factors have shaped his thoughts on meditation.



The dissertation continues, in Chapter Four, with an analysis of Mahāsi Sayādaw’s explanation of matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*).<sup>92</sup> This is actually his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, which is often referred to as bare insight meditation. In examining the bare insight meditation (also known as the Mahāsi method), the chapter argues that most of Mahāsi Sayādaw’s teachings are based on the commentaries. This can be seen in a number of meditation theories developed in his treatment. They are: (1) the theory of bare insight is a vehicle which asserts full awakening without the support of *jhāna*; (2) the assertion that the three characteristics are central to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice; (3) the content of awakening is equal to the knowledge of the three characteristics; (4) the quality of *sampajañña* is explained as clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics and is identified as the discernment factor; (5) the doctrine of *anattā* as no self is elaborated, thus denying a permanent metaphysical self. Although Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory is deeply rooted in the commentaries, the investigation shows that his view on concentration goes past the commentaries. In addition, the chapter also answers the question of how Mahāsi Sayādaw used *satipaṭṭhāna* to foster insight. Subsequently, the chapter examines factors that might have shaped his *satipaṭṭhāna* theory, such as his monastic education, insight meditation training, and social influences.

Having examined their treatments separately, the dissertation then moves to Chapter Five to compare and contrast them. This is the core section of the research project. In order to address the second research question concerning the discrepancies between their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the chapter will limit itself to the discussion of their different teachings related particular topics in mindfulness training. The analysis

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<sup>92</sup> *Nāma* and *rūpa* are often translated as “name” and “form.” However, here I opt to use U Pe Thin’s translation to reduce unnecessary confusion.

uses the findings that have been examined in prior chapters, incorporating the meditation writings of the two teachers as well as my personal observations and interactions with both traditions, to investigate their discrepancies in theorizing *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. The findings show a number of areas where their discrepancies can be found, such as: (1) difference pertaining to the approach toward *satipaṭṭhāna* practice; (2) difference in identifying the main factors in the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice; (3) difference in the understanding of concentration; (4) difference pertaining to the methods of handling wandering thoughts; (5) difference pertaining to the treatment of *nimitta*; (6) difference pertaining to the treatment of rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*); (7) difference in explaining the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*; (8) difference in identifying the knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma (the knowledge leading up to the awakening), i.e., the four noble truths and dependent co-arising versus the realization of no self; (9) difference in their indications of the fruits that arise in the course of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. The discussion points out the fact that one of the main reasons accounting for their discrepancies is their reference source. Whereas Ajaan Lee's treatment is largely in line with the *suttas*, Mahāsi Sayādaw's exposition is primarily based on the commentaries. The investigation covered in this section would be undoubtedly conducive to meditation studies and practice in general and to the understanding of the *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation theories of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw in particular. The dissertation then concludes with Chapter Six, which briefly summarizes the research findings before providing final thoughts as well as suggestions for future research.

## Chapter Two: Discrepancies between the *Suttas* and the Commentaries Pertaining to the Treatment of *Satipaṭṭhāna*

### 2.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter One, their respective foundational sources are what lie at the root of the most significant differences between the meditation theories of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw. Where the former's treatment is largely based on the *suttas*, the latter's is more in line with the commentaries. To give a better understanding of the differences between the treatments of these two teachers, this chapter will first examine the significant discrepancies regarding *satipaṭṭhāna* as presented in the *suttas* and the commentaries.<sup>93</sup> The discussion of these texts will be limited to the vital points that most directly relate to the understanding of the distinctions between the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* of Ajaan Lee and that of Mahāsi Sayādaw. (A more thorough-going comparison between the texts could perhaps be taken up in future scholarship.) Specifically, this chapter will examine such key differences in *satipaṭṭhāna* practices as the emphasized factors (the three qualities versus the three characteristics), the explanation of the quality of *sampajañña*, the treatment of the three characteristics, and the view regarding *samatha* and *vipassanā*. To state my conclusion in advance, the investigations of the discrepancies between the *suttas* and the commentaries concerning *satipaṭṭhāna* exposition support the understanding that:

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<sup>93</sup> The commentaries here mainly refer to the texts that Mahāsi Sayādaw used as main resources, including *The Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the *Papañcasūdanī*, the commentary to the *Majjhima Nikāya*; the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, the commentary to the *Dīgha Nikāya*; and the *Visuddhimagga*, all attributed to Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa.

1. Whereas the *suttas* emphasize the three qualities—*sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*—the commentaries emphasize the three characteristics—*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*;
2. Whereas the *suttas* explain the quality of *sampajañña* as being aware of what is happening in one's meditation, the commentaries interpret it as clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics, which means that meditators are instructed to examine mental and physical phenomena as subject to inconstancy, suffering, and no-self;
3. Whereas the commentaries identify the quality of *sampajañña* as the discernment factor, the *suttas* see the quality of *ātappa* as playing this role;
4. Whereas the commentaries explain the three characteristics as a way to deny a permanent metaphysical self, the *suttas* see them as a strategy to foster dispassion and disenchantment toward the five aggregates to help meditators realize the cause of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering;
5. Whereas the commentaries seem to equate the knowledge of three characteristics with the knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma*—knowledge leading up to awakening, the *suttas* frequently refer to the knowledge of the four noble truths and dependent co-arising whenever there is a mention of awakening;
6. Whereas the *suttas* state that *samatha* and *vipassanā* can be cultivated in either order or at the same time, the commentaries promote a bare insight vehicle that completely forgoes the development of *jhāna*.

Discussion of these primary discrepancies will resurface in the following chapters when we analyze the treatments of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw individually. Many of the differentiating elements in the two *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation theories are themselves significant components of the respective teachings. That is why they are treated here in advance: both so that this discussion may serve as a platform for a later elaboration of the treatments of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw, and so that we may compare and contrast their *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation theories in a more substantive way.

## **2.2 Discrepancies between the *Suttas* and the Commentaries**

The following discussion is an expansion of the discrepancies summarized above. Before proceeding with the investigation, it is important to keep in mind that the *Sutta Piṭaka* is believed to be a basket that gathers the words of the historical Buddha and his immediate disciples. It was orally passed down for hundreds of years before being written down on palm leaf for the first time in Sri Lanka during the first century BCE. The “basket” contains the teachings on various topics, from basic moral conduct—such as the five precepts—to higher teachings such as the path to awakening. The details of the teachings also vary from one discourse to another. There are *suttas* in which certain instructions are mentioned only concisely. However, their supplemental explanations can often be found in other *suttas*. The teaching on *satipaṭṭhāna* is a typical example. Although a lengthy exposition is provided in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*, one still needs to consult other *suttas* for more detailed understanding on certain points.

The commentaries were composed several centuries after the *suttas* were compiled. They were attributed to Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, a great commentator who worked in Sri Lanka during the fifth century CE. Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa’s

commentaries to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*, recorded in the *Papañcasūdanī* and the *Sumaṅgala-vilāsinī*, are said to be based on the older Sinhala commentaries, which recorded the words of ancient masters of the *Dhamma*.<sup>94</sup> Their explanations, in turn, reflected their own personal experience and understanding.<sup>95</sup> Although the commentaries attempted to fill in any explanatory gaps in the *suttas*, in the view of the sub-commentaries, there was still room for further elaboration. This is the reason why Dhammapāla or Sayadaw U Ñāṇābhivamsa, for example, still provided their additional emendations to the commentaries. It should be kept in mind, however, that although the commentarial expositions are informative, they misrepresent the *suttas* on certain doctrines.<sup>96</sup>

Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, the author of the commentaries, is a key figure in Theravāda traditions, especially in Sri Lanka and Burma, and well known in the field of Buddhist studies. As the late Professor C. R. Lanman writes in the Harvard Oriental Series, “Of all the names in the history of Buddhist scholasticism, that of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa is the most illustrious.”<sup>97</sup> Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa gained high respect due to the enormous volume of work attributed to his name. In the history of Pāli literature, he was a preeminent commentator, a great exegetist, and a pioneering translator. However, despite the huge corpus consisting of thirteen commentaries and

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<sup>94</sup> The *Visuddhimagga* is said to reflect the knowledge of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa on the teachings of the Buddha. It was written to meet the challenge set by the elders of the Mahāvihāra, an important center of Buddhist learning in Anurādhapura, ancient capital of Sri Lanka. It was said that only when he was able to convince them with a massive treatise, the *Visuddhimagga*, that he composed, did they allow him to access their scriptures so that he could begin his work of translating the Sinhala commentaries into the Pāli language. For more detail, see Robinson, Johnson, and Ṭhānissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 147–150.

<sup>95</sup> See Bhikkhu Bodhi, message to *The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Its Commentary*, by Soma Thera, Accessinsight.org, 1998, <https://www.accessinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wayof.html>.

<sup>96</sup> See the discussion on their discrepancies for more detail.

<sup>97</sup> *Harvard Oriental Series* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), 384.

many translations, there is little information about his life. The epilogues to his work, both commentaries and translations, do not mention his place of origin apart from a reference to Kāñcī, a location in Southern India. This leads scholars such as Oskar von Hinüber and Polwatte Buddhaddatta Thera to conclude that Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa likely hailed from Southern India and at least stayed in Kāñcī for a period of time.<sup>98</sup>

According to the *Mahāvamsa*, the *Great Chronicle of Ceylon* (Sri Lanka) written in the fifth century CE by an Elder Mahānāma of the Mahāvihāra,<sup>99</sup> Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa was a Brahman born in Northern India somewhere near the great Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya. In the *Mahāvamsa*, Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa was described as an expert in three Vedas before converting to Buddhism after an interesting debate with Mahathera Revata, who saw profound value in this worthy young brahman and decided to conquer him for the benefit of the religion. In the account of Mahathera Revata telling Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa to go to Ceylon to get the texts which were no longer preserved in India, scholars suggest that Thera Dhammakirti, the author of the second part of the *Mahāvamsa*,<sup>100</sup> seems to have altered Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa's biography.<sup>101</sup> Even though the narrative of Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa in the *Mahāvamsa* might have been modified, other information related to him, as Bimala

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<sup>98</sup> Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 102.

<sup>99</sup> Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 87–92.

<sup>100</sup> The second part of the *Mahāvamsa* was composed approximately 700 years after Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa's time. See Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 102.

<sup>101</sup> This makes scholars think that perhaps the tree worship culture of the preexisting religious traditions had influenced the Buddhists. Many significant events of the Buddha's life have obvious connections with tree veneration: the Buddha's birth under the sacred sala tree, his awakening under the Bodhi tree, and his attaining *parinibbana* between the twin sala trees. The notion of the tree worship can be dated back to the Indus Valley fertility cults or even earlier. Thus, the tradition—or more specifically, Dhammakirti—attempted to construct Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa's birthplace close to the cradle of Buddhism: i.e., Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha attained awakening. See Buddhaddatta A. P., "Who Was Buddhaghosa?" *University of Ceylon Review* 2, no. 1&2 (1944): 77–85. See also Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 102–03.

Churn Law noted, is well matched with the historical records of Ceylon, such as his date of arrival, the reign of king Mahānāma, and so forth. It is said that Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa returned to India after finishing his assigned work in Ceylon.<sup>102</sup>

Unlike the *Mahāvamsa*, the *Burmese Chronicles* describe Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa as “a native of Burma.”<sup>103</sup> These claim that he was born in Thaton and then took a voyage to Ceylon in 400 CE.<sup>104</sup> Their narrative provides details of his trip, and emphasizes his contribution in bringing Buddhist scriptures and other texts, including the Kaccayana Pāli grammar,<sup>105</sup> from Ceylon to the Gulf of Martaban. In addition, a volume of parables in Burmese is also attributed to him. A chronicle of his early life and career is given, together with the story of the writing of the commentaries. It seems the Burmese actually used the *Sinhalese Chronicles* as the main reference for many of their descriptions. While scholars are still debating the details of the historical account of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa,<sup>106</sup> the Burmese tradition insists on maintaining their central position in the narrative.<sup>107</sup> The key role of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa in modern Burmese Buddhism can be explicitly seen, for example, in *vipassanā* meditation

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<sup>102</sup> Bimala Churn Law, *The Life and Work of Buddhaghosa*, reprint ed. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1997), 5.

<sup>103</sup> Niharranjaan Ray, *An Introduction to the Study of Theravāda Buddhism in Burma: A Study in Indo-Burmese Historical and Cultural Relations from the Earliest Times to the British Conquest* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946), 24.

<sup>104</sup> Captain T. Rogers, *Buddhaghosa's Parables* (London: Trübner, 1870), xvi.

<sup>105</sup> Ray notes that Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa is said to have written a commentary on this book, too. See Ray, *An Introduction to the Study of Theravāda Buddhism in Burma*, 25.

<sup>106</sup> Various views on Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa can be found in Law, *The Life and Work of Buddhaghosa*; L. Finot, *Legend of Buddhaghosa*, trans. P.C. Bagchi (Journal of the Departments of Letters: University of Calcutta, 1924), 65–86; Rupert Gethin, “Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin? Buddhist Identities in the Commentaries and Chronicles,” in *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*, ed. Peter Skilling et al., (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2012), 1–63; “Two Buddhaghosas,” *Indian Culture* 1, no. 2: 294–95; and Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, vol. 3 (United Kingdom: Edward Arnold & Company, 1921), 32.

<sup>107</sup> For more detail on the discussion of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa in Burmese Chronicles see Ray, *An Introduction to the Study of Theravāda Buddhism in Burma*, 24–33.



instructions of the various traditions in this country. As will be made clear in the following chapters, Mahāsi Sayādaw’s *satipaṭṭhāna* theories tend to echo the work of this commentator—via the commentaries—rather than the *suttas*. To reiterate, the expositions on *satipaṭṭhāna* recorded in the *suttas* and in the commentaries are fundamentally different. However, *satipaṭṭhāna* is not the only area where the *suttas* and the commentaries show their differences. In earlier studies, meditation teachers and scholars have also pointed out, for instance, their differences concerning the issue of concentration.<sup>108</sup> This chapter mainly explores their discrepancies in the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

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<sup>108</sup> Richard Shankman, *The Experience of Samādhi: An In-depth Exploration of Buddhist Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 77–104. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Wings to Awakening*, 248–261.

The following chart outlines the key discrepancies between the *suttas* and the commentaries regarding the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* and provides a framework for the discussion that follows.

Table 1: The discrepancies between the *suttas* and the commentaries regarding the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*

Vital factors treated in <i>satipaṭṭhāna</i> practice	<i>Suttas</i>	Commentaries
Key factors	The three qualities: <i>sati</i> , <i>sampajañña</i> , and <i>ātappa</i>	The three characteristics: <i>anicca</i> , <i>dukkha</i> , and <i>anattā</i>
Exposition of the quality of <i>sampajañña</i>	Being aware of one's actions	Clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics
Discernment factor	The quality of <i>ātappa</i>	The quality of <i>sampajañña</i>
The doctrine of <i>anattā</i>	-Not-self -To develop dispassion toward the five aggregates	-No-self -To negate a permanent metaphysical self
Categorical teaching	The four noble truths, Dependent co-arising, Cultivation of what is skillful and abandoning of what is unskillful	Three characteristics
Knowledge that leads up to the awakening	The four noble truths, Dependent co-arising	The realization of no-self
Practicing approach	Concentration in tandem with insight	Bare insight

### 2.2.1 Discrepancy in Framing the Key Factors of *Satipaṭṭhāna* Practice

The first noticeable discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries regarding the explanation of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is their key factors. Whereas the former emphasizes the three qualities—*sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*, the latter stresses the three characteristics—*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*.

In the *suttas*, the three qualities—*sati* (mindfulness), *sampajañña* (alertness), and *ātappa* (ardency)—are mentioned with regard to each frame of reference (body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas*) in the standard formula describing the establishing of mindfulness.

There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on the mind in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.<sup>109</sup>

This formula describes the participation of the three qualities in each *satipaṭṭhāna* practice—or frame of reference—each of which consists of two primary activities: remaining focused on a particular frame of reference, and subduing greed and distress with reference to the world.<sup>110</sup> Here, the importance of the three qualities in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice can be understood as follows: in addition to remaining focused on a particular frame of reference, and subduing greed and distress with reference to the world, meditators have to be mindful, alert, and ardent with respect to what they are doing during the course of their meditation. In other words, the proper development of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is never separate from the exercise of these three qualities. The fact

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<sup>109</sup> MN 10; DN 22; SN 45.8

<sup>110</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *On the Path: An Anthology on the Noble Eightfold Path Drawn from the Pāli Canon* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2017), 342.

that each frame of reference contains mention of the three qualities confirms their centrality to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.<sup>111</sup>

Unlike the *suttas*, the commentaries do not place much emphasis on the three qualities. They only explain the terms *sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa* in brief. Further instructions such as how to use these three qualities in each frame of reference or how these three qualities should function in order to bring the best result in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice are almost neglected, with the exception of the body contemplation section which dedicates a long discussion to explaining the quality of *sampajañña*. Commentarial expositions of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, however, significantly stress the three characteristics.<sup>112</sup> The contemplations on *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anattā* (no self) are frequently addressed in all four frames of reference (*satipaṭṭhāna*). Sometimes these three characteristics are recommended for contemplation separately for different frames of reference. For instance, this is said in *The Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*:

...These Four Arousings of Mindfulness are taught for casting out the illusions [*vipallasa*] concerning beauty, pleasure, permanence, and an ego.

The body is **ugly**. There are people led astray by the illusion that it is a thing of beauty. In order to show such people the ugliness of the body and to make them give up their wrong idea, the First Arousing of Mindfulness is taught.

Feeling is **suffering**. There are people subject to the illusion that it gives pleasure. In order to show such people the painfulness of feeling and to make them give up their wrong idea, the Second Arousing of Mindfulness is taught.

Consciousness is **impermanent**. There are people who, owing to an illusion, believe that it is permanent. To show them the impermanence of consciousness

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<sup>111</sup> Like the *suttas*, Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, which will be analyzed in Chapter Three, also emphasizes these three qualities.

<sup>112</sup> Like the commentaries, Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, as presented in Chapter Four, also stresses the significance of the three characteristics.

and to wean them of their wrong belief, the Third Arousing of Mindfulness is taught.

Mental objects are insubstantial, are *soulless*, and *possess no entity*. There are people who believe by reason of an illusion that these mental things are substantial, endowed with an abiding core, or a soul, or that they form part of a soul, an ego or some substance that abides. To convince such errant folk of the fact of the soullessness or the insubstantiality of mental things and to destroy the illusion which clouds their minds, the Fourth Arousing of Mindfulness is taught.<sup>113</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Here meditators are recommended to contemplate the ugliness of the body, the suffering of the feelings, the impermanence of the consciousness, and the no-self of the mental objects. However, most of the time, contemplation on all three characteristics is prescribed for all four *satipaṭṭhāna* subjects. For example, in the explanation of contemplation on the body, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa states:

...This person contemplates in this body only the body; he does not contemplate anything else. What does this mean? In this definitely transient, suffering, soulless body, that is unlovely, he does *not see permanence*, pleasure, a soul, nor beauty, after the manner of those animals which see water in a mirage. Body-contemplation is only the contemplation of the collection of qualities of transiency, *suffering*, *soullessness*, and unloveliness.<sup>114</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Unlike the above teachings, this time meditators are instructed to contemplate, for example, the body as impermanent, stressful, and no-self. Here, these three characteristics are mentioned in Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa's own language as “does not see impermanence” (impermanent); “suffering” (stressful); and “soullessness” (no-self).

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<sup>113</sup> Soma Thera and Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness: Being a Translation of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya; Its Commentary the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta Vāṇanā of the Papañcasūdanī of Buddhaghosa Thera; and Excerpts from the Līnatthapakāsanā Tīkā, Marginal Notes of Dhammapāla Thera on the Commentary*, 5th ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981), 28–29.

<sup>114</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 33–34.

A similar emphasis on the three characteristics in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice can also be found in the *Visuddhimagga*, another commentary of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa. This is his explanation of mindfulness practice:

“Foundation” (*paṭṭhāna*) is because of establishment (*upaṭṭhāna*) by going down into, by descending upon, such and such objects. Mindfulness itself as foundation (establishment) is “foundation of mindfulness.” It is of four kinds because it occurs with respect to the body, feeling, consciousness, and mental objects (*dhamma*), taking them as **foul, painful, impermanent, and non-self**, and because it accomplishes the function of abandoning perception of beauty, pleasure, permanence, and self. That is why “four foundations of mindfulness” is said.<sup>115</sup> (Emphasis mine)

In this passage, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa again stresses the contemplation of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*, in his words, as “foul/painful,” “impermanent,” and “non-self.” As in the expositions provided in other commentaries, the *Visuddhimagga* also indicates that the contemplation of all four *satipaṭṭhānas* is to be carried out in terms of the three characteristics. In other words, here, the three characteristics are attributes of the “four kinds”—body, feeling, consciousness, mental objects

The commentaries even recommend seven sorts of contemplation for each *satipaṭṭhāna*, in which the first three—contemplations on the three characteristics—seem to act as a foundation for the other four to develop. According to them, meditators should see the body, feelings, mind, and mental objects as: “(1) as something impermanent; (2) as something subject to suffering; (3) as something that is soulless; (4) by way of turning away from it and not by way of delighting in it; (5) by freeing himself of passion for it; (6) with thoughts making for cessation and not making for origination; (7) and not by way of laying hold of it, but by way of giving it up.”<sup>116</sup> However, it should be noted that

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<sup>115</sup> Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), XXII 34.

<sup>116</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 34, 41–42.

although in the beginning section these seven contemplations are repeatedly suggested, the exposition of each *satipaṭṭhāna* elaborated after that mentions mostly the three characteristics with a specific focus on the contemplation on *anattā* (no-self).<sup>117</sup>

### **2.2.2 Discrepancy in Identifying the Discernment Factor and in Explaining the Quality of *Sampajañña***

The *suttas* and the commentaries also show their discrepancy in explaining the quality of *sampajañña*. Whereas the *suttas* simply explain *sampajañña* as being aware of, or alert to, what is happening in one's meditation practice in both physical and mental activities,<sup>118</sup> the commentaries develop four different definitions of this quality, all of which emphasize, in each of the four frames of reference, seeing in terms of the three characteristics.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, whereas the *suttas* identify the quality of *ātappa* as the discernment factor, the commentaries see the quality of *sampajañña* as playing this role. In other words, the commentaries claim that the discernment factor is fostered through the cultivation of the quality of *sampajañña*,<sup>120</sup> but not through the quality of *ātappa* as implied in the *suttas*.

Before continuing with a detailed discussion of the discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries on these points, it is worth noting that although the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas* keep mentioning the three qualities in each frame of reference in their summarizing section, those specific *suttas* do not themselves offer any further explanation of the meanings of these terms and how they might be understood in

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<sup>117</sup> Note that the commentaries render *anattā* as “no-self.” This is substantively different from the *suttas*’ exposition which explain it as “not-self.” This point will be addressed in more detail below.

<sup>118</sup> Ajaan Lee seems to follow the *suttas* as he also renders *sampajañña* simply as “being aware” of what is happening to one’s meditation.

<sup>119</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, in his treatment, appears to rely on the commentaries as he also interprets *sampajañña* as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics.

<sup>120</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 37.

practice.<sup>121</sup> The terms become clearer only when other *suttas* are consulted. This, however, has presented a problem: when later generations approached the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*, they have given interpretations that diverge from the original *Sutta Piṭaka* when taken as a whole. The first interpretation views it as a complete teaching, believing that everything related to *satipaṭṭhāna* is already well addressed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas* so meditators do not have to look for elsewhere for more guidance.<sup>122</sup> The second interpretation claims that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*’ explanations are too concise, which encourages them to fill in their own interpretations where they feel a lack without cross-referencing with other *suttas* where the issues are addressed.<sup>123</sup> The commentaries fall into the second category. The third interpretation, which we are taking, argues that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas* cannot be taken as complete guides to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice as they answer questions on only one part of the *satipaṭṭhāna* formula: what it means to remain focused on x in and of itself. To answer questions on other parts of the formula we can look at how these terms are defined and explained in other *suttas*.

The following discussion will first show that: (1) other discourses in the *Sutta Piṭaka* do provide a detailed exposition on the qualities of *sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*, which appears as a supplement for the briefer delineation within the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*; (2) in the *suttas*, ardency is the discernment factor in the three qualities brought to the establishing of mindfulness; (3) the *suttas* explain the quality of *sampajañña* simply as

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<sup>121</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *On the Path*, 342.

<sup>122</sup> This view is mentioned by Bhikkhu Bodhi in *The Way of Mindfulness*. “The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, is generally regarded as the canonical Buddhist text with the fullest instructions on the system of meditation unique to the Buddha’s own dispensation.” See Soma Thera, *The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Its Commentary*, Accesssotoinsight.org, 1998, <https://www.accesstoisight.org/lib/authors/soma/wayof.html>.

<sup>123</sup> There is another view held by contemporary meditation teachers which tries to reject some of the significant teachings in the *suttas* such as the cultivation of *jhānas* as a fruit of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. See Chapter Five for more detail on the issue of *jhānas*.



being aware. Subsequently, we will examine the commentaries' perspective on the matter in order to uncover the differences between these two corpora.

First, it should be noted that in the *sutta* passages that define mindfulness and alertness, there is no reference to giving preference to skillful qualities over unskillful qualities. In that sense, mindfulness and alertness are more likely to be considered as neutral qualities. This can be seen, for instance, in the *sutta* passage that defines the faculty of mindfulness without reference to the establishing of mindfulness: "There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones has mindfulness, is endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering and recollecting what was done and said a long time ago."<sup>124</sup> In this definition, no particular reference is made to being mindful of skillful things. Here, mindfulness is rendered as remembering and recollecting things regardless of whether they were skillful or not. This means that mindfulness, on its own, is a neutral quality.

The same observation can be made about the following two *sutta* passages that define the quality of alertness:

From the *Gelaṇṇa Sutta*:

And how is a monk alert? There is the case where feelings are known to the monk as they arise, known as they persist, known as they subside. Thoughts are known to him as they arise, known as they persist, known as they subside. Perceptions are known to him as they arise, known as they persist, known as they subside. This is how a monk is alert.<sup>125</sup>

From the *Sata Sutta*:

And how is a monk alert? When going forward and returning, he makes himself alert; when looking toward and looking away...when bending and extending his limbs...when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe, and his bowl...when eating, drinking, chewing, and savoring...when urinating and defecating...when walking,

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<sup>124</sup> SN 48.9

<sup>125</sup> SN 47.35

standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he makes himself alert. This is how a monk is alert.<sup>126</sup>

In these *sutta* passages, alertness is defined simply as being aware of the activities of the mind and the body when they arise, remain, or disband. Here again, no preference is given to developing skillful mental states. Alertness on its own, in these contexts, is a neutral quality.

However, in the *Anottāpī Sutta*, in a passage defining ardency, a definite preference is given to abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful qualities:

Ven. Mahā Kassapa: “And how is one ardent? There is the case where a monk, (thinking,) ‘Unarisen evil, unskillful qualities arising in me would lead to what is unbeneficial,’ arouses ardency. (Thinking,) ‘Arisen evil, unskillful qualities not being abandoned in me...’... ‘Unarisen skillful qualities not arising in me ...’... ‘Arisen skillful qualities ceasing in me would lead to what is unbeneficial,’ he arouses ardency. This is how one is ardent.”<sup>127</sup>

This qualification implies at least two things: (1) an understanding of cause and effect, i.e., that skillful qualities lead to beneficial results and unskillful qualities to unbeneficial results (a principle of right view); and (2) a desire to avoid unbeneficial results (a principal of right resolve). Given that ardency is related directly to right view and right resolve, it is also thereby directly related to the principles of discernment. Given that it is the only one of the three qualities—as defined in the *suttas*—that shows this preference, ardency is the only one of the three that deserves to be identified as the discernment factor.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> SN 36.7

<sup>127</sup> SN 16.2

<sup>128</sup> Ajaan Lee seems to follow the *suttas* as he also identifies the quality of *ātappa* as the discernment factor. However, Ajaan Lee’s exposition of *ātappa* is far beyond what is in the Canon. Whereas the *suttas* simply imply the principle of right view and right resolve, Ajaan Lee’s exposition of this quality (*ātappa*) strongly emphasizes the development of insight into the fabricated phenomena and the unfabricated. To him, the development of *ātappa* is for the sake of concentration and discernment, which then serve as a ladder for gaining release. See Chapter Three for more detail.

The investigation of the three qualities in these *suttas* demonstrates by example that what details may be lacking in one *sutta* can be found in others. In other words, the *Sutta Piṭaka* as a whole does provide detailed elaborations on the qualities of *sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*. With such detailed articulations available within the internally consistent body of the original *suttas*, it is arguably safe to assume that there is no reason to depart from the *suttas*’ original formulations, if only for want of further detail in individual texts. However, it seems the authors of the commentarial literature did not thoroughly examine the corpus as a whole, and it appears that they might have missed the explanations on the three qualities addressed in other *suttas*. As a result, they amended the account of *satipaṭṭhāna* with their own interpretations, which differ significantly. The most obvious instance in this case can be seen in their exposition of the quality of *sampajañña*.

The commentaries present a different theory regarding these three qualities in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. That is, they seem to identify the quality of *sampajañña* as discernment factor. This is what is stated in the *Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*:

In the passage beginning with “ardent,” Right Exertion [*sammāppadhāna*] is stated by energy [*ātappa*]; the subject of meditation proper in all circumstances or the means of protecting the subject of meditation, is stated by mindfulness and clear comprehension [*sati sampajañña*]; or the quietude that is obtained [*paṭiladdhā samatha*] by way of the contemplation on the body [*kāyānupassanā*] is stated by mindfulness; insight [*vipassanā*] by clear comprehension; and the fruit of inner culture [*bhāvanā phāla*] through the overcoming of covetousness and grief.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 37.

This explanation seems to claim that cultivation of mindfulness leads to the development of concentration, whereas the development of *sampajañña* (clear comprehension) fosters the discernment factor.<sup>130</sup>

That *sampajañña* is considered a discernment factor in the commentaries can also be seen in the way Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa expounds this quality. Whereas the *suttas* define *sampajañña* as being aware of what is happening in one's meditation, the commentaries render it in four different ways, namely, comprehension of purpose, comprehension of suitability, comprehension of resort, and comprehension of non-delusion. In his work, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa devotes long sections to providing detailed expositions on this quality. Meditators are instructed to carry out every single activity, such as walking, sitting, lying down, eating, chewing, drinking, and so forth with these four types of clear comprehension in mind. The four kinds of clear comprehension are elaborated as follows:

Comprehension of purpose is a consideration of the purpose of the activity of meditation; meditators are to learn whether it is worthy or not. Cultivating a sense of purpose insofar as it is conducive to one's spiritual practice is encouraged, for example, going to see the *Saṅgha*, the elders, the relics, the Bodhi Tree, or reading a commentary.<sup>131</sup>

Clear comprehension of suitability requires meditators to consider the suitability of the actions that they carry out to see if they are conducive to practice. An example the commentaries provide is that although it is good to go and pay respect to the relics shrine,

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<sup>130</sup> Like the commentaries, Mahāsi Sayādaw in his treatment also identifies the quality of *sampajañña* as discernment factor. See Chapter Four and Chapter Five for more detail.

<sup>131</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 61–62.

one still needs to think of an appropriate time of going. A time when crowds of people are gathering there, for instance, is an unsuitable time to visit the shrine, because many dangers and risks to one's holy life—such as sensory attractions, resentment, lust, or delusion—may arise and be detrimental to meditation. So, the suitable time to visit is when there are no such dangers, and clear comprehension of suitability aids in making such appropriate adjustments.<sup>132</sup>

Clear comprehension of resort is the persistence in keeping a chosen meditation subject in mind while performing any activity. It should be carried out along with the other two, clear comprehension of purpose and clear comprehension of suitability. This means that having comprehended the purpose and the suitability of a certain action that one is about to do, one is instructed to retain a meditation subject in mind when doing one's work. In other words, meditators should train themselves not to drop their meditation subject while performing any duty.<sup>133</sup>

The last of the discernment factors is comprehension of non-delusion, which is explained as the understanding of no-self in any activity that one performs. According to the commentaries, there is no one who carries out any action. Things happen simply based on a combination of different conditions.<sup>134</sup> It seems their explanation indicates that there is no intention or no desire behind the action. It should be noted that, in explaining clear comprehension of non-delusion, the commentaries even severely criticize the *suttas*' exposition of *sampajañña*—being aware of what is happening in

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<sup>132</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 62.

<sup>133</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 64–74.

<sup>134</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 74–79.

one's meditation. For instance, in the contemplation of the body, the commentaries state in somewhat snide terms:

When he is going (a bhikkhu) understands: "I am going." In this matter of going, readily do dogs, jackals and the like, know when they move on that they are moving. But this instruction on the modes of deportment was not given concerning similar awareness, because awareness of that sort belonging to animals does not shed the belief in a living being, does not knock out the percept of a soul, and neither becomes a subject of meditation nor the development of the Arousing of Mindfulness.

But the knowledge of this meditator sheds the belief in a living being, knocks out the idea of a soul, and is both a subject of meditation and the development of the Arousing of Mindfulness.

Indeed, who goes, whose going is it, on what account is this going? These words refer to the knowledge of the (act of) going (the mode of deportment) of the meditating bhikkhu.

In the elucidation of these questions the following is said: Who goes? No living being or person whatsoever. Whose going is it? Not the going of any living being or person. On account of what does the going take place? On account of the diffusion of the process of oscillation born of mental activity. Because of that this yogi knows thus: If there arises the thought, "I shall go," that thought produces the process of oscillation; the process of oscillation produces expression (the bodily movement which indicates going and so forth). The moving on of the whole body through the diffusion of the process of oscillation is called going. The same is the method of exposition as regards the other postures: standing and so forth.<sup>135</sup>

In this argument, the notion of being aware of one's activity during the course of meditation which is used in the *suttas* to explain the quality of *sampajañña* is strongly criticized because it does not have the ability to eliminate the perception of the self. According to the commentaries, even animals such as dogs and jackals possess this sort of awareness—knowing what they are doing. The author of the commentaries goes further to claim that this sort of awareness should not be used as a meditation subject nor to be applied in the cultivation of *satipaṭṭhāna*. In the commentaries' perspective,

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<sup>135</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 54–55.

*sampajañña* should not be understood simply as being aware, but as clear comprehension of no-self. For example, in the case of “going” provided here, meditators are instructed to pose several questions in order to see that there is no any living being or person who is performing the act of “going.” The act of going takes place simply through the diffusion of the process of oscillation. This realization of no self, according to the commentaries, is the goal of the contemplation of “going.”

A similar criticism is repeated in the section on contemplation of feelings, below, to echo that *sampajañña* should be construed in terms of the three characteristics rather than—as the *suttas* suggest—as being alert to one’s activities.

Certainly, while they experience a pleasant feeling, in sucking the breast and on similar occasions, even infants lying on their backs know that they experience pleasure. But this meditator’s knowledge is different. Knowledge of pleasure possessed by infants lying on their backs and other similar kinds of knowledge of pleasure do not cast out the belief in a being, do not root out the perception of a being, do not become a subject of meditation and do not become the cultivation of the Arousing of Mindfulness. But the knowledge of this bhikkhu casts out the belief in a being, uproots the perception of a being, is a subject of meditation and is the cultivation of the Arousing of Mindfulness. Indeed, the knowledge meant here is concerned with experience that is wisely understood through inquiry.

Who feels? No being or person. Whose is the feeling? Not of a being or person. Owing to what is there the feeling? Feeling can arise with (certain) things—forms, sounds, smells and so forth—as objects. That bhikkhu knows, therefore, that there is a mere experiencing of feeling after the objectifying of a particular pleasurable or painful physical basis or of one of indifference. (There is no ego that experiences) because there is no doer or agent [*kattu*] besides a bare process [*dhamma*]. The word “bare” indicates that the process is impersonal. The words of the Discourse, “I experience (or feel),” form a conventional expression, indeed, for that process of impersonal feeling. It should be understood that the bhikkhu knows that with the objectification of a property or basis he experiences a feeling.<sup>136</sup>

In this passage, the commentaries use the image of the infants knowing the pleasant feeling when they are sucking the breast to criticize the explanation of *sampajañña* as

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<sup>136</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 108.

being aware of one's activity, as described in the *suttas*. In their view, although the infants are aware of that pleasant feeling, they are still unable to realize that actually there is no being nor person experiencing that pleasant feeling, which is the goal of the contemplation of this particular feeling. The exposition of the commentaries here clearly indicates that only when meditators apply the notion of clear comprehension into this case (experiencing the pleasant feeling) by inquiring a series of question such as "who feels," "whose is the feeling," or "what make the feeling arise," are they able to come to a realization that there is no self. Therefore, the author of the commentaries again claims that *sampajañña* should be interpreted as clear comprehension of no self rather than as awareness of one's activity.

Other evidence for the commentaries' explanation of *sampajañña* as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics can also be found in another passage on the contemplation of feelings.

By the absence of painful feeling at the moment of pleasant feeling, he knows, while experiencing a pleasant feeling: "I am experiencing a pleasant feeling." By reason of that knowledge of the experiencing of pleasant feeling, owing to the absence now of whatsoever painful feeling that existed before and owing to the absence of this pleasant feeling, before the present time, feeling is called an impermanent, a not lasting, and a changeful thing. When he knows the pleasant feeling, in the pleasant feeling, thus, there is clear comprehension.<sup>137</sup>

Here, clear comprehension is expounded as knowing the impermanence of feeling. And, the realization of this knowledge—the impermanent nature of feeling—comes by reasoning that pleasant feeling arises due to the absence of painful feeling and vice versa. This is how *sampajañña* is developed when one contemplates a particular feeling.

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<sup>137</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 112.



According to the commentaries, acting with clear comprehension should be understood in terms of these four kinds of clear comprehension.<sup>138</sup> This explanation of *sampajañña* is also shared by the authors of the subcommentaries such as Dhammapāla of the sixth century CE and, more recently, Burmese Sayadaw U Ṇanabhivamsa of the late eighteenth century.<sup>139</sup> However, this position is not in line with the *suttas*. Here, the commentaries seem to equate *sampajañña* with *vipassanā* as they say that this quality involves seeing things in terms of the three characteristics.<sup>140</sup> This explanation conflicts with the *suttas* in two ways: (a) the *suttas* define *sampajañña* simply as being aware of one's own activities, physical or mental, while they are happening; and (b) the *suttas* never equate *sampajañña* with *vipassanā*.<sup>141</sup>

### 2.2.3 Discrepancy in Explaining the Doctrine of *Anattā*

Another significant discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries is their teaching on the three characteristics. The texts differ on three points: (1) Whereas the *suttas* do not treat the three characteristics as a categorical teaching—something that is always true and beneficial—the commentaries do; (2) Whereas the *suttas* explain *anattā* as not-self to foster a sense of disenchantment and dispassion in order to release the mind from clinging, the commentaries interpret it as a no-self teaching which is utilized to deny a permanent metaphysical self. Note that the *suttas* claim that the views that “there is no self” is a wrong view which would put an obstacle on the path; (3) Whereas the

<sup>138</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Fruits of Reclusheship: The Sāmaññaphala Sutta and Its Commentaries*, reprint ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publications Society, 2008), 127.

<sup>139</sup> Bodhi and Buddhaghosa, *The Fruits of Reclusheship*, v–vi.

<sup>140</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to follow the commentaries' teachings as he also equates *sampajañña* with *vipassanā*. In his treatment, the quality of *sampajañña* is also explained as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics. For more detail, see Chapters Four and Five.

<sup>141</sup> More discussion of the interpretation of *sampajañña*—as being aware versus seeing things in term of the three characteristics—will be addressed in the following chapters when we analyze the treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw.

commentaries seem to equate the knowledge leading up to awakening to the knowledge of the three characteristics, the *suttas* explain it in terms of the four noble truths or dependent co-arising.

(1) With regard to the first discrepancy, this investigation shows that the commentaries seem to treat the three characteristics as a categorical teaching—something that is always true and beneficial. As mentioned in the first section above—discrepancy in framing the key factors of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice—the commentaries put great emphasis on the three characteristics. It can be seen by the fact that they use this doctrine in every single activity to explain the practice of mindfulness. From walking, sitting, eating, urinating, and other aspects of body contemplation, to the contemplation of feelings, the contemplation of the mind, and the contemplation of mental qualities, the cultivation of the three characteristics occupies a central role.<sup>142</sup> In other words, the commentaries seem to apply this doctrine to all cases as they appear to believe that this teaching is always true and beneficial.<sup>143</sup>

Unlike the commentaries, the *suttas* do not recommend applying the three characteristics in all circumstances. This doctrine, according to the *suttas*’ perspective, is always true but not always beneficial. As the *suttas* revealed, the Buddha did not advocate adopting it or reflection on it in all circumstances.<sup>144</sup> This can be clearly seen by his reprimands to the monks who apply the teaching wrongly. The *Mahā Kamma-vibhaṅga Sutta* (MN 136) reports an example of such criticism. The monk in this *sutta*

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<sup>142</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 16–151.

<sup>143</sup> In his exposition of *satipaṭṭhāna*, Mahāsi Sayādaw also suggests applying the three characteristics to all situations as in the commentaries.

<sup>144</sup> Similar to the *suttas*, Ajaan Lee’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* also does not use the teaching on the three characteristics in all circumstances as the commentaries and do. He applies it selectively for particular occasions. See Chapter Three and Chapter Five for more detail.

tries to argue from the principle that all feelings are stressful to conclude that all actions lead to stress. In his criticism of this view, the Buddha says that when talking about *kamma* or the consequences of intentional action, one should talk about three kinds of feeling—pleasant, painful, and neither pleasant-nor-painful—instead of portraying them as just painful.

In the Buddha’s words: “Having intentionally done—with body, with speech, or with mind—an action that is to be felt as pleasure, one experiences pleasure. Having intentionally done—with body, with speech, or with mind—an action that is to be felt as pain, one experiences pain. Having intentionally done—with body, with speech, or with mind—an action that is to be felt as neither-pleasure-nor-pain, one experiences neither-pleasure-nor-pain.”<sup>145</sup> It is obvious that applying the three characteristics here is a mistake. This is because if everything one does—whether skillful or unskillful—would lead to suffering and stress, then there would be no incentive in trying to perform any skillful deed. This would go against one of the Buddha’s categorical teachings, which is to try to cultivate what is skillful and abandon what is unskillful for the sake of long-term welfare and happiness.<sup>146</sup>

Another example can be found in the *Mahā Puṇṇamā Sutta* (MN 109). Here a monk tries to argue that if the five aggregates are not-self, then that begs the question of which self does the action and receives the results for that action. In response to this, the Buddha severely scolds the monk for not applying the teaching correctly before counter-questioning him whether the five aggregates are the subject of the three characteristics in

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<sup>145</sup> MN 136

<sup>146</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Three Perceptions and Their Opposites,” Dhammatalks.org, May 2020, [https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/Writings/CrossIndexed/Published/Meditations11/200512\\_The\\_Three\\_Perceptions\\_Their\\_Opposites.pdf](https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/Writings/CrossIndexed/Published/Meditations11/200512_The_Three_Perceptions_Their_Opposites.pdf).

order to arrive at the development of a sense of disenchantment and dispassion toward form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness for the sake of gaining release.<sup>147</sup>

(2) The second discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries is in explaining the *anattā* doctrine: whereas the former aims at preventing meditators from misidentifying with the five aggregates and to foster a sense of disenchantment and dispassion in order to release the mind from clinging, the latter expounds it as no-self to negate the idea of a permanent metaphysical self. However, the *suttas* regard the idea of no-self as a wrong view.

As discussed in the section on clear comprehension of non-delusion, the commentaries expound the doctrine of *anattā* as no-self. In fact, throughout the commentarial literature, the doctrine of *anattā* is elaborated as a way to negate the idea of a permanent metaphysical self. In addition to the examples provided above, here is another from the commentaries. The following is the explanation of the activity of “looking” through the lens of no-self:

Internally there is no self which looks ahead and looks aside. When the thought “Let me look ahead” arises, the mind-originated air element arises together with that thought, producing intimation. Thus, through the diffusion of the air element (resulting from) mental activity, the lower eyelid sinks down and the upper eyelid rises up; there is no one who, as it were, opens them up with a device. Then eye-consciousness arises accomplishing the task of seeing.<sup>148</sup>

In order to strengthen this theory of no-self, the commentaries also provide a more detailed exposition to illustrate that the act of “looking” should be understood by means of these four aspects: the aggregates, the sense bases, the elements, and conditions. The

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<sup>147</sup> MN 109

<sup>148</sup> Bodhi and Buddhaghosa, *The Fruits of Reclusheship*, 113. See also Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 81.

detailed analysis in each aspect focuses on a demonstration that there is no self in the action.

Herein, the eye and forms belong to the aggregate of materiality; seeing to the aggregate of consciousness; the associated feeling to the aggregate of feeling; perception to the aggregate of perception; contact, etc., to the aggregate of mental formations. Thus, looking ahead and looking aside are discerned in the assemblage of these five aggregates. Therein, who is it that looks ahead? Who looks aside?

So, too, the eye is the eye base; form is the form base; seeing is the mind base; the associated phenomena such as feeling, etc., are the mind-object base. Thus, looking ahead and looking aside are discerned in the assemblage of these four sense bases. Therein, who is it that looks ahead? Who looks aside?

So, too, the eye is the eye element; form is the form element; seeing is the eye-consciousness element; the associated phenomena such as feeling, etc., are the mind-object element. Thus, looking ahead and looking aside are discerned in the assemblage of these four elements. Therein, who is it that looks ahead? Who looks aside?

So, too, the eye is a support condition [for seeing]; forms are an object condition; adverting is a proximity, contiguity, decisive support, absence, and disappearance condition; light is a decisive support condition; feeling, etc., are conascence conditions. Thus, looking ahead and looking aside are discerned in the assemblage of these conditions. Therein, who is it that looks ahead? Who looks aside?<sup>149</sup>

It should be noted that this theory of no-self that the commentaries propose has had a wide impact on many generations. Not only Dhammapāla of the sixth century, Sayadaw U Ñāṇābhivamsa of the eighteenth century,<sup>150</sup> and Ledi Sayādaw<sup>151</sup> of the twentieth century, but even modern scholars such as Rupert Gethin<sup>152</sup> and Bhikkhu Bodhi also

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<sup>149</sup> Bodhi and Buddhaghosa, *The Fruits of Reclusheship*, 117. See also Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 85–86.

<sup>150</sup> See their subcommentaries, for example, in the commentary to the *Samaññaphala Sutta* in Bodhi and Buddhaghosa, *The Fruits of Reclusheship*.

<sup>151</sup> Ledi Sayādaw, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Relations* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1986).

<sup>152</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 147.

adopt this view.<sup>153</sup> In an argument with Thānissaro Bhikkhu<sup>154</sup> on this particular topic, Bhikkhu Bodhi makes a claim that “the teaching is not intended to establish the existence of some reality beyond the range of experience, but to demonstrate the absence, or nonexistence, of anything within experience—either among the five aggregates or apart from them—that meets the criterion of true selfhood.”<sup>155</sup>

Once again, it should be noted that this is not in line with the *suttas*. First of all, views such as there is a self, there is no self, etc., are wrong views from the *suttas*’ perspective. For instance, the *Samaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2) attributes a no-self teaching to Ajita Kasakambalin, a contemporary of the Buddha and proponent of annihilationism, in a context where it is obviously a wrong view:

A person is a composite of four primary elements. At death, the earth (in the body) returns to and merges with the (external) earth-substance. The fire returns to and merges with the external fire-substance. The liquid returns to and merges with the external liquid-substance. The wind returns to and merges with the external wind-substance. The sense-faculties scatter into space... The words of those who speak of existence after death are false, empty chatter. With the break-up of the body, the wise and the foolish alike are annihilated, destroyed. They do not exist after death.<sup>156</sup>

The same *sutta* also attributes a different no-self teaching to another contemporary of the Buddha, Pakudha Kaccāyana—again, as a type of wrong view. This is what recorded in the *sutta*:

There are these seven substances<sup>157</sup>—unmade, irreducible, uncreated, without a creator, barren, stable as a mountain-peak, standing firm like a pillar—that do not

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<sup>153</sup> Like the commentaries, Mahāsi Sayādaw in his treatment also explains *anattā* as no-self.

<sup>154</sup> First Thānissaro Bhikkhu wrote an article in 1993 called “The Not-Self Strategy,” which was critiqued by Bhikkhu Bodhi in a responding article titled “*Anattā* as Strategy and Ontology.” Subsequently, Thānissaro Bhikkhu responded to Bhikkhu Bodhi in later article called “The Limit of Description: Not-self Revisited” in 2017, when the criticism came to his attention.

<sup>155</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Investigating the Dhamma* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2015), 30.

<sup>156</sup> DN 2

<sup>157</sup> The earth-substance, the liquid-substance, the fire-substance, the wind-substance pleasure, pain, and the soul as the seventh. See DN 2

alter, do not change, do not interfere with one another, are incapable of causing one another pleasure, pain, or both pleasure and pain.

And among them there is no killer nor one who causes killing, no hearer nor one who causes hearing, no cognizer nor one who causes cognition. When one cuts off [another person's] head, there is no one taking anyone's life. It is simply between the seven substances that the sword passes.<sup>158</sup>

Similarly, the *Sabbāsava Sutta* (MN 2) states that the questions such as “Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I?” are unfit for attention. If one attends to them, one can come to the conclusion either that “I have a self” or “I have no self,” both of which it criticizes as part of a “thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views.”<sup>159</sup> The *Ānanda Sutta*,<sup>160</sup> in addition, suggests that saying there is a self is to conform with the eternalists, who hold a view that there is an eternal and unchanging soul; to say there is no self is to conform with the annihilationists, who believe that death is the annihilation of consciousness. In this *sutta*, too, the Buddha shows that the questions “Is there a self?” and “Is there no self?” should not be answered but should be put aside because they will become obstacles to one's practice.<sup>161</sup>

Second, the *suttas* never explain the third characteristic—*anattā*—for the purpose of claiming that there is no permanent self. In the *suttas*, the doctrine of *anattā*, along with *anicca* and *dukkha*, is a strategic approach which is applied selectively in specific circumstances to free one from clinging or attachment to certain forms of craving that would lead one to suffering. *Anattā*, along with *anicca* and *dukkha* are three perceptions—rather than three characteristics—that are used in the context of contemplating the five aggregates. They are used as a means to help practitioners

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<sup>158</sup> DN 2

<sup>159</sup> MN 2

<sup>160</sup> SN 44.10

<sup>161</sup> For more detail, see Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Skill in Questions* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2010).

eliminate their clinging to the five aggregates: it is the clinging that is the cause of suffering. A closer look at the *suttas*’ presentation shows that the teaching of the three perceptions/characteristics has to be placed within the framework of the four noble truths and the teaching of *kamma*—cause and effect—in order to give rise to liberating insight. The core teaching of the *suttas* on the three perceptions/characteristics can be summarized as follows: Because the five aggregates are inconstant, that gives rise to suffering. And, whatever makes one suffer, one should not identify oneself with that. When not identifying something as oneself, one is free from the suffering caused by such wrong identification. This is different from the commentaries’ explanation, which states outright that there is no self, no being, no person in any particular contemplation of physical or mental activity.<sup>162</sup>

(3) Finally, the commentaries seem to equate knowledge in terms of the three characteristics with the knowledge leading up to awakening. This is what they say:

Having emerged from the absorption, he lays hold of either the respiration body or the factors of absorption. There the meditating worker in respiration examines the body (*rūpa*) thinking thus: Supported by what is respiration? Supported by the basis [*vatthunissita*]. The basis is the coarse body. The coarse body is composed of the Four Great Primaries and the corporeality derived from these.

Thereupon, he, the worker in respiration, cognizes the mind (*nāma*) in the pentad of mental concomitants beginning with sense-impression. The worker in respiration examines the mind and the body, sees the Dependent Origination of ignorance and so forth, and concluding that ***this mind and this body are bare conditions***, and things produced from conditions, and that ***besides these there is neither a living being nor a person***, becomes to that extent a person who transcends doubt.

And the yogi who has transcended doubt while cultivating insight, applies the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and soullessness, to the mind

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<sup>162</sup> Ajaan Lee’s teaching on the three characteristics also delivers a similar message to the *suttas*. See Chapter Three and Chapter Five for more detail.



and body together with the conditions and gradually reaches arahantship.<sup>163</sup>  
(Emphasis mine)

In this explanation, the commentaries seem to claim that when meditators finally see that there is no-self, they are said to have reached the first level of awakening.<sup>164</sup> In other words, it seems, according to the commentaries' theory, that insight into the three characteristics is the same as the knowledge leading up to awakening. This transcending doubt is said to achieve by working through the contemplation of depending origination, which proves that there is nobody there. To put it another way, the expression of awakening from the commentaries' perspective is that of the formula saying that mind and body are bare conditions, besides these, there is no self, i.e., there is neither any living being nor a person.<sup>165</sup>

However, it is important to re-emphasize that the three characteristics are taught in the *suttas* as three perceptions. Perceptions themselves are empty and devoid of substance.<sup>166</sup> The goal of the practice, on the other hand, is to seek something that does have essence.<sup>167</sup> The theory that the commentaries propose here seems to mistake a

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<sup>163</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 49–50.

<sup>164</sup> The same account of awakening is also given for practitioners who take on the practice of absorption (concentration). “The worker in absorption, namely, he who contemplates upon the factors of absorption, also thinks thus: Supported by what are these factors of absorption? By the basis. The basis is the coarse body. The factors of absorption are here representative of the mind. The coarse body is the body. Having determined thus, he, searching for the reason of the mind and the body, seeks it in Conditions’ Mode beginning with ignorance, concludes that this mind and the body comprise just conditions and things produced by conditions and that besides these there is neither a living being nor a person, and becomes to that extent a person who transcends doubt. And the yogi who transcends doubt thus, while cultivating insight, applies the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and soullessness, to the mind and the body together with conditions and gradually reaches arahantship.” But this is strange, for what difference between the worker in respiration and the worker in absorption can be found here? See Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 51.

<sup>165</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to follow the commentaries as he also equates knowledge in terms of the three characteristics with the knowledge that results from awakening. See Chapter Four and Chapter Five for more detail.

<sup>166</sup> SN 22.95

<sup>167</sup> SN 43.1–44; SN 22.89

perception for something that should be beyond perception. Misunderstanding of perception is quite common. For instance, in his objection against Thānissaro Bhikkhu's thesis which claims that the three characteristics is a strategic teaching to foster dispassion, Bhikkhu Bodhi argues that "The perception is not merely an expedient technique with therapeutic benefits, but an insight that cuts through conceptual and perceptual distortions to uncover phenomena in their own nature."<sup>168</sup> The question for this argument is that if it (the perception) is not a tool, then how can one let go of it when the job is done in order to stay unbound? If the answer is positive, then he is ironically strengthening Thānissaro Bhikkhu's thesis<sup>169</sup> while trying to attack it. In other words, even though the insights may be true about all fabrications, they have to be let go as well when it comes to the point of gaining release. Insights, after all, are fabrications, too. If one still latches to them but believes one has reached the goal, one would suffer from what are called the "corruptions of insight."<sup>170</sup> It is like a simile of someone who uses a ladder to climb to the roof of the house. In order to step on the roof, one needs to let go of the ladder once it has done its job. Otherwise, it is impossible to claim to already be on top of the house while one is still attached to the ladder.

The interpretation of the commentaries on the issue of awakening is significantly different from the *suttas*. First of all, there is no place in the *suttas* where the Buddha equates either the four noble truths or the three characteristics with the content of awakening. The knowledge of full awakening is expressed as knowledge of "release"<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Investigating the Dhamma*, 30.

<sup>169</sup> See Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Not-Self Strategy" and "The Limit of Description: Not-self Revisited" for more detail.

<sup>170</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Three Perceptions and Their Opposites."

<sup>171</sup> SN 56.11

or the knowledge of “the deathless: the liberation of the mind through lack of clinging.”<sup>172</sup> It is depicted throughout the *suttas* by a formula that “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.” However, the important question is, what kind of knowledge leads up to this liberation. The *Susima Sutta* reveals two stages in the process of awakening. “First there is the knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma*, after which there is the knowledge of Unbinding.”<sup>173</sup> The *sutta* seems to indicate that the knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma* is what leads up to liberation. So it is vital to learn what kind of knowledge is the knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma*?

When the Buddha describes his own awakening, he describes the knowledge leading up to the knowledge of liberation almost always in terms of the four noble truths<sup>174</sup> or in terms of dependent co-arising,<sup>175</sup> which is essentially an elaboration of the four noble truths.<sup>176</sup> In one *sutta* where he does not mention either of those teachings, he simply states that he found the deathless.<sup>177</sup> He also never mentions the three characteristics in the autobiographical accounts of his awakening.

As for the knowledge of stream-entry: The events reported in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion*<sup>178</sup> and the *Pañcavaggi Sutta: Five Brethren*<sup>179</sup> give insight into this issue. In the

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<sup>172</sup> MN 106

<sup>173</sup> SN 12.70

<sup>174</sup> SN 56.11; MN 4; MN 19; MN 36

<sup>175</sup> SN 12.65

<sup>176</sup> Like the *suttas*, Ajaan Lee in his teachings also describes the knowledge leading to awakening as the realization of the four noble truths or dependent co-arising. See Chapter Three for more detail.

<sup>177</sup> MN 26

<sup>178</sup> SN 56.11

<sup>179</sup> SN 22.59. This discourse is also known as the *Anattā-lakkhana Sutta: The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic*.

*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, Venerable *Añña Koṇḍañña* attains the *Dhamma*-eye after hearing a teaching on the four noble truths. The Buddha does not introduce the concept of *anattā* to the five brethren until later, after all five of them have become stream-enterers.<sup>180</sup> Now, if confirmation that there is no self were the content of the knowledge of stream-entry, the Buddha would not have had to introduce the topic to them after their attainment of stream-entry. They would already have known it.

Furthermore, the expression of what the *Dhamma*-eye sees (given in SN 56:11) is a formula that reappears throughout the *suttas*: “Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.”<sup>181</sup> The words “origination” and “cessation” here relate to the four noble truths and dependent co-arising, not to the three characteristics. Here it is important to note that *samudaya*, “origination,” does not mean mere arising, as it is sometimes translated in this context. It refers to causality: the process by which x cause y to arise. In the context of the four noble truths, craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming are the causes that lead to the suffering described in the first noble truth, which is the result of those cravings. Nevertheless, when those cravings (the cause) are abandoned, liberation is said to be attained (the effect). And, with the attainment of liberation, there is no more suffering, i.e., suffering has come to its cessation. Likewise, in the context of the dependent co-arising, “craving” is a requisite condition of “clinging,” i.e., “craving” is the cause leading to “clinging” (the effect). However, when craving is uprooted (the cause), liberation (the effect) is gained through lack of “clinging,” i.e., “clinging” has come to its cessation at the moment of liberation.

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<sup>180</sup> SN 22.59; Mv 1.6

<sup>181</sup> SN 56.11

In these two contexts, there is a noticeable connection between the cause and the effect, that the *Dhamma*-eye sees clearly with direct knowledge.

As for the *Pañcavaggi Sutta*, here the Buddha does use the concepts of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* to induce full awakening in the five brethren. But he does not try to lead them to the conclusion that there is no self, but rather, he demonstrates that questioning the worthiness of attachment to mine/self/what-I-am, is itself a liberating exercise:

And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: “This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am?”— “No, lord.”  
Thus...every form...feeling...perception...fabrication...consciousness is to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: “This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.”<sup>182</sup>

The purpose of this conclusion is to induce disenchantment and dispassion for the five aggregates.<sup>183</sup>

Seeing thus, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is fully released.<sup>184</sup>

In inducing dispassion, one is completing the duty with regard to the first noble truth, which is to comprehend the five clinging-aggregates. As the *Pariñña Sutta*<sup>185</sup> defines it, comprehension implies, or leads to, the ending of passion, aversion, and delusion. So here, again, the knowledge leading to awakening falls under the rubric of the four noble

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<sup>182</sup> SN 22.59

<sup>183</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Purity of Heart: Essays on the Buddhist Path* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2006), 37.

<sup>184</sup> SN 22.59

<sup>185</sup> SN 22.23

truths.<sup>186</sup> The three characteristics simply serve to complete the duties of those truths, and not to stand as categorical truths on their own.

#### 2.2.4 Discrepancy in Explaining the Way to Practice *Satipaṭṭhāna*

In the course of cultivating *satipaṭṭhāna*, the *suttas* and the commentaries also reveal their different approaches to this practice. Whereas the *suttas* state that *samatha* and *vipassanā* can be cultivated in either order or at the same time, the commentaries promote a bare insight vehicle that completely forgoes the development of *jhāna*, strong states of mental absorption. This is another discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries.

The notion of bare insight meditation, which will be presented in Chapter Four, is popular within insight contemporary meditation circles. The practice focuses on developing mainly insight into the three characteristics<sup>187</sup> or *vipassanā* which literally means clear-seeing.<sup>188</sup> This approach is said to exclude the cultivation of *samatha* or tranquility<sup>189</sup> which is an approach of practice used to foster strong states of mental absorption called *jhāna*.<sup>190</sup> Their reference sources can be traced to the commentarial literature such as the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>191</sup> In his treatise, Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa

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<sup>186</sup> Like the *suttas*, Ajaan Lee's teaching on the three characteristics ultimately aims to develop dispassion in order to achieve unbinding. However, the uniqueness of his teaching lies in the fact that besides describing things as inconstant, stressful, and not-self, he also talks about another side which is constant, easeful, and under one's control: the qualities that arise by mastering the skill of concentration. Later on, he also says that one should eventually abandon both sides. See the discussion of this point in Chapter Five.

<sup>187</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli defines *vipassanā* or insight as "the vision of what is formed as permanent, painful, and not self." It is for him a synonym of understanding (*paññā*). See Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 88, 784.

<sup>188</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Noble Strategy*, 55. *Vipassanā* is also rendered as "knowledge of the truth." See Ajaan Chah, *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah* (Bangkok: Aruna Publications, 2011), 7, 318.

<sup>189</sup> According to Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *samatha*, which also rendered as serenity, is a synonym for absorption concentration. See Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 88.

<sup>190</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Noble Strategy* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 1999), 55.

<sup>191</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw's promoting of bare insight meditation, as shown in Chapter Four, is based on the commentaries. See Chapter Four more detail.

introduces the vehicle of bare insight when giving a summary of the path leading to liberation. In the beginning section of the *Visuddhimagga*, he states that:

Herein, purification should be understood as *Nibbāna*, which being devoid of all stains, is utterly pure. The path of purification is the path to that purification; it is the means of approach that is called the path. The meaning is, I shall expound that path of purification.

In some instances this path of purification is taught by **insight alone**, according as it is said:

“Formations are all impermanent:  
When he sees thus with understanding  
And turns away from what is ill,  
That is the path to purity” (Dhp 227).<sup>192</sup> (Emphasis mine)

In this passage, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa briefly describes the path of bare insight as a contemplation of the aggregates. Formation (*saṅkhāra*) here is one of the five aggregates. The other four are form, feelings, perception, and consciousness. Similar to the instruction in other commentaries, the practice here also focuses on the development of the three characteristics, a dominant theme in the commentaries’ teaching on *satipaṭṭhāna*. In another chapter in this commentary, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa again mentions the practice of bare insight. This time, it consists of contemplation of the four elements—earth, water, wind, and fire. As he says: “But one whose vehicle is pure insight.....discerns the four elements in brief or in detail in one of the various ways given in the chapter on the definition of the four elements.”<sup>193</sup> It should be noted that this notion of bare insight does not appear randomly in the *Visuddhimagga*. Instead, it seems to be a well-developed theory as Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa mentions it quite often in his work.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, I 5–6.

<sup>193</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, XVIII 5.

<sup>194</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, I 6; VIII 237; XVIII 5; XVIII 8; XXIII 31.

Bare insight is explained in the sub-commentary (the *Visuddhimagga-mahāṭīkā*) as an approach that excludes the practice of *samatha* or tranquility. Note that tranquility here is understood in terms of absorption concentration (*jhāna*) alone but not including access concentration (*upacārasamādhī*),<sup>195</sup> “a necessary prelude to *jhāna*.”<sup>196</sup> This is what it said in the sub-commentary:

The words ‘insight alone’ are meant to exclude not virtue, etc., but serenity (i.e. *jhāna*), which is the opposite number in the pair, serenity and insight. This is for emphasis. But the word ‘alone’ actually excludes only that concentration with distinction [of *jhāna*]; for concentration is classed as both access and absorption (see IV.32).<sup>197</sup>

The sub-commentary’s exposition seems to indicate that bare insight is the vehicle that forgoes the practice of *jhāna* or awakening can be achieved with a level of concentration lower than that of *jhāna*,<sup>198</sup> i.e., access concentration.<sup>199</sup> And, this method is named as bare insight so that meditators can differentiate it with the other approach which promotes the cultivation of *jhāna* and insight in tandem.

According to the commentaries, the mind can become concentrated in both access concentration and absorption concentration. In access concentration, the five hindrances are said to have been abandoned, whereas the *jhāna* factors are manifesting in absorption concentration.<sup>200</sup> The difference between these two kinds of concentration is explained in terms of their power. The concentration power of absorption concentration is stronger

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<sup>195</sup> *Upacārasamādhī* is also translated as threshold concentration or neighborhood concentration. For more detail, see Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 937–38.

<sup>196</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Wings to Awakening*, 249.

<sup>197</sup> *Vism-mhṭ* 9-10. See Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, I 5–6.

<sup>198</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Wings to Awakening*, 248.

<sup>199</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to go past the commentaries on this point as he claims that awakening can take place with the support of momentary concentration, the lowest degree compared to the other forms of concentration such as access concentration and absorption concentration.

<sup>200</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, IV 32–33.



than that of access concentration.<sup>201</sup> In access concentration, “the mind now makes the sign its object and now re-enters the life-continuum, just as when a young child is lifted up and stood on its feet, it repeatedly falls down on the ground.”<sup>202</sup> The mind in absorption concentration, on the other hand, is compared with a healthy man who could stand for a whole day after rising from his seat.<sup>203</sup> As access concentration is able to bring about the mental purification, a necessary condition for awakening to take place, the cultivation of higher concentrations (*jhāna*) is thus not required for bare insight meditation. So, it can be said that *jhāna* and *vipassanā* do not have any connection to each other in this method of practice (bare insight meditation) at all.<sup>204</sup>

This theory, however, is considerably different from what the *suttas* convey. Unlike the commentarial literature, the *suttas* never promote the notion of bare insight. In the *suttas*, the path to awakening always consists of both tranquility and insight, which can be developed in either order or at the same time.<sup>205</sup> This point is well described, for example, in the *Yuganaddha Sutta*:

Ven. Ānanda said: Friends, whoever—monk or nun—declares the attainment of arahantship in my presence, they all do it by means of one or another of four paths. Which four?

There is the case where a monk has developed insight preceded by tranquility. As he develops insight preceded by tranquility, the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it and pursuing it—his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.

Then there is the case where a monk has developed tranquility preceded by insight. As he develops tranquility preceded by insight, the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it and pursuing it—his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.

Then there is the case where a monk has developed tranquility in tandem with insight. As he develops tranquility in tandem with insight, the path is born. He

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<sup>201</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, IV 32–33.

<sup>202</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, IV 32–33.

<sup>203</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, IV 32–33.

<sup>204</sup> See Chapter Five for a more detailed discussion on the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*.

<sup>205</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Noble Strategy* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 1999), 55–66.

follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it and pursuing it—his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.

Then there is the case where a monk's mind has its restlessness concerning the *Dhamma* [Comm: the corruptions of insight] well under control. There comes a time when his mind grows steady inwardly, settles down, and becomes unified and concentrated. In him the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it and pursuing it—his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed. Whoever—monk or nun—declares the attainment of arahantship in my presence, they all do it by means of one or another of these four paths.<sup>206</sup>

Among these three cases, the instruction on *satipaṭṭhāna* practice in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* seems to belong to the last one—developing tranquility in tandem with insight.<sup>207</sup>

This can be seen through the explanations of the three qualities mentioned above. While *sati* and *sampajañña* help to keep the mind in concentration, *ātappa* plays the role of discernment. With the functions of these three qualities, the act of establishing mindfulness is not only primarily concerned with getting the mind into concentration, but it also includes the development of the discernment factor.<sup>208</sup> The cooperation of tranquility and insight also can be seen in two activities constituting *satipaṭṭhāna* practice: one not only has to stay focused on the meditation object, but at the same time has to fend off any mental states that come to disturb that focus.

In addition, the *suttas* also indicate the necessity of both tranquility and insight that meditators should develop for the consummation of their meditation. For example, the *Samādhi Sutta* states that:

The individual who has attained internal tranquility of awareness, but not insight into phenomena through heightened discernment, should approach an individual who has attained insight into phenomena through heightened discernment and ask him: 'How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be investigated?

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<sup>206</sup> AN 4.170

<sup>207</sup> Ajaan Lee's approach to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is in line with the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as his treatment fosters the development of concentration along with insight. See Chapter Three for detailed discussion on this point.

<sup>208</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *On the Path*, 346–47.

How should they be seen with insight?’ The other will answer in line with what he has seen and experienced: ‘Fabrications should be regarded in this way. Fabrications should be investigated in this way. Fabrications should be seen in this way with insight.’ Then eventually he [the first] will become one who has attained both internal tranquility of awareness and insight into phenomena through heightened discernment.

As for the individual who has attained insight into phenomena through heightened discernment, but not internal tranquility of awareness, he should approach an individual who has attained internal tranquility of awareness... and ask him, ‘How should the mind be steadied? How should it be made to settle down? How should it be unified? How should it be concentrated?’ The other will answer in line with what he has seen and experienced: ‘The mind should be steadied in this way. The mind should be made to settle down in this way. The mind should be unified in this way. The mind should be concentrated in this way.’ Then eventually he [the first] will become one who has attained both internal tranquility of awareness and insight into phenomena through heightened discernment.<sup>209</sup>

In this discourse, the point is rather clear that meditators who are skilled at tranquility but not insight, were instructed to go consult individuals who are good at insight and vice versa. There is no way that meditators could rely on only one of these two qualities and ignore the other. The *Kimsuka Sutta* even compares tranquility and insight to a swift pair of messengers who enter the fortress—which stands for the body—by means of the noble eightfold path to report their message: unbinding, or nibbana.<sup>210</sup> Still another discourse suggests that meditators commit to tranquility, become endowed with insight, perfect their virtue, and commit to seclusion if they wanted to eliminate their mental defilements.<sup>211</sup> It is clear that, in these *suttas*, *vipassanā* is so often mentioned together with tranquility that one concludes that they are not two alternative methods, but rather two qualities of mind that meditators should cultivate together.<sup>212</sup> So, unlike the

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<sup>209</sup> AN 4. 94

<sup>210</sup> SN 35. 204

<sup>211</sup> AN 10. 71

<sup>212</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Noble Strategy*, 55–60.

commentaries, the *suttas* present an unseparated relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā* in the description of awakening.<sup>213</sup>

## 2.3 Conclusion

The textual analysis conducted for this chapter shows a number of significant discrepancies between the *suttas* and the commentaries concerning their expositions of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The differences that distinguish these two literatures are as follows:

(1) The key factors constituting *satipaṭṭhāna* practice: Whereas the *suttas* emphasize the applying of the three qualities—*sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*—the commentaries stress the three characteristics—*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*.

(2) Their distinct exposition of the quality of *sampajañña*: Whereas the *suttas* elaborate it simply as being aware of what is happening in one's meditation, the commentaries explain it as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics. In addition, whereas the commentaries equate *sampajañña* with *vipassanā*, the *suttas* treat them at separate. Moreover, whereas the commentaries identify *sampajañña* as the discernment factor, the *suttas* identify the quality of *ātappa* as the discernment factor.

(3) Their teachings on the three characteristics: Whereas the *suttas* use these three perceptions selectively, the commentaries suggest applying them in all situations. The *suttas*' explanation of the *anattā* doctrine aims at developing disenchantment and dispassion toward the aggregates. The disenchantment and dispassion consequently free the mind from attachment, and so, lead to ultimate release. The commentaries, on the other hand, develop a no-self theory to deny the existence of a permanent metaphysical self, a view criticized by the *suttas*. In addition, whereas the commentaries propose a

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<sup>213</sup> See Chapter Five for a more detailed discussion on the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*.

theory that knowledge of awakening is the realization of the no-self doctrine, the *suttas* repeatedly state that knowledge of awakening consists of the direct understanding of the four noble truths and dependent co-arising.

(4) Their exposition of way to practice *satipaṭṭhāna*: Whereas the commentaries promote a bare insight meditation which completely dispense the cultivation of *jhāna*, the *suttas* often describe the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* with the development of tranquility in tandem with insight. In fact, unlike the commentaries, in the *suttas*, tranquility and insight can be developed in either order or at the same time.

It should be noted that the commentaries are believed by many to be a more detailed version of the *suttas* as they attempt to provide interpretation to every single turn of phrase in the *suttas*. In many cases, they give lengthy explanations to compensate for the conciseness in the teachings of the *suttas*. These commentaries that we have examined, compiled by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, are said to be based on an older set of commentaries that were composed in Sinhala by Sri Lankan monks centuries prior. Therefore, it can be said that they not only reflect the understanding of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa but also reveal the accreted interpretations of generations of Sri Lankan scholar monks. There are many followers from various Theravāda traditions who treat the commentaries as an authoritative teaching equivalent to the *suttas*. To some extent, this is similar to Vajrayana practitioners who are also well known for placing the words of the commentators in a central position. However, it seems that they never compare and contrast the commentarial teaching with the *suttas*, which are believed to be the words of the Buddha and his immediate disciples, to see if there are any differences between the

two. Or, they might have done so but have failed to capture the discrepancies in a written analysis.

Whereas the followers of the commentarial tradition place their trust in this literature without questioning it, others reject the commentaries and the *Abhidhamma* out of hand.<sup>214</sup> A concise comparison of the explanations of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice between the *suttas* and the commentaries shows that although this commentarial corpus does contain some useful materials conducive to the practice and to the understanding of the development of Buddhism, several teachings presented in the commentaries remain at variance with the *suttas*. To some degree, the interpretations of the commentaries may cause confusion to practitioners who are not experienced in the Buddha's teachings. At some points, their theory is at odds with the *suttas* and could lead practitioners astray and away from the goal, as in the case of the *anattā* doctrine. Indeed, the various points of divergence uncovered in this chapter, as well as the other aspects that have been examined by meditation teachers and scholars,<sup>215</sup> call for a serious reevaluation of the commentarial teachings.

Learning about these discrepancies between the *suttas* and the commentaries will prepare us to unfold and gain clarity on the respective treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* given by Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw. In other words, the framework developed in this chapter will have the function of providing a checklist for highlighting the differences between Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw pertaining to their expositions of *satipaṭṭhāna*, which will be investigated in the following chapters.

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<sup>214</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Investigating the Dhamma*, 43.

<sup>215</sup> Shankman, *The Experience of Samādhi*, 77–104. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Wings to Awakening*, 248–261.

## Chapter Three: Ajaan Lee's Treatment of *Satipaṭṭhāna*

“Virtue, the first part of the path, and discernment, the last, aren’t especially difficult. But keeping the mind centered, which is the middle part, takes some effort because it’s a matter of forcing the mind into shape. Admittedly, centering the mind, like placing bridge pilings in the middle of a river, is something difficult to do. But once the mind is firmly in place, it can be very useful in developing virtue and discernment.”<sup>216</sup>

### 3.1 Introduction

With the discussion of Chapter Two as the background, the dissertation now moves forward to the heart of the project. It begins with a detailed analysis of Ajaan Lee’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. With regard to the topic of *satipaṭṭhāna*, there are a variety of studies currently available in English written by meditation teachers as well as by scholars.<sup>217</sup> However, in the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition, there are almost no written texts systematizing meditation practice, especially targeting the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>218</sup> There are grounds, from the documents gathered, to claim that Ajaan Lee

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<sup>216</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, 5th ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2000), 6.

<sup>217</sup> Some examples are: Sayādaw U Silānanda, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, ed. Ruth-Inge Heinze (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002); Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1990); Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*, trans. Mobi Ho (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator’s Handbook* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006); Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2003); Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna Meditation: A Practice Guide* (Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2018); Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna* (Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2014); Joseph Goldstein, *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2013); Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A Handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha’s Way of Mindfulness* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1965); Rupert Gethin, “The Establishing of Mindfulness,” in *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 29–68; Edward Conze, *Buddhist Meditation* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003); Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Right Mindfulness: Memory and Ardency on the Buddhist Path* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2012).

<sup>218</sup> It should be noted that Ajaan Mun left only one book, which provides a brief taste of his teachings. See Phra Ajaan Mun, *A Heart Released: The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Mun Bhūridatta Thera*, trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2016). Of course, his teachings also can be found in the form of persons, which can be seen in his close disciples’ writings and in the way they live their lives. Regarding *satipaṭṭhāna*, Ajaan Mun, in one of the sections in his only book, did explain the practice of mindfulness although his talk was relatively concise compared to the *suttas*’ description.

was perhaps the first teacher of the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition, who composed<sup>219</sup> a systematic teaching on *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>220</sup>

From the two volumes that collect the writings of Ajaan Lee, we learn that most of his teachings primarily focus on meditation. Many of his treatises are devoted to elaborating key concepts in meditation; hundreds of *Dhamma* talks encourage the development of inner qualities for the purpose of obtaining a better rebirth, as well as for transcending birth and death. These are intended for both monastics and lay people. Ajaan Lee's teachings are centered on three main principles often indicated in Buddhist texts—virtue, concentration, and discernment—which, to him, cannot be separated from one another. Among these three vital trainings, concentration, according to Ajaan Lee, is the most challenging practice and needs a lot of time and wisdom in order to be well developed as a skill.<sup>221</sup> One of the similes he gives is the process of learning to weave a basket. As he says, in order to become a good weaver, at first one needs to pay careful attention to how the master does it, and then one can start weaving. The first basket might not look beautiful and might take a long time to complete, but if one carefully examines where the basket could be developed and then improves accordingly, one's weaving skill

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<sup>219</sup> Date of composition: 1948.

<sup>220</sup> Ajaan Singh wrote an earlier treatise on meditation but nothing on *satipaṭṭhāna*. For more detail on Phra Ajaan Singh's small handbook for the practice of meditation, see Phra Ajaan Singh, *Taking the Triple Refuge and the Techniques of Meditation*. Ajaan Thate Desaraṇsī and Ajaan Mahā Boowa wrote treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* but they were composed much later than that of Ajaan Lee. See Phra Acharn Thate Desaraṇsī, *The Flavour of Dhamma*, trans. Phra Steven Pannobhaso (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Wisdom Audio Visual Exchange, 1978), 16–62; and Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Forest Desanās: A Selection of Dhamma Talks on Buddhist Meditation Practice Given at Baan Taad Forest Monastery in 1979*, trans. Ajaan Suchart Abhijāto, vol. 1 (Udon Thani, Thailand: Forest Dhamma Books, 2010), 107–119.

<sup>221</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 6.



would begin to develop. The beauty of the basket then would depend on the skill of each individual, which is based on his or her powers of observation and discernment.<sup>222</sup>

In his explanation of the noble eightfold path in *The Path to Peace and Freedom*, Ajaan Lee places right mindfulness, right effort, and right concentration under the heading of “concentration,”<sup>223</sup> which aligns with a schema that can be found in the *Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta: The Shorter Set of Questions and Answers*.<sup>224</sup> It can be said that, in Ajaan Lee’s meditation system, right concentration and right mindfulness are interconnected. The practice of right mindfulness, in his theory, is the cultivation of the four frames of reference (body, feelings, mind and mental qualities), which are being used for the work of centering the mind in concentration for the sake of ultimate release.<sup>225</sup>

The questions that then arise are: what was Ajaan Lee’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* or right mindfulness? And, how did Ajaan Lee use *satipaṭṭhāna* or right mindfulness to develop concentration and discernment? Because these questions have broad appeal to both the scholarly and non-scholarly communities, I will attempt to tackle them in this chapter. In addition, the chapter also investigates other important aspects in his treatment including the topic of whether Ajaan Lee’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* or the four frames of reference is in accord with that of the suttanta teachings in the Pāli Canon. To be more specific, although the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* are relatively

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<sup>222</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Inner Strength and Parting Gifts*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, rev. ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2011), 33–34. See also Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Five Faculties* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2017), 70–71.

<sup>223</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Wisdom Audio Visual Exchange, 2008), 43.

<sup>224</sup> MN 44

<sup>225</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 20. See also Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 14.

lengthy, they do not comprise a complete description of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, as they answer questions only about one part of the *satipaṭṭhāna* formula.<sup>226</sup> The chapter thus examines whether Ajaan Lee's description will require the filling in of details about what is mentioned only in passing in these suttas. This chapter will also consider whether his additions are in line with other *suttas* that do describe such things as ardency and alertness. I will also consider the extent to which Ajaan Lee's treatment of mindfulness and concentration as two practices that are not radically separate—or as different aspects of a single practice—is in line with other *suttas* such as the *Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta* (MN 44) and *Mahā-Cattārīsaka Sutta* (MN 117). The chapter also seeks to explore factors that might have accounted for Ajaan Lee's distinct *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation theory, such as his training with Ajaan Mun in the forest, as well as his formal monastic education. Examining unique aspects of Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* undoubtedly would bring to light his point of view on the matter as well as help us understand the perspectives of the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition on this meditation teaching.<sup>227</sup> That is the task undertaken in this chapter.

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<sup>226</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Right Mindfulness*, 149–154.

<sup>227</sup> Note that with regard to the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, there are significant differences among Ajaan Thate, Ajaan Mahā Boowa and Ajaan Lee. In comparison to Ajaan Lee's treatment, the approach that Ajaan Thate Desaraṇsī and Ajaan Mahā Boowa use to explain *satipaṭṭhāna* is fairly informal. As this chapter will present, Ajaan Lee's treatment is basically based on the outline of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* to explain the four frames of reference (body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities) with a strong emphasis on the function of three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—in each frame. In addition, his treatment also considers a variety of key points, which are mentioned only briefly in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Ajaan Thate Desaraṇsī and Ajaan Mahā Boowa seemed to take a more liberal approach in elaborating the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. Their treatments appear to present their own experience and viewpoints on what one should do in order to get the best result out of one's *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, rather than engaging with clarifying the instructions as Ajaan Lee does. Whereas Ajaan Thate Desaraṇsī emphasizes the unification of the mind, Ajaan Ajaan Mahā Boowa stresses the power of discernment. Despite the differences in the way they explain *satipaṭṭhāna*, the central theory in their treatments appears consistent. The common point that can be found in all three treatments is that *satipaṭṭhāna* is a practice used to cultivate concentration, a point that is repeatedly emphasized in their explanations. There is no clear dividing between these two factors (right mindfulness and right concentration) of the noble eightfold path.

The examination of his texts reveals that Ajaan Lee’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* or right mindfulness is found in three treatises: *Frames of Reference* (1948), *The Path to Peace and Freedom* (1955), and *A Refuge in Awakening* (1960-61). Despite the fact that they were composed at three different times, the main principles in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* recorded in these three treatises remain invariable. In Ajaan Lee’s work, the four frames of reference—body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities<sup>228</sup>—are treated with detailed analysis. A unique feature that clearly distinguishes his treatment from that of others is that Ajaan Lee places emphasis on three qualities—namely mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—which are brought to bear on mindfulness practice. In Ajaan Lee’s theory, in order to effectively deal with issues related to the four frames of reference, meditators should bring all these three qualities together to their practice.<sup>229</sup> The way Ajaan Lee presents his understanding of right mindfulness reveals the fact that, although Ajaan Lee might have accessed both *Sutta Piṭaka* and commentarial literatures, his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, in which various essential meditation concepts are delineated, stays closer to the perspective of the former. These are the reasons that make Ajaan Lee’s treatment different from the others who echo the meditation concepts elaborated in the commentaries.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Note that Ajaan Lee in his treatises does not translate the word “*dhamma*” into another Thai word because Thai people tend to take Pāli words into their language. It is Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu who renders “*dhammas*” in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* as “mental qualities” when he translates Ajaan Lee’s books into English. As for how the four noble truths and six sense media could be mental qualities: he explains that one should notice what the discussion in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* focuses on in each case, i.e., whether it is the fetters in the case of the six-sense media, or craving in the context of the four noble truths. (Personal communication, July 2019).

<sup>229</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Five Faculties: Putting Wisdom in Charge of the Mind* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2017), 66.

<sup>230</sup> See Chapter Two for the discussion of some of the discrepancies that exist between the *suttas* and the commentaries.

To understand Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, it is necessary to first understand his personal history, which is given in brief below.

### **3.2 Ajaan Lee's Childhood and Lay Life**

Phra Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo (1907-1961) was born in Ubon Ratchathani province of Thailand.<sup>231</sup> His original name was Chaalee. He came from a large family with five brothers and four sisters. His young age was full of hardship as he lost his mother at the age of eleven and had to work in the rice field to help his father.<sup>232</sup>

Ajaan Lee did not attend school until he turned twelve and he learned just enough to read and write. He left home to make money at the age of eighteen. After having worked for a couple of years, a thought of renunciation came across his mind due to his remorse over killing a dog in an explosive angry moment.<sup>233</sup>

### **3.3 Entering the Monkhood and Training under Ajaan Mun**

Ajaan Lee took full ordination as a monk at the age of 20. Monastic life at a village temple, however, did not satisfy him for it was opposite of what he learned from the *Dhamma* textbooks. As the autobiography reports, village monks were “playing chess, wrestling, playing match games with girls whenever there was a wake, raising birds, holding cock fights, sometimes even eating food in the evenings.”<sup>234</sup>

Discontented with monastic life at the village, Ajaan Lee decided to go seek Ajaan Mun after he happened to meet a forest monk who was one of Ajaan Mun's students. It seemed Ajaan Lee was very satisfied with the meeting with his desired

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<sup>231</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, 3rd ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2012), 1.

<sup>232</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 2.

<sup>233</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 3–4.

<sup>234</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 4.

teacher, as he said, “The advice and assistance he gave me were just what I was looking for.”<sup>235</sup> Ajaan Lee eventually decided to re-ordain into Ajaan Mun’s sect, the Dhammayutika<sup>236</sup> in the year 1927, which, according to him, meant making a clear break with the wrongdoings of his past.<sup>237</sup>

Regarding the matter of re-ordination into the Dhammayut Forest Meditation Tradition, it is interesting to note that Ajaan Lee was not an exception. From the biographies of the forest monks in this tradition, we learn that a variety of monks also re-ordained upon meeting their desired *Dhamma* teacher.<sup>238</sup> For example, Ajaan Fuang, one of the most devoted students of Ajaan Lee, re-ordained under Ajaan Lee for a similar reason.<sup>239</sup> They re-ordained and became extremely devoted to their teachers because of the many amazing things they witnessed firsthand. As Ajaan Lee explained, “There were times when I would have been thinking about something, without ever mentioning it to him, and yet he’d bring up the topic and seemed to know exactly what my thoughts had been. Each time this happened, my respect and devotion toward him deepened.”<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 7.

<sup>236</sup> In his autobiography, Ajaan Lee simply names the Dhammayutika sect as the sect that Ajaan Mun belongs to, but not the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition as people called it later. However, please keep in mind that a variety of principles of monastic life upheld by the Dhammayut monks in the city and monks in Ajaan Mun’s lineage are significantly different in many aspects, including their commitment to *dhutaṅga* practice, their respective meditation theories, as well as their living mindset—wandering life versus settled life—education, social work, and so forth. The Ajaan Mun lineage community gradually formed a subsect, which what we now know as the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition.

<sup>237</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 9.

<sup>238</sup> For example, Ajaan Chaup, see Kamala Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*, 327; Ajaan Funn, see Phra Ajaan Funn Ācāro, *Come and See*, trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2018), 5; or Ajaan Paṇṇāvaḍḍho (1925–2004), a former Mahanikaya monk, who re-ordained under the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition in order to study with Ajaan Mahā Boowa. See Ajaan Dick Sīlaratano, *Uncommon Wisdom: Life and Teachings of Ajaan Paṇṇāvaḍḍho* (Lexington, VA: Forest Dhamma Publications, 2014), 73–94.

<sup>239</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Awareness Itself*, i.

<sup>240</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 9.

Similar reports can be found by other students of Ajaan Mun such as Ajaan Khao<sup>241</sup> or Ajaan Mahā Boowa,<sup>242</sup> who were also deeply devoted to Ajaan Mun for similar reasons.

Because the training with Ajaan Mun might have shaped Ajaan Lee's meditation theory, it is treated in detail here. According to his autobiography, right after his re-ordination, Ajaan Lee followed ascetic rules such as eating only one meal a day,<sup>243</sup> or staying in the cemetery, the so-called *dhutaṅga* practices in early Buddhism.<sup>244</sup> Thai Forest meditation monks are said to strictly uphold many of these *dhutaṅgas*, which have become fundamental principles of their tradition.<sup>245</sup> The interest in *dhutaṅga* practices of the Dhammayut monks was revived by Prince Mongkut, or Rama IV, who sent one of his students to the *Saṅgha* of Sri Lanka to request related texts and reliable versions of the Canon.<sup>246</sup>

As Ajaan Lee recounted, Ajaan Mun trained him in many ways, from meditation to monastic discipline and *dhutaṅga* practice.<sup>247</sup> For instance, in order to help Ajaan Lee

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<sup>241</sup> Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Venerable Ajaan Khao Anālayo: A True Spiritual Warrior*, trans. Ajaan Pañṇāvaḍḍho (Udon Thani, Thailand: Forest Dhamma Books, 2006), 58–60.

<sup>242</sup> Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera: A Spiritual Biography*, trans. Ajaan Dick Sīlaratano, 4th ed. (Udon Thani, Thailand: Forest Dhamma Books, 2010), 119–131.

<sup>243</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 25.

<sup>244</sup> The number of *dhutaṅga* practices varies from one source to another. The *Majjhima Nikāya* III. 113 mentions nine *dhutaṅgas*, the *Vin. Parivāra* records twelve; the *Vin. Suttavibhaṅga* has four, *Āṅguttara Nikāya* and the *Theragāthā* indicate thirteen; the *Visudhimagga* and *Vimuttimaggā* provide full list as: 1. Refuse-rag-wearer's Practice (*pamsukulik'anga*); 2. Triple-robe-wearer's Practice (*tecivarik'anga*); 3. Alms-food-eater's Practice (*pindapatik'anga*); 4. House-to-house-seeker's Practice (*sapadanik'anga*); 5. One-sessioner's practice (*ekasanik'anga*); 6. Bowl-food-eater's Practice (*pattapindik'anga*); 7. Later-food-refuser's Practice (*khalu-paccha-bhattik'anga*); 8. Forest-dweller's Practice (*Arañṇik'anga*); 9. Tree-root-dweller's Practice (*rukkhāmulik'anga*); 10. Open-air-dweller's Practice (*abbhokasik'anga*); 11. Charnel-ground-dweller's Practice (*susanik'anga*); 12. Any-bed-user's Practice (*yatha-santhatik'anga*); 13. Sitter's Practice (*nesajjik'anga*). See Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, 55; Cai, "Doctrinal Analysis of the Origin and Evolution of the Thai Kammatṭhāna Tradition," 43–51; Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 326–328.

<sup>245</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Customs of the Noble Ones," 1.

<sup>246</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Traditions of the Noble Ones," 10.

<sup>247</sup> Note that although Ajaan Lee had a chance to wander with Ajaan Mun for four months prior to his re-ordination, his intensive training with Ajaan Mun was not begun until his fifth Rains retreat. For the first Rains retreat, Ajaan Mun let Ajaan Lee stay with other students of his for he had to return to Bangkok with

put up with the practice of using rag robes, Ajaan Mun put out a lot of effort in training him so that his student would gradually pick up the practice without realizing it. The autobiography states:

He seemed reluctant to let me have anything nice to use. Sometimes he would ask for whatever nice things I did have and then go give them to someone else. I had no idea what he meant by all this. Whenever I would get anything new or nice, he would order me to wash and dye it to spoil the original color ..... He liked to find old, worn-out robes, patch them himself, and then give them to me to wear.<sup>248</sup>

This passage reveals Ajaan Mun's lesson on contentedness, one of the vital qualities emphasized by the Buddha in his teaching on the four requisites for monastics. *Dhutanga* practice is considered one of the ways that conduce to the cultivation of this quality (being contented). Here, in order to keep Ajaan Lee from getting too attached to nice things, Ajaan Mun either took away Ajaan Lee's good belongings or spoiled their original color before allowing his student to use them.

From a traditional perspective, it would be right to say that a student's progress largely depends on the teacher's insightful training. This is accurate in Ajaan Lee's case as he received daily training from Ajaan Mun, who did not merely see his hidden problems and potentials, but also was able to provide discerning teaching corresponding to unique circumstances. The following example illustrates another aspect of Ajaan Mun's typical approach of training.

I made a regular practice of going with Ajaan Mun when we went out for alms. As we would walk along, he would constantly be giving me lessons in meditation all along the way. If we happened to pass a pretty girl, he would say, "Look over there. Do you think she is pretty? Look closely. Look down into her insides." No matter what we passed—houses or roads—he would always make it an object lesson.<sup>249</sup>

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Phra Pannabhisara to spend their Rains retreat there. For the three following Rains retreats Ajaan Lee had to stay with his preceptor in Bangkok.

<sup>248</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 44.

<sup>249</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 44.

The example indicates a sense of humor and the insight of Ajaan Mun who was quick enough to use any teachable moment available to serve his training purpose. A pretty girl immediately becomes a subject for unattractiveness meditation within a few steps of contemplation.

It may be correct to say that, to a forest monk who lives in solitude, sexual desire sometimes is a bigger obstacle than illness or fear of death. The failure of both young and old monks in the battle against sexual desire made the others who were still on track realize the severity of its challenge. From time to time, a test at an appropriate moment would be carried out to double check the strength of one's meditation practice.<sup>250</sup> For instance, Ajaan Waen tried many ways but still could not subdue his lustful mind's yearning for a young woman he met while searching for seclusion. He had to change tactics by fasting and contemplating the foulness of the woman's image that appeared in his mind until he finally conquered his lustful thoughts.<sup>251</sup> However, not all *dhutaṅga* monks could overcome the temptation of sexual desire. Unlike Ajaan Waen, Samret failed in his battle. He ordained at a young age and became a revered teacher who was known as a strict and serious meditator. However, he fell in love with a daughter of his lay followers when he was nearly sixty years of age. Before disrobing, he did try to meditate in order to get the image of the young women out of his mind, but as he reported, "Every time I meditate, all I see is her face."<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*, 127.

<sup>251</sup> Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*, 128–29. See also *Anuson Luang Pu Waen Sujinno* [Biography of Ven. Grandfather Waen]. Chiang Mai: Crem. vol. Luang Pu Waen Sujinno (Thailand: Wat Doi Maepang, 1985), 39.

<sup>252</sup> Nanthapanyaphon, *Luang Pu fak wai: bantheuk khati tham* [A collection of Luang Pu Dun's Dhamma] (Bangkok: Kledthai, 1990), 62–63. See also Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*, 141.



One of the most special features of Ajaan Mun's training that Ajaan Lee noted was that Ajaan Mun barely presented his teaching straightforwardly but tended to foster the powers of investigation and observation in the student. An interesting narrative depicting Ajaan Lee's struggle in arranging Ajaan Mun's requisites is a perfect example to illustrate this point. Often Ajaan Mun would scold Ajaan Lee for putting his things in the wrong place, but he never told Ajaan Lee what the right place was. This unusual training would force the student to develop the power of thinking and observing in order to figure out the hidden message that the teacher wanted to deliver. Ajaan Lee was confused for a while before he found the way to tackle his assignment by making a hole on the banana leaf wall of Ajaan Mun's hut to watch and take note where his teacher put each item. The next day he followed exactly the same pattern, and that was how he passed that particular test.<sup>253</sup>

In the autobiography, Ajaan Lee reports Ajaan Mun's training to be particularly rigorous and demanding. In serving as Ajaan Mun's attendant, Ajaan Lee learned to pay careful attention to every detail.

Attending to Ajaan Mun was very good for me, but also very hard. I had to be willing to learn everything anew. To be able to stay with him for any length of time, you had to be very observant and very circumspect. You could not make a sound when you walked on the floor, you could not leave footprints on the floor, you could not make noise when you swallowed water or opened the windows or doors. There had to be a science to everything you did—hanging out robes, taking them in, folding them up, setting out sitting mats, arranging bedding, everything. Otherwise he would drive you out, even in the middle of the Rains Retreat. Even then, you would just have to take it and try to use your powers of observation.<sup>254</sup>

It seems in Ajaan Mun's philosophy, monastic life and meditation practice appear wholly interrelated. The training includes any part of life where the mind gets involved. Ajaan

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<sup>253</sup> Phra Saddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 45–46.

<sup>254</sup> Phra Saddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 45.

Mun’s demanding training, indeed, helped Ajaan Lee develop many good qualities, such as being observant, circumspect, and discerning. Ajaan Lee commented that although Ajaan Mun trained him fully and in every way, he was only able to keep up with Ajaan Mun about 60 percent of the time.<sup>255</sup>

In addition, Ajaan Mun’s training also included more challenging aspects such as requesting students to meditate in a secluded place in the evening and to stay alone in the wilderness. Ajaan Lee recounted: “Each evening he had me climb up and sit in meditation on the north side of the Great Chedi,”<sup>256</sup> or “two days after the end of the Rains Retreat he had sent me out on my own to a mountain in Lamphun province, a spot where he himself had once stayed.”<sup>257</sup> Retreating to the wilderness provided an opportunity for forest dwellers to test their practice. As Ajaan Lee reported, he felt both brave and scared walking alone in dense forests full of tigers, elephants, and spirits. According to Tiyanich, the experience of having a difficult childhood might have helped forest monks overcome the hardships in their forest life.<sup>258</sup> However, it is more likely that the power of the *Dhamma* and Ajaan Mun made Ajaan Lee move forward.<sup>259</sup> One of the highlights of Ajaan Lee’s wilderness retreat stories was his encounter with a tiger. Ajaan Lee depicted the incident in a very realistic way, recollecting how the state of mind unfolded in the midst of a life and death situation. Even though he was extremely terrified, he was able to rescue himself through his chanting and through the skill of managing his mind. How he survived this frightening situation would appeal to the

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<sup>255</sup> Phra Suddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 46.

<sup>256</sup> Phra Suddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 44.

<sup>257</sup> Phra Suddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 47.

<sup>258</sup> Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*, 49.

<sup>259</sup> Phra Suddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 47.

readers, especially potential forest dwellers who are interested in practicing in the wild.

He recounts as follows:

I stayed for two nights. The first night, nothing happened. The second night, at about one or two in the morning, a tiger came—which meant that I didn’t get any sleep the whole night. I sat in meditation, scared stiff, while the tiger walked around and around my umbrella tent. My body felt all frozen and numb. I started chanting, and the words came out like running water. All the old chants I had forgotten now came back to me, thanks both to my fear and to my ability to keep my mind under control. I sat like this from two until five a.m., when the tiger finally left.<sup>260</sup>

In his training, adhering to his teacher’s ascetic spirit, Ajaan Lee was seen persisting in his *dhutaṅga* practice. At times, he stayed in an isolated cave far from habitation or in the cemeteries full of graves and corpses. All he could do was bear with the fear and figure out a way to overcome it without running away.<sup>261</sup>

One day, as I was wandering with Phra Choei, some villagers built a little place for us to stay in the middle of a large cemetery. The cemetery was full of graves and dotted with the remains of old cremation fires. White, weathered bones were all over the place. Phra Choei and I stayed there for quite a long time.....A few days later, well before dawn, a villager came with a little cone of flowers and incense, saying that he was going to bring someone to stay with me as my disciple. I thought to myself, “At least now I’ll be a little less lonely.” I had been feeling scared for quite a few days running, to the point that every time I sat in meditation I’d start feeling numb all over.....The corpse hadn’t been placed in a coffin, but was simply wrapped in a cloth. As soon as I saw it, I told myself, “You’re in for it now.” If I were to leave, I’d lose face with the villagers, but the idea of staying on didn’t appeal to me either. Then the realization hit me: The corpse was probably my “disciple.”<sup>262</sup>

This account shows that, in the early days of his *dhutaṅga* training, Ajaan Lee was shaken by the fear of the cemetery. However, in order to maintain the respect of the

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<sup>260</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 47.

<sup>261</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 50–51.

<sup>262</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 50–51.

villagers to the monastics and to protect the reputation of forest monks, he had to contemplate the new coming corpse as his disciple as a way to diminish that fear.<sup>263</sup>

There is no doubt to say that Ajaan Mun not only provided vital skills, but also motivated Ajaan Lee to fulfill the purpose of the training. Ajaan Mun's comprehensive and intensive training apparently greatly influenced Ajaan Lee's practice. It also shaped Ajaan Lee's theory of meditation. This can be seen in several meditation treatises that Ajaan Lee composed after he finished his training with Ajaan Mun in which the power of alertness, observation, discernment, and many others are strongly emphasized. Alertness, observation, and discernment were indispensable qualities for meditation, as they were for surviving in the wilderness.

In addition to Ajaan Mun's training, the other factor that might also have had an impact on Ajaan Lee's meditation theory is his formal monastic education in which he passed the Third Level *Dhamma* Exams, the highest level in basic Buddhist studies of the Thai *Saṅgha* ecclesiastical system.<sup>264</sup> Ajaan Lee obtained this education during his early years as a monk, when he had to leave the forest monastic community to stay in Bangkok with his preceptor to help with temple work.

With regard to Ajaan Lee's monastic education, it is necessary to note that Dhammayutika, the tradition that Ajaan Lee re-ordained with, was recognized back in the time of King Rama IV (r. 1851-1868), who ascended the throne after having been ordained as a monk for 27 years. "Dhammayut" means, literally, "in accordance with the

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<sup>263</sup> Note that, his fellow monk, Phra Choei ran away right after he saw the villagers bringing the new corpse to the cemetery and left Ajaan Lee alone there. This somewhat reveals a scary atmosphere that they were encountering at that moment. See Phra Saddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 50–51.

<sup>264</sup> Phra Saddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 32–33. There is also a higher set of Pāli exams, which Ajaan Lee did not study for. This set has nine levels. Pāli nine, the highest level, is equivalent to Bachelor degree.

*Dhamma*.”<sup>265</sup> The Dhammayut tradition was started by him in the 1820s when he was still a prince. It was well known for strictly upholding the *Vinaya* and for holding a critical attitude toward the *suttas*, the *Abhidhamma*, and the commentaries.<sup>266</sup> The intentions of King Rama IV’s reforms perhaps reflected (1) the influence of the ascetic Mon monks who strictly observed the *Vinaya*, and with whom King Rama IV spent a period of time; and (2) his contact with Western scientific points of view. To some extent, it could be seen as a response to the challenge and encroachment of Christianity, which introduced Western science and Christian ideas to Thailand.<sup>267</sup> Western scientific influence might have motivated the Buddhists of the era to point a critical eye toward their sacred scripture corpus. It is also possible that the traditional Thai skeptical attitude toward their commentarial literature led to their questioning the validity of the texts. This remains a question to whoever wants to explore the topic. However, one thing for sure is that unlike the Sri Lankan and Burmese monastics, who piously venerated the commentaries as reporting the intent of the Buddha, some Thai Theravāda monks started showing a critical attitude to the authority of the commentarial literature. The Pāli studies, as a result, were set up and advocated as a means for Thai monastics to learn the authentic *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*. This structured education still exists up to the present time.

Thai Buddhism continued to be reformed through the attempts of King Rama V (r. 1868-1910) and his half-brother, the Prince-Patriarch Vajirañāna (1859-1921). They started an overarching monastic organization that included both Mahanikaya and

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<sup>265</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Customs of the Noble Ones,” 2. See also Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 162.

<sup>266</sup> Robinson, Johnson, and Thānissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 156.

<sup>267</sup> Charles S. Prebish and Damien Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), 158.

Dhammayut orders. The Prince-Patriarch composed a series of *Dhamma* textbooks that covers various topics such as the life of the Buddha and his disciples, the *Vinaya*, rituals, and meditations. His textbooks took a rational approach to the *Dhamma* and the legends surrounding the Buddha. The Prince-Patriarch preferred the *Dhamma* presented in the early *suttas* to that which was taught in the *Apadānas*. The textbooks became standard materials for three national ecclesiastical examinations, which help to standardize the knowledge of the *Dhamma* and provide a prerequisite condition for advancement in the ecclesiastical rank system of the government.

Aside from its successes, the reforms also showed their excesses, such as burning ancient non-canonical scriptures whose content conflicted with the standard textbooks, altering an essential rule in *Vinaya* to forbid monks uncertified by the government from holding ordination, or house arresting monks who posed potential political threat to the central power. On the whole, the reforms were successful in blowing in a new wind to bring up the level of practice and study in the *Saṅgha* community and to respond to the Christian missionaries' widely spreading rumor that Buddhism was an unscientific and superstitious religion. The reforms, in fact, succeeded in making Buddhism more respectable and appealing to the society.<sup>268</sup>

The undaunted spirit of the movement might have produced a certain impact on Ajaan Lee's meditation theory. This was because before starting his rigorous meditation training with his forest teacher, he was already well educated in the Dhammayut education system. Indeed, Ajaan Lee must have had extensive background in Buddhist

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<sup>268</sup> Robinson, Johnson, and Thānissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 157.

Canonical studies, despite his forest style ascetic appearance, in order to interpret the *satipaṭṭhāna* in such a way that aligns with the *suttanta*.

When observing the teaching style of the Thai Forest Tradition, one will notice that it actually shares some elements in common with Western scientific approach. For instance, in order to accurately understand a concept, hypotheses need to be tested time and again until the truth is found.<sup>269</sup> Ajaan Lee's skeptical attitude toward the existence of the Buddha's relics is a good example to illustrate his belief that things needed to be tested and analyzed before one could have conviction in them. This attitude can also be seen in the way he interprets the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*. Although his treatises reveal that Ajaan Lee might have had access to both the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Sutta Piṭaka*, his interpretation firmly stood on the ground of the latter. This differs greatly from other scholarly monks who follow a viewpoint in the *Visuddhimagga* without knowing the contradictions between two literatures on the matter. This more or less reflected the impact of the critical study toward Buddhist scriptures, and especially toward the commentary literatures that were introduced in the new curriculum.

After training with Ajaan Mun for several years, Ajaan Lee wandered alone in many forests throughout Thailand. His wandering journey also took him to other countries such as Burma, Cambodia, and India. Ajaan Lee passed away in 1961 after months of being hospitalized.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ajaan Lee was well known within his tradition for his skill as a teacher as well as for his mastery of supernatural powers.<sup>270</sup> Although as Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu notes, Ajaan Lee never revealed his attainments even to

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<sup>269</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Customs of the Noble Ones," 4.

<sup>270</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, i.

his closest student, his disciples believed that Ajaan Lee possessed all the traditionally Buddhist purported psychic powers except levitation.<sup>271</sup> Many incidents in his autobiography reveal his special abilities, such as mind reading,<sup>272</sup> communicating with divine beings and spirits,<sup>273</sup> or curing an illness by using power of meditation.<sup>274</sup> In addition, Ajaan Lee is also recognized for bringing the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition into Central Thailand.<sup>275</sup>

It is not an exaggeration to say that Ajaan Lee's having taught meditation to the Somdet Phra Mahawirawong, also known as Tisso Uan (1867-1956), produced tremendous impact on the recognition and dissemination of the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition. It should be kept in mind that before this time, there were conflicts between the Dhammayut administrative hierarchy and the Dhammayut Forest Tradition.<sup>276</sup> The administration repeatedly ordered the forest monks to settle down and study the new curriculum designed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, so that they would become teachers and administrators, whereas the forest monks preferred their wandering life and wanted to preserve their ascetic practices. As Taylor states, the pinnacles of their conflict occurred in 1926, when the Somdet required a group of Ajaan Mun's students to leave the forest in Ubon Rachathani province, which was under the administration of the

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<sup>271</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says that although Ajaan Lee himself could not levitate, he could levitate others. For more information on Ajaan Lee's concentration powers see Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Remembering Ajaan Lee," Metta Forest Monastery, evening dhammatalk on April 24, 2011, YouTube video, 4:20, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLvV\\_DrbhWo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLvV_DrbhWo).

<sup>272</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 116.

<sup>273</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 104–5, 94–95.

<sup>274</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 119–20.

<sup>275</sup> Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 166; Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 77; and Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 14–17.

<sup>276</sup> For more detail on the relationship between the Thai Dhammayut administrative hierarchy and the Thai Dhammayut Forest tradition see Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*; Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*; Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*; and Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Traditions of the Noble Ones."



Somdet. In addition, the Somdet insisted on declaring that Ajaan Mun was not a qualified teacher even after the latter died.<sup>277</sup> Taylor also describes another incident showing the opposition to the forest monks, which occurred periodically during the 1920s and 1930s. Phra Lui, the sub-district Religious Head for the Dhammayut at Baan Kheng Yai, now Yasothon province, attempted to chase Ajaan Funn (1899-1977) and Ajaan Kuu Thammathino (1900-53) away when they came to his area to construct a kuti for the coming Rains retreat. But Phra Lui could not find any convincing reason to force these two students of Ajaan Mun to leave and returned home.

In Ajaan Lee's autobiography, Phra Lui is also mentioned as something of a problem. He and two other leading monks were the ones who were behind the sermon debate incident with the purpose of driving Ajaan Lee away at a time when Ajaan Lee was encamped in the area. However, as the autobiography recounts, the debate was resolved peacefully.<sup>278</sup> These historical events demonstrate how Ajaan Lee changed the image of forest monks in the Somdet's thinking, and indirectly had contributed to dissolving the tension between the Thai Dhammayut Central Saṅgha and the Thai Dhammayut Forest monks. Indeed, the Somdet actively promoted the teaching of Ajaan Lee, and this led other highly ranked monks in Bangkok, such as late Supreme Patriarchs Juan Utthayi and Charoen Suvattano to become supporters of the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition.<sup>279</sup> The Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition, subsequently, became well

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<sup>277</sup> Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 137–38. See also Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Traditions of the Noble Ones,” 1.

<sup>278</sup> Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 140. See also Phra Suddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 13–14.

<sup>279</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Traditions of the Noble Ones,” 1.

established in Central Thailand and other regions and gradually gained public recognition nationwide.

For the limited scope of this dissertation, here I only highlight some distinct features of Ajaan Lee's life. A more in-depth study of his life and career, I believe, would require a separate project. Many of the Thai Forest Ajaans have had distinctive characters, powers, and contributions. As Thānissaro Bhikkhu notes, in addition to his reputation of mastery of supernatural power, Ajaan Lee is well known for his great skill as a teacher.<sup>280</sup> As a skillful teacher, Ajaan Lee's uniqueness is shown not only in his *Dhamma* talks but also in the way he composed many meditation treatises. These have become some of the most valuable treasures of the Thai Forest teachings because from these writings we have an opportunity to learn about the forest meditation teachings in a systematic way and to see a slice of Ajaan Lee's meditation theory in particular.

Before discussing meditation teachings of the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition, I will briefly survey the meditation teachings circulating prior to the emergence of this tradition so that we can understand some of the significant reforms made by its founder(s).

### **3.4 Meditation in Thailand Prior to the Emergence of the Thai Forest Tradition**

It seems meditation teachings both inside and outside of Thailand during his time did not satisfy Ajaan Mun, the founder of the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition. Throughout approximately two decades of wandering, Ajaan Mun searched for a teacher who could show him the way to noble attainments, a journey that took him through the

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<sup>280</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, i.

jungles of Thailand, Burma, and Laos. Nonetheless, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu notes, Ajaan Mun could not find the teacher he sought.<sup>281</sup>

In Thailand, at the time of Ajaan Mun's ordination in 1893, there were two forms of Buddhism, namely, "Customary Buddhism" and "Reform Buddhism."<sup>282</sup> In regard to meditation, it is said that the followers of the Customary Buddhism, both monks and lay people practiced *vichaa aakhom*, which can be understood as incantation knowledge. This *gatha* reciting practice involves initiations and invocations used for shamanistic purposes, such as protective charms and magical powers.<sup>283</sup> Mahanikai monks from Northeastern and other regions of Thailand still practice this form of meditation today.

Evidence of pre-reform monks practicing *vichaa aakhom* can be found in scholarly works such as the *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand*, and *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*.<sup>284</sup> Kamala Tiyanich notes correctly that pre-reform monks practiced *khaathaa aakhom* or *vichaa aakhom* meditation and that

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<sup>281</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Customs of the Noble Ones," 3.

<sup>282</sup> Loose terms used by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. "Customary Buddhism" at that time (later developed to become the Mahanikai tradition) tended to associate with the mores and rites that were handed down over the centuries from teacher to teacher with little, if any, reference to the Pāli Canon. Monks in this tradition often lived a sedentary life in village monasteries, where they served the local villagers as traditional doctors or fortune-tellers. Monastic discipline was not upheld seriously. Occasionally, they would perform "*dhutaṅga*" practice, which was not more than a pilgrimage. This type of practice, in fact, has little resemblance to the classic *dhutaṅga* practices. The present-day Dhammakaya movement in Thailand occasionally organizes huge events of this sort of ritual wandering. "Reform Buddhism," or the Dhammayut tradition, which was started in the 1820's by Prince Mongkut (King Rama IV), on the other hand, took the Pāli Canon as its main reference. Before becoming the king, Prince Mongkut was ordained as a monk for twenty-seven years. The study of the Canon in his early years of training made him dissatisfied with the practice he saw at Thai temples around him. Mongkut reordained under a Mon teacher and studied *Vinaya* and the classic *dhutaṅga* practices. Later on, Mongkut came to live at a royal monastery his brother built for him on the Bangkok side of the river where he attracted like-minded monks and lay supporters and gradually formed the Dhammayut movement. Dhammayut monks mainly devoted themselves to Pāli studies, focusing on *Vinaya*, the classic *dhutaṅga* practices, a rationalist interpretation of the *Dhamma*, and the revival of meditation techniques recorded in the Pāli Canon. For more detail see Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Customs of the Noble Ones," 2–3.

<sup>283</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Customs of the Noble Ones," 3.

<sup>284</sup> Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*, 280.

Ajaan Sao studied meditation with some of them.<sup>285</sup> However, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu pointed out she was incorrect in her conclusion categorizing the Thai Dhammayut Forest monks as pre-reform based on this simple fact. This is because Ajaan Sao, before becoming a meditation teacher, repudiated the *khaathaa aakhom* or *vichaa aakhom* meditation he learned from pre-reform monks. As Taylor noted, Ajaan Sao publicly repudiated the teachings of Samretlun, a *khaathaa aakhom* monk who was well known in Laos and Northeastern Thailand in Ajaan Sao's day, and was able to attract many of the Samretlun's former students to switch to the Dhammayut style of meditation.<sup>286</sup> In addition, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu argues that Tiyanich also fails to note the fact that the early Dhammayut movement also sponsored meditation practice, which differed radically from the quasi-tantric *khaathaa aakhom* meditation of pre-reform monks.<sup>287</sup>

The Reform Buddhism or the Dhammayut Tradition that Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun were ordained in (but within which they developed their own sub-lineage, the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition), on the other hand, tried to revive the meditation techniques taught in the Pāli Canon, such as the practice of *Buddhānussati* (recollection of the Buddha), *ānāpānāsati* (mindfulness of breathing), *marāṇassati* (mindfulness of death), and in particular, *kāyagatāsati* (mindfulness immersed in the body). However, there was no account or recording of any member of this new movement carrying out these meditation practices that could prove that the teachings of the Pāli Canon could lead to enlightenment. Mongkut himself believed that the path to *nibbāna* was no longer open, a common belief held by many at that time, together with another belief that *jhānas* are

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<sup>285</sup> Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*, 263–264.

<sup>286</sup> Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 54, 111–12.

<sup>287</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Traditions of the Noble Ones,” 4–5.

unattainable.<sup>288</sup> Indeed, this view was mentioned several times in Ajaan Lee’s *Dhamma* talks although he tried to correct it.<sup>289</sup>

In short, popular meditation teachings in Thailand before the emergence of the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition would fall into two categories: either the quasi-tantric *khaathaa aakhom* meditation—“Customary Buddhism”—or the meditation techniques taught in the Pāli Canon. The latter were those revived by the Dhammayut movement and promoted by Prince Mongkut, minus the belief in the possibility enlightenment or even attaining the *jhāna* as described in the *suttas*.

### **3.5 Common Meditation Techniques Taught by the Thai Forest Tradition**

Before discussing the meditation techniques that the Thai Dhammayut Forest monks teach, it bears emphasizing that the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition is a branch of the Thai Dhammayut Tradition. The founder(s) of the Thai Dhammayut Forest Tradition—both Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao—were ordained in the Thai Dhammayut Tradition before starting to explore meditation by themselves. They ordained, but nevertheless struck out on their own, as there was no teacher who could show them the sure way to noble attainments. The significant difference between these two traditions, hence, is in the different perceptions of the noble attainments. While most of the Thai Dhammayut followers, including its founder Prince Mongkut as mentioned above, believed that *nibbāna* was closed and that the *jhānas* unachievable, many of the Thai Dhammayut Forest monks, starting with Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun, affirmed the

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<sup>288</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Custom of the Noble Ones,” 2–3.

<sup>289</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Craft of the Heart*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 3rd ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2009), 49–50.

contrary. Noble attainments were still accessible and, in their teachings, *jhānas* were an essential practice.

Meditation techniques that the Thai Dhammayut Forest monks taught then mainly derived from the Pāli Canon that the Thai Dhammayut Tradition tried to revive. However, the key point would be through the confident articulations and strict trainings of the Thai Forest Ajaans, their students were able to achieve the noble attainments that they claimed, and which are also described in the Pāli *suttas*. See for instance, the declaration of noble attainments by Ajaan Maha Boowa,<sup>290</sup> Ajaan Khao,<sup>291</sup> Mae Chee Kaew,<sup>292</sup> and others. In their teachings, the teachings of people who have gone through the training, meditation can be seen in a practical way, and not just as an element within a corpus of literature.

Some common meditation techniques that the Thai Dhammayut Forest Ajaans often teach are:

### 3.5.1 Recollection of the Buddha

In several *Dhamma* talks of the Thai Forest Ajaans, recollection of the Buddha is explained as recalling the good qualities of the Buddha, recalling how the Buddha achieved awakening, and how the Buddha lived his life.<sup>293</sup> However, in meditation, recollection of the Buddha in the instructions of the Thai Forest Ajaans is often taught as the repetition of the meditation word *buddho*, which is considered a technique used for

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<sup>290</sup> Venerable Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Arahanttamagga Arahattaphala: The Path to Arahantship*, trans. Bhikkhu Dick Silaratano (Udon Thani, Thailand: Forest Dhamma Books, 2012), 69–83. See also [https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/advanced/219101/well-known-forest-monk-passes-away#cxrecs\\_s](https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/advanced/219101/well-known-forest-monk-passes-away#cxrecs_s).

<sup>291</sup> Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Venerable Ajaan Khao Anālayo*, 88–89.

<sup>292</sup> Bhikkhu Dick Silaratano, *Mae Chee Kaew: Her Journey to Spiritual Awakening and Enlightenment*, (Udon Thani, Thailand: Forest Dhamma Books, 2012), 199–200, 224–229.

<sup>293</sup> This is also the explanation in the Pāli Canon.

centering the mind in concentration. As Ajaan Lee said: “When we start off recollecting the Buddha in this way, we simply think of the word, *buddho*. We don’t yet have to analyze what it means. *Buddho* is a name for mindfulness. It means being awake, being aware.”<sup>294</sup> In this instruction, Ajaan Lee explains the mantra *buddho* as a meditation subject that can be used to cultivate mindfulness and awareness, the qualities that are conducive to the awakening. In a *Dhamma* talk of Phra Ajaan Thate Desaraṇsī, one of the senior students of Ajaan Mun, the meditation word *buddho* is explained in this way: “If you go to a teacher experienced in meditating on *buddho*, he’ll have you repeat *buddho*, *buddho*, *buddho*, and have you keep the mind firmly on that meditation word until you’re fully skilled at it. Then he’ll have you contemplate *buddho* and what it is that saying *buddho*. Once you see that they are two separate things, focus on what’s saying *buddho*. As for the word *buddho*, it will disappear, leaving only what it is that was saying *buddho*. You then focus on what it is that was saying *buddho* as your object.”<sup>295</sup> Here Ajaan Thate provides a more detailed framework for the *buddho* method. He first tells meditators to develop mindfulness and concentration by keeping their mind steadfastly on the mantra *buddho* until they are skilled at it. Subsequently, he has them contemplate *buddho*, as well as the pointing them to the person who is saying *buddho*. The effect of this teaching is that he is having meditators contemplate where action and intention reside.

The use of the meditation word *buddho* also can be seen through a more detailed explanation of Ajaan Sao. “The main methods of mindfulness training are reciting *buddho* and *ānāpanāsati* (mindfulness breathing). The way of training the mind is to

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<sup>294</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee 2: Dhamma Talks*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2017), v–vii.

<sup>295</sup> Phra Acharn Thate Desaraṇsī, “Buddho,” trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 1994), 2–3.

concentrate on one point, the point of ‘*buddho*.’ *Buddho* means the one who knows, awakening and joy. These features are the potential of the mind. When the mind concentrates deeply on the word ‘*buddho*,’ it investigates the five factors of the first absorption (*jhāna*). Thinking of *buddho* is called directed thought (*vitakka*). Associating with *buddho*, not sliding away is called evaluation (*vicāra*). Afterward, rapture and pleasure appear. When rapture and pleasure have occurred, the mind falls into peace and attains access concentration (*upācāra samādhi*) and absorption concentration (*appanā samādhi*).<sup>296</sup> This explanation of Ajaan Sao interestingly was somewhat similar to the description of five factors of the first *jhāna* in the Pāli *suttas*. Clearly Ajaan Sao is recommending more than just repetition as he says “*buddho*” will let meditators see the potential of the mind. He also demonstrates his commitment to the Pāli *suttas* and his understanding of right concentration and how the *jhāna* are developed. His elaboration shows that meditators can develop rapture, pleasure, and concentration in just one little word *buddho*.

With regard to the meditation word, it is interesting to learn that sometimes the meditation word *buddho* is replaced by other meditation words or phrases like “*buddho*, *dhammo*, *saṅgho*,”<sup>297</sup> or *araham*,<sup>298</sup> and sometimes it is taught together with the breath.<sup>299</sup> As Ajaan Thate said, the technique often varies from one teacher to another, depending on their expertise.<sup>300</sup> The ajaans’ auto/biographical accounts reveal that many

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<sup>296</sup> Supad Kongasa, *Luang Pu Sao Kantasilo*, trans. Zhiyun Cai (Thailand: Quality Books Ltd. Company, 2006), 68–69.

<sup>297</sup> Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections*, 163.

<sup>298</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee 1: Collected Writings* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2017), 45.

<sup>299</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee 1*, 52.

<sup>300</sup> More discussion on meditation word *buddho* see also Cai, “Doctrinal Analysis of the Origin and Evolution of the Thai Kammatthāna Tradition,” 138–92.



of them were able to make considerable progress in their meditation through this contemplation.<sup>301</sup>

### 3.5.2 Mindfulness Immersed in the Body

The second meditation technique taught by the Forest Ajaans is a practice of contemplation of the body both inside and outside that is recorded most notably in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10), *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (DN 22), and *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* (MN 119), most notably. In the Theravāda tradition, new monks are taught at their ordination ceremony to contemplate on hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, and skin.<sup>302</sup> This is regarded as one of the most important meditation themes. In one of his *Dhamma* talks, Ajaan Mun relates a saying from the commentary to the *Dhammapada* that an unwise preceptor who does not teach this meditation theme may destroy his student's potential for *arahantship*.<sup>303</sup> This practice, in fact, became one of the defining practices of the forest monks, who make it their basic meditation theme that one continuously works on, or *kammaṭṭhāna*. The Thai Dhammayut Forest monks were often called “*Kammaṭṭhāna*” monks to distinguish them from pre-reform forest meditation monks.<sup>304</sup> The purpose of this practice is to help meditators see the unattractive, filthy, and repulsive nature of the body so that they can make the mind become still and eliminate any lustful feeling toward the body.

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<sup>301</sup> This contemplation is similar to the *nianfo* (念佛) method of the Pure Land tradition.

<sup>302</sup> Phra Ajaan Mun, *A Heart Released*, 13–14, 34, 38.

<sup>303</sup> Phra Ajaan Mun, *A Heart Released*, 14.

<sup>304</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “The Traditions of the Noble Ones,” 4–5.

### 3.5.3 Mindfulness of Breathing

Another meditation technique also often taught by the Thai Dhammayut Forest Ajaans is mindfulness of breathing.<sup>305</sup> Their breath meditation teaching is based on either the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* or the *Ānāpānāsati Sutta* (MN 118). Among the Thai Dhammayut Forest Ajaans, Ajaan Lee developed a unique technique of breath meditation.<sup>306</sup> Unlike other Ajaans in the lineage of Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Lee and his students tended to teach breath meditation more often than the meditation word *buddho* despite the fact that the latter often is used at the beginning together with the in-and-out breath, but then is abandoned to leave only the breath as the object of attention.<sup>307</sup> Ajaan Lee's teaching on breath meditation will be elaborated in more detail in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* below.<sup>308</sup>

## 3.6 Ajaan Lee's Writings on Meditation

Ajaan Lee believed that the lessons of the *Dhamma* came from living in accordance with it. Living close to nature put him in a position to grapple with his own fear and terror and defilements, and he found that the *Dhamma* provided a refuge. In his autobiography, Ajaan Lee discusses his experience of learning the *Dhamma*:

Living in the forest, the mind becomes confident. *Dhamma* that you have studied—or even that you haven't—will make itself clear because nature is the teacher. It's like the sciences of the world, which every country has used to develop amazing powers. None of their inventions or discoveries came out of a textbook. They came because scientists studied the principles of nature, all of

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<sup>305</sup> This will be elaborated in more detail in the section discussing Ajaan Lee's breath meditation.

<sup>306</sup> See "Method 1" and "Method 2" in *Keeping the Breath in Mind* and "The Foul: Tranquility Meditation" in Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Basic Themes: Four Treatises on Buddhist Practice*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2012), 120–25.

<sup>307</sup> See *Dhamma* talks on the breath in *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee 2*, such as "The Basis of Breathing," "Quiet Breathing," "The ABC's of the Breath," "The Refinements of the Breath," just to name a few.

<sup>308</sup> For more detail see section 3.7.1 *Kāyānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna*: Being Mindful of the Body as a Frame of Reference.

which appear right here in the world. As for the *Dhamma*, it's just like science: It exists in nature. When I realized this, I no longer worried about studying the scriptures and I was reminded of the Buddha and his disciples: They studied and learned from the principles of nature. None of them followed a textbook. For these reasons I'm willing to be ignorant when it comes to texts and scriptures. Some kinds of trees sleep at night and are awake during the day. Others sleep by day and are awake by night.<sup>309</sup>

Evidently scriptures were of secondary importance to actual meditation experience, but despite his declaration of practice-tested conviction, Ajaan Lee—according to Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu—made an intensive effort to study the texts on his own so that his teachings would be intelligible and acceptable to his audience in Central Thailand. In fact, as mentioned above, in the third year of his re-ordination, while he had to stay with his preceptor in Bangkok, Ajaan Lee did receive a formal monastic education.<sup>310</sup> In addition, Ajaan Lee also subscribed to *Dhammacaksu*, the Dhammayut magazine for monks that included translations of *suttas*. Ajaan Lee's writings can thus be said to be the result of his forest training, self-study, and also formal education.

Most of Ajaan Lee's writings focus on meditation, and the sole purpose of meditation was to purify the mind to release it from defilements. There was no sign of other purposes, in the way that his contemporaries in Burma endeavored to establish a meditation movement for lay followers and monastics as a national call of unity against the colonial invasion, or for the purpose of solving mental depression in society.<sup>311</sup> The intention was simply putting the teachings of the Buddha into practice. As Ajaan Lee once said: "If a person isn't true to the Buddha's teachings, the Buddha's teachings won't

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<sup>309</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 154.

<sup>310</sup> Ajaan Lee passed the Third Level *Dhamma* Exams, the highest level of the Thai Saṅgha ecclesiastical systems, before beginning his study of Pāli grammar. See Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 32–33.

<sup>311</sup> See Braun, *The Birth of Insight*; Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*; and Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*.

be true to that person and that person won't be able to know what the Buddha's true teachings are."<sup>312</sup> This can be seen in the refrain of the Thai Forest Ajaans: practice the *Dhamma* in line with the *Dhamma*.

Regarding Ajaan Lee's writing on meditation, Thānissaro Bhikkhu said that "[Ajaan Lee] was unique among the ajaans in the Thai Forest Tradition in that he composed systematic treatises on the practice. These are valuable documents, giving a wilderness perspective on basic *Dhamma* topics, and in particular on topics taught in the standard textbooks that Thai monks have been studying since the reign of King Rama VI (1910-1925)."<sup>313</sup> In order to study Ajaan Lee's meditation theory in general and his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* in particular, I will examine his treatises that touch on these matters. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, in *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee*, has already provided significant historical background on Ajaan Lee's writings.<sup>314</sup> Thus, in the general survey below, I tend to focus more on the aspects related to meditation teachings in these treatises.

*The Craft of the Heart* (1936) is Ajaan Lee's earliest book. It was written soon after he founded a monastery in Chanthaburi. *The Craft of the Heart* consists of two separate parts written at different times. The second part, titled "*The Training of the Heart*," appeared in 1936, whereas the first part, "*Precepts for Laypeople*," came out the following year. Although the aim of the first part is to clarify the practice of virtue, Ajaan Lee included one section explaining basic concentration practice, and this overlaps with the concentration section in *The Training of the Heart*. In regard to meditation, *The*

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<sup>312</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "The Customs of the Noble Ones," 6.

<sup>313</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, vii.

<sup>314</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, vii–xiii.

*Training of the Heart* mainly provides treatments of the lists of meditation issues recorded in the official *Dhamma* textbooks in Thailand.<sup>315</sup> Perhaps, the fact that this is the first book Ajaan Lee wrote on meditation explains why he focused on providing fundamental meditation guidance. Prerequisite steps, such as taking refuge in the Triple Gem; taking the precepts; recollecting of the virtues of the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Saṅgha*; spreading the four sublime attitudes;<sup>316</sup> and basic steps such as the four meditation postures—sitting, standing, walking, and lying down—are treated systematically and with considerable attention. Advanced steps in meditation, such as rapture, *jhāna*, liberating insight, and their related issues, such as the five hindrances or the corruptions of insight, are also treated with detailed instructions and explanations. Among Ajaan Lee’s treatises on meditation, *The Craft of the Heart* can be seen as a manual for both beginner and advanced students.

As he did in *The Craft of the Heart*, Ajaan Lee again provides a detailed description of the *jhānas* and his understanding of liberating insight in *What is the Triple Gem*,<sup>317</sup> which appeared shortly after his first book. In the section on the attainment of the *Dhamma*, which refers to the attainment of the highest quality, *nibbāna*, Ajaan Lee named four kinds of *arahant*. From his description of the first kind, *sukkha-vipassako*, we learn that liberating insight, according to Ajaan Lee, is clear and true comprehension of the four noble truths.<sup>318</sup> This point repeatedly appears in his writings.<sup>319</sup> In *The Craft of the Heart*, Ajaan Lee indicates all four form *jhānas* and four formless *jhānas*, but in this

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<sup>315</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, viii.

<sup>316</sup> These prerequisite steps in meditation practice are also presented in other treatises, such as *Basic Themes* and *The Divine Mantra*.

<sup>317</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *What is the Triple Gem*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Wisdom Audio Visual Exchange, 2004).

<sup>318</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, 140.

<sup>319</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, 160.

book, he only gives the description of the four form *jhānas*. The discussion of the five factors of *jhāna*—directed thought, evaluation, singleness of mind, rapture and pleasure—however, remains consistent. Actually, it is worthwhile to note that his description of *jhāna* is consistent in all of his treatises such as *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, *Basic Themes*, *A Refuge in Awakening*, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, and *Frames of Reference*.<sup>320</sup>

*Keeping the Breath in Mind* and *Basic Themes* are the two treatises devoted to breath meditation. Among all the treatises on meditation, it is essential to note that Ajaan Lee's most original teachings are contained in *Keeping the Breath in Mind*. In this treatise, Ajaan Lee develops two unique methods. "Method 1" is an exercise to develop concentration by directing breath energy to various focal points in the body, with emphasis on the head. This technique was written after he came back to Thailand from his second trip to India in the year 1950. During this trip he was inspired by austere Indian yogis who were able to stand for long periods of time or to lie on beds of nails. It is said that Ajaan Lee, instead of asking them, posed the question in his meditation and figured out by himself that they were directing the breath energies in their bodies. He then began his own experimenting and that was how he arrived at "Method 1." Unlike "Method 1," "Method 2" is an exercise of directing breath energy throughout the whole body. Ajaan Lee is said to have developed this technique while spending his Rains retreat alone in a forest in Chiang Mai. It is said that Ajaan Lee had a heart attack after walking three days to reach the spot where he would spend the retreat. So, in order to rescue

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<sup>320</sup> For other accounts that relate to *jhāna* see, for example, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 261–264; *Basic Themes*, 296–299, 316–317; *A Refuge in Awakening*, 488–489; and *Frames of Reference*, 186–187; in Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīraṇedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1.

himself, he experimented with the breath energy throughout the body. As a result, he recovered and was able to walk out of the forest at the end of his retreat. When he came back to Bangkok, he wrote “Method 2.” In addition to these two methods, *Keeping the Breath in Mind* also has an added section on *jhāna*. According to Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “In its final form, this book provided the basic framework for Ajaan Lee’s instruction on meditation for the remainder of his life.”<sup>321</sup>

*Basic Themes*, as Ajaan Lee said, is “a guide to develop Right Concentration.”<sup>322</sup> Similar to meditation instructions in *The Craft of the Heart*, *Basic Themes* in its original form also consisted of two main sections: tranquility meditation and insight meditation. In the tranquility meditation portion, Ajaan Lee presented a special technique of counting breaths from one to ten. “Divide ‘*Buddho*’ into two syllables, thinking ‘*bud-*’ with the in-breath, and ‘*dho*’ with the out-, at the same time counting your breaths: ‘*Bud-*’ in, ‘*dho*’ out, one; ‘*bud-*’ in, ‘*dho*’ out, two; ‘*bud-*’ in ‘*dho*’ out, three, and so on up to ten. Then start counting again from one to nine; then one to eight, one to seven... six... five... four... three... two... one...zero.”<sup>323</sup> The effect of this counting practice is to help the mind settle down and prevent the arising of five hindrances. The instructions of tranquility meditation in this treatise appear consistent with other treatises. After presenting prerequisite steps and basic breath meditation steps, Ajaan Lee talks about the five factors of *jhāna* and other related issues in meditation, such as focal points, images, and corruptions of insight.<sup>324</sup> Insight meditation is presented in *Basic Themes* as “mindfulness of death.” As Ajaan Lee explains, “‘Death’ here refers to the death occurring in the

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<sup>321</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, ix–x.

<sup>322</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, 289.

<sup>323</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, 297.

<sup>324</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, 293–306.

present—physical sensations arising and passing away, mental acts arising and passing away, all in a moment of awareness. Only when you’re aware on this level can you be classed as being mindful of death.”<sup>325</sup> The section is then devoted to the indications of the arising of physical sensations and mental acts, and following with instructions for focusing on what causes them to arise until they disappear.<sup>326</sup> This is another form of exposition to help the reader correctly perceive the five aggregates within the framework of insight meditation that would lead to the arising of liberating insight.<sup>327</sup> Although they might appear similar with regard to some of the terminology used, Ajaan Lee’s presentation of insight meditation is very different from that of the Burmese sayādaws. We will lay out this comparison below.<sup>328</sup>

It seems that each of Ajaan Lee’s treatises went through several editions with additions and corrections in each new version. The current *Basic Themes* was developed by adding a Prologue and Epilogue to its original shorter treatise when a monastic academy under construction north of Bangkok requested Ajaan Lee to provide a meditation text. Although plans to use the text in the academy were never carried out, as Ajaan Lee died before the academy was completed, the added section revealed Ajaan Lee’s viewpoint on some teachings in the Canon that most directly related to meditation training. As Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu notes, training in the *Dhamma* is a form of apprenticeship, which is the point emphasized in the added sections of the text. This perspective of Ajaan Lee perhaps arises from his reflection of his own training as an

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<sup>325</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, 306.

<sup>326</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, 306.

<sup>327</sup> A similar explanation of the five aggregates in insight meditation is also presented in *The Craft of the Heart*, 105–08.

<sup>328</sup> For more detail related to their differences on the understanding of insight meditation, see Chapter Five.



attendant of Ajaan Mun. While the apprenticeship relationship is one of the distinctive features of the Thai Forest monastic tradition, it has often been overlooked.<sup>329</sup>

In Ajaan Lee's meditation treatises, *satipaṭṭhāna* or right mindfulness also occupies a significant position. He wrote altogether at least three long treatments on *satipaṭṭhāna* with slight variations in each version. In *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, a treatise written in 1955, a few years before Ajaan Lee passed away, Ajaan Lee delivers the teachings on the noble eightfold path, including *satipaṭṭhāna* under the heading of right mindfulness. It is important to learn that, according to Ajaan Lee, "Right mindfulness is in no way distinct from right concentration,"<sup>330</sup> an observation that is borne out when we examine Ajaan Lee's writings. The treatise also stresses that virtue, concentration, and discernment are inseparable in practice, a point that is often emphasized in the Thai Forest Tradition.

*Satipaṭṭhāna* was also included in *A Refuge in Awakening*, written in the year 1960 or 1961. This is, perhaps, the last treatise of Ajaan Lee, which encourages making oneself one's own refuge by practicing *satipaṭṭhāna*. The teaching on making oneself one's own refuge follows the explanation given by the Buddha in the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*<sup>331</sup> in the *Dīgha Nikāya*. In this treatise, Ajaan Lee points out two levels where people take refuge in the Triple Gem: the level of individuals and the level of inner qualities. While the first level refers to the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Saṅgha* in a conventional way, the second level requires the development of the four establishments of mindfulness.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, x–xi.

<sup>330</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, x.

<sup>331</sup> DN 16

<sup>332</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Frames of Reference*, 45–51.

The treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* found in *Frames of Reference* is the earliest version and contains the most detailed elaborations. In this treatise, Ajaan Lee provides clarification for various key points in each frame of reference, which are not included in the *sutta*. Another unique feature in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is his explanation of the three functions of mind—(1) the primal nature of the mind, (2) mental states, (3) mental states in interaction with their objects.<sup>333</sup> This understanding of mind underlies both the explanations of inner and outer feelings, mind states and mental qualities, and his proactive approach to mindfulness and concentration in general.

*Frames of Reference* was composed in 1948 at Wat Paa Khlawng Kung (The Shrimp Canal Forest Temple) in Chanthaburi, a province in the East of Thailand. It appeared shortly after Ajaan Lee paid respect to Ajaan Mun. According to a monk who was present at the time Ajaan Lee visited his teacher, Ajaan Mun gave some especially profound *Dhamma* talks during Ajaan Lee's visit. The book, thus, may reflect some significant teachings of Ajaan Mun. This was noted by Thānissaro Bhikkhu when he attempted to track down information on this treatise.<sup>334</sup>

In Ajaan Lee's words, the book *Frames of Reference* is written reflecting his own thoughts and opinions. Right at the beginning of the introduction, he confesses that his explanations, at some points, may not directly go in line with the original texts, because he wants to get to the point quickly so that the practitioner can put the lessons into practice right away.<sup>335</sup> Ajaan Lee, however, does argue that strictly following the texts is not wrong as long as the teachings are held with discernment. He gives this example:

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<sup>333</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 30–32.

<sup>334</sup> Phra Suddhidhammarāṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, ix.

<sup>335</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 1.

there is more than one prescription for curing a fever. Some doctors think that a fever can be cured only by drinking a concoction of boiled neem, but not by using quinine leaves. Nevertheless, others may practice different kinds of medicine like producing powder from the leaves of other trees, making a concentrated extract, or prescribing other dosages. The treatment is prescribed very much depends on the experience of the doctor as to what is effective in curing the illness. The value of medicine is shown in its ability to cure the disease. Likewise, he said, as long as the *Dhamma* can help uproot the defilements, then it is a right teaching.<sup>336</sup> One will find most of his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* in the *Frames of Reference* to be elaborated below. Significant attention is devoted to articulating several key aspects of practicing *satipaṭṭhāna* that are found in other *suttas* besides the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.

According to Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the four establishings of mindfulness, "offers an important corrective to many of the modern misunderstandings surrounding mindfulness."<sup>337</sup> We will pay particular attention to the concept and function of ardency—*ātappa*—which is rarely mentioned as playing a role in mindfulness and was generally omitted from both the *Dhamma* textbooks of Ajaan Lee's generation as well as the mindfulness teachings of the present day. In the few instances where it is mentioned, it is often misinterpreted. In order to understand Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, let's examine his interpretation of the matter.

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<sup>336</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 1.

<sup>337</sup> Phra Saddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 1, ix.

### 3.7 Ajaan Lee's Treatment of *Satipaṭṭhāna*

#### 3.7.1 *Kāyānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna*: Being Mindful of the Body as a Frame of Reference

Contemplation of the body is presented with some variations in all three of Ajaan Lee's treatises. First of all, with regard to the term "body," which Ajaan Lee explains at the beginning of each treatise: in *A Refuge in Awakening* "body" is the four properties: the earth property or the solid aspects; the water property or the liquid aspects; the fire property or the warm aspects; and the wind property or the in-and-out breath.<sup>338</sup> In *Frames of Reference*, he includes in the concept "body" both the living body as well as the dead-but-still-visible body that can serve the purpose of impurity contemplation.<sup>339</sup> In the *Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, the "body" is ascribed two additional properties: the space property, the empty places between the other properties that allow them to come together in proper proportion, and consciousness property, the awareness that permeates and brings the other properties together.<sup>340</sup>

In addition, whereas *Frames of Reference* and *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind* provide detailed instructions for investigating various aspects of the body for the purpose of developing a sense of dismay toward the body or to develop tranquility,<sup>341</sup> *A Refuge in Awakening* presents a much more specific focus on breath energy. Additionally, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind* adds a description on "the body in the mind," and *Frames of Reference* emphasizes applying three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Although some of the ways Ajaan Lee presents his

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<sup>338</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *A Refuge in Awakening* in *Frames of Reference*, 51–52.

<sup>339</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 10.

<sup>340</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 20.

<sup>341</sup> In Ajaan Lee's treatises, tranquility is most often said to be cultivated through breath meditation.

teachings are quite different, his underlying theory on the contemplation of the body can be said to be consistent in all three treatises. The purpose of body contemplation is to liberate the mind from the temptations of the body, and to develop the power of tranquility and insight for the purpose of unbinding.

In *Frames of Reference*, his earliest treatise on *satipaṭṭhāna*, Ajaan Lee looks at the body with respect to three aspects: the inner body—one’s own body; outer bodies—the bodies of other people; and the body in and of itself, which he explains as the act of focusing on any one of the four properties, such as the breath, the warmth, the coolness, or the solidity.<sup>342</sup> One noteworthy feature that three treatises have in common is that when providing an example of the contemplation of the body in and of itself, Ajaan Lee always gives the breath as his reference. Contemplation of other properties is also mentioned, but they are usually taught after meditators have mastered the breath.

Before describing the contemplation of the body in detail, Ajaan Lee gives an instruction explaining what duty should be appropriately performed. Like the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, he also emphasizes the development of three qualities, *sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*, or mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. However, whereas the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* only mentions these three qualities briefly, Ajaan Lee’s treatment provides a detailed explanation of what these qualities consist of. In his words, *sampajañña*, alertness, should be kept in place. It has to be directed not anywhere else but right at the mind within. *Sati*, mindfulness, has to be “all-round,” meaning directing it inwardly to the mind and then out to the physical body—and then watching after the

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<sup>342</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 10. These three aspects of the body are also mentioned in *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind* with an additional section on “the body in the mind,” 20–26.

mind and the physical body to make sure that they do not slip away from each other. And the function of *ātappa*, ardency, is to focus—with commitment and zeal—on investigating the physical body and analyzing it into its various aspects.<sup>343</sup>

Ajaan Lee’s explanation, in general, is consistent with the other *suttas* that explain the three qualities in the following way:<sup>344</sup> *sati* and *sampajañña* are explained as neutral qualities, whereas *ātappa* is the quality that fosters the development of discernment for the sake of centering the mind in concentration and gaining release. However, as indicated in this frame of reference as well as in the other three, his explanation of the quality of *ātappa* extends beyond what is in the *suttas*. For instance, whereas the *suttas*’ exposition of *ātappa* as discussed in Chapter Two only implies the path factors of right view and right resolve,<sup>345</sup> Ajaan Lee develops a theory that goes further than that. His rendering of *ātappa* as “focused investigation” gives meditators a means to explore and accomplish each factor of the noble eightfold path all the way to ultimate liberation.

It is worthwhile to note that these three qualities are considered the framework that constitutes the backbone of Ajaan Lee’s meditation theory, especially in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. In other words, in his treatment, Ajaan Lee repeatedly emphasizes the functions of the three qualities with detailed elaborations in each of the four frames of reference—body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities—to explain how each of these three qualities should be developed so that it can bear fruit in the course of meditation.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 10.

<sup>344</sup> See the section on the Discrepancy in Framing the Key Factors of *Satipaṭṭhāna* Practice in Chapter Two.

<sup>345</sup> See section 2.2.2 Discrepancy in Identifying the Discernment Factor and in Explaining the Quality of *Sampajañña* in Chapter Two.

<sup>346</sup> See also the discussion on the three qualities in other frames of reference described below.

With the support of the three qualities, one then is instructed to carry out body contemplation, which can be done in five steps:

1. Investigate the thirty-two parts of the body
2. Investigate the various repugnant aspects of the body
3. Investigate the in-and-out breath
4. Investigate the four properties
5. Investigate three characteristics of the body: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*.<sup>347</sup>

We will examine Ajaan Lee's teachings within each of these five steps below.

( 1 ) Whereas the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* starts the contemplation of the body with a section on mindfulness of breathing,<sup>348</sup> Ajaan Lee's treatment of the body contemplation begins right with the investigation of the thirty-two parts of the body without any basic meditation instruction such as looking for a secluded place, crossing one's legs, or keeping the back of the body straight, etc., as recorded in the *sutta*.<sup>349</sup> It seems that Ajaan Lee's readers were already familiar with these meditation instructions, which had been provided in other talks and writings that appeared prior to the *Frames of Reference*.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Note that, in *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, Ajaan Lee also presents these five steps, but the way he groups them is different.

<sup>348</sup> MN 10

<sup>349</sup> In MN 10, the *sutta* begins the contemplation with a basic instruction on meditation. "And how does a monk remain focused on the body in and of itself? There is the case where a monk—having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building—sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect and setting mindfulness to the fore [lit: the front of the chest]. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out."

<sup>350</sup> For instance, earlier in the year 1936 Ajaan Lee provided several talks on various topics including basic meditation teachings, which appear in *The Craft of the Heart*.

Investigation of the thirty-two parts of the body, sometimes referred to as *asubha* (unattractiveness), is a traditional Buddhist meditation method, which appears in several *suttas* and commentaries.<sup>351</sup> It is described in great detail in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*:

And further... just as if a sack with openings at both ends were full of various kinds of grain—wheat, rice, mung beans, kidney beans, sesame seeds, husked rice—and a man with good eyesight, pouring it out, were to reflect, “This is wheat. This is rice. These are mung beans. These are kidney beans. These are sesame seeds. This is husked rice,” in the same way the monk reflects on this very body from the soles of the feet on up, from the crown of the head on down, surrounded by skin and full of various kinds of unclean things: “In this body there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, gorge, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-oil, saliva, mucus, fluid in the joints, urine.”<sup>352</sup>

In this section, the mind is directed to examine various anatomical parts of the body so as to deconstruct the whole body into its separate parts. The body is seen as a skin bag full of parts, which is compared to a sack contains different sorts of grain. The mundane concept of the body’s beauty and attraction, thus, can be broken down by the power of mindfulness, which keeps directing the mind to focus on the body both internally and externally. One understands that, besides the parts inside and outside of the body, i.e., in the bodies of other people, there is only that. Nothing else added.

In the refrain that appears at the end of each meditation theme in the contemplation of the body as well as in the other three frames of reference, the *sutta* also describes three stages of the practice that indicate three different levels in the contemplation. For instance, in this contemplation of the body, the first stage refers to the body in and of itself at a fundamental level. The second stage refers to events that relate

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<sup>351</sup> See *Khuddakapāṭha* (Khp 1–9), *Girimānanda Sutta* (AN 10.60), and the *Visudhimagga*. In the Chinese Canon, it is recorded in the *Zuo Chan San Mei Jing*, etc.

<sup>352</sup> MN 10



to the body at this level, such as the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or both. And the third stage refers to higher levels, the state of non-clinging.<sup>353</sup> They are depicted in the *sutta* as follows:

In this way he remains focused internally on the body in and of itself, or externally on the body in and of itself, or both internally and externally on the body in and of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that “There is a body” is maintained to the extent of knowledge and remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself.<sup>354</sup>

However, in this refrain, the *sutta* provides only a concise description stating that one should contemplate the inner or outer body, or any phenomenon that related to the body, etc., without any further explanation of what it means or how the task should be carried out.

In Ajaan Lee’s treatment, the investigation of the thirty-two parts of the body is relatively concise compared to that in *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. This is his description:

“Investigate the 32 parts of the body, beginning with the hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, etc. Make a thorough survey and evaluation.”<sup>355</sup> Nevertheless, the unique aspect of Ajaan Lee’s treatment in this section is, perhaps, his adding of the term “evaluation” in addition to the examination as recorded in the *sutta*. It is possible to construe the acts of surveying and evaluating in this section as equivalent to the functions of the first two factors of the *jhāna*, “directed thought” and “evaluation.” This is a central

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<sup>353</sup> For more detail on the discussion of these three stages see Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Handful of Leaves 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya*, 53–54; and Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Wings to Awakening*, 74–79.

<sup>354</sup> MN 10

<sup>355</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Frames of Reference*, 11.

theme in Ajaan Lee's meditation guidance that appears frequently in many of his treatises and Dhamma talks.<sup>356</sup> Also, it is probably because merely scanning the thirty-two parts of the body without evaluating them would not be enough to provide conditions for concentration and insight to arise. The function of "evaluation" would keep the mind on investigating each part of the body as it goes through the survey, so the reality of the body can be seen, rather than being covered by its attractive appearance. The purpose of this investigation is to settle the mind down and to develop tranquility and insight. That is why Ajaan Lee, in the end of the section, states that "If this method doesn't calm the mind, go on to [the next one]."<sup>357</sup>

( 2 ) The second meditation theme in contemplation on the body focuses on investigating various repugnant aspects of the body. The task of this investigation requires the power of imagination, recollection, and analysis. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the sense of dismay and detachment toward the body is developed by corpse visualization. The meditator imagines a corpse going through different stages, from being carried to the charnel ground to being eaten by animals, and then step-by-step decomposing all the way to powder.

And further, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground—one day, two days, three days dead—bloated, livid, and festering, he applies it to this very body...Or again, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground, being chewed by crows, being chewed by vultures, being chewed by hawks, being chewed by dogs, being chewed by hyenas, being chewed by various other creatures... a skeleton smeared with flesh and blood, connected with tendons... a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, connected with tendons... a skeleton without flesh or blood, connected with tendons... bones detached from their tendons, scattered in all directions—here a hand bone, there a foot bone, here a shin bone, there a thigh bone, here a hip bone, there a back bone, here a rib, there

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<sup>356</sup> Note that the only way that meditators can do *asubha* practice in the second *jhāna* on up is simply by staring at the image of a body part, without evaluating it any further. (Personal communication with Thānissaro Bhikkhu).

<sup>357</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Frames of Reference*, 11.

a chest bone, here a shoulder bone, there a neck bone, here a jaw bone, there a tooth, here a skull... the bones whitened, somewhat like the color of shells... the bones piled up, more than a year old... the bones decomposed into a powder: He applies it to this very body, “This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate.”<sup>358</sup>

In this *sutta* passage, meditators then are told to reflect on the inevitability of decomposition of their own bodies to learn that it is the unavoidable fate of any body. This is an exercise of visualization and reflection. Here, body contemplation becomes a subject in this lesson for the purpose of developing dispassion.

In Ajaan Lee’s treatment, body contemplation is depicted slightly differently. He describes the body as a cemetery where animal corpses—animals we’ve eaten—are gathered, buried, and decomposed. And, no matter how people take care of it and try to keep it clean, it is still filthy because, as he notes, what it comes from is filthy, and what comes out of it is repulsive. In his instruction, Ajaan Lee encourages seeing the body as inherently unclean, inside and out:

The body is a conglomeration of all sorts of things. In other words, it’s a burial ground, a national cemetery, filled with the corpses of cattle, pigs, ducks, chickens, sour, sweet, greasy, salty, gathered and aged in the stomach, filtered and distilled into blood, pus, decomposing and putrid, oozing throughout the body and coming out its various openings: this body, which all of us in the human race care for without ceasing—bathing it, scrubbing it, masking its smell—and even then its filth keeps displaying itself as ear wax, eye secretions, nasal drip, tooth tartar, skin-scruff, and sweat, always oozing out, filthy in every way.<sup>359</sup>

Ajaan Lee is careful to use the kind of language to describe the body that would elicit the same sort of response that body contemplation would have in the practitioner. He does not hold back on detailing the many ways that the body can be shockingly filthy and repulsive.

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<sup>358</sup> MN 10

<sup>359</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *Frames of Reference*, 11.

Ajaan Lee's treatment of this second theme—investigating various repugnant aspects of the body—appears similar to that in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, despite the difference in the visualizing approach. Both accounts are aimed at developing a sense of dismay and detachment toward the body.<sup>360</sup> However, it should be kept in mind that this sort of contemplation, in some cases, could produce negative effects. For example, the Canon records a group of monks who seriously put it into practice and subsequently killed themselves to terminate their impure bodies.<sup>361</sup> Likewise, Ajaan Lee, in *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, also points out some negative effects of this practice. For example, he said that one's perceptions might become skewed, which could make one feel depressed,<sup>362</sup> or one might be tempted break the precept regarding illicit sex if one only sees the body as a component of elements and thus fails to distinguish men from women. Or one might commit suicide. It can also lead to the so-called corruption of insight,<sup>363</sup> misperceiving experiences or knowledge that arise in the course of meditation which are sometimes true, sometimes false, sometimes mixed as absolutely true or considering them as noble attainments.<sup>364</sup> Note that, the reasons that meditators fall for corruption of insight, according to Ajaan Lee, are because their powers of reference are weak<sup>365</sup> or because they are lacking of discernment.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> In some *suttas*, mindfulness of the perception of unattractiveness is one of the practices conducive to noble attainments that the Buddha recommends to sick monks. See AN 5.121.

<sup>361</sup> SN 54.9

<sup>362</sup> The concern that Ajaan Lee states here, in fact, has happened at Mahāsi Sayādaw's centers as some reports mention that meditators are instructed to keep focusing on the three characteristics—impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and no-self (*anattā*) in all of their activities, which made them depressed and led them to flee the center. See the section on Objections Toward Mahāsi Method in Chapter Four for more detail.

<sup>363</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 22–23.

<sup>364</sup> The *Visuddhimagga* lists ten corruptions of insight—illumination, knowledge, rapturous happiness, tranquility, bliss, resolution, exertion, assurance, equanimity, and attachment. See Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, XX 105–130.

<sup>365</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Basic Themes*, 125.

<sup>366</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Basic Themes*, 128.

It is said that the Buddha, after learning about the mass suicide incident depicted in the *sutta*, instructed his monks to switch from foulness-of-the-body contemplation to mindfulness of breathing. Likewise, Ajaan Lee suggests, “So in dealing with this frame of reference, if we want our path to be smooth and convenient, with no stumps or thorns, we should focus on the sensation of the body in and of itself, i.e., on one of the elements as experienced in the body, such as the breath.”<sup>367</sup> Perhaps, this is the reason Ajaan Lee, in his treatment both in *Frames of Reference* and *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, places breath meditation right after the foulness theme.

( 3 ) The third theme shows how Ajaan Lee uses breath meditation as a reference to develop tranquility and insight. In all three treatises, Ajaan Lee provides detailed instructions on how to contemplate the breath from beginning steps to advanced levels. For instance, “When the breath comes in long, be aware of the fact. When it goes out long, be aware of it.”<sup>368</sup> In his words, one should stay aware of all of aspects of the breath. In many of his *Dhamma* talks and other treatises, Ajaan Lee suggests that meditators should spread their breath energy to different parts of the body and to keep their awareness as broad as possible, for this kind of broad awareness will not be knocked down easily by other interfering thoughts. At other times, however, Ajaan Lee provides a number of focal points for the mind to rest on, such as the tip of the nose, at the palate, or in the middle of the chest.<sup>369</sup> It is because, he explains, some meditators find it too distracting to deal with the breath sensation in various parts of the body, as other related

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<sup>367</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 23.

<sup>368</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 11.

<sup>369</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 12. In *Basic Themes* and *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, Ajaan Lee provides other focal points in addition to these, such as the tip of the breastbone, the base of the throat, the middle of the forehead, the middle of the head, the middle of the brain, and the navel. See Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Basic Themes*, 123; and Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 12–18.

thoughts might sneak in and carry them away. He makes the comparison with starting an orchard. Intelligent orchard owners would begin with a small area. After they harvest the crop from that small area, then they will use it to expand their orchard to its maximum production capacity. But if they start out with the whole orchard then they might face many challenges, such as running out of resources, exhausting themselves, or risking all their capital.<sup>370</sup>

Additionally, Ajaan Lee recommends playing with the breath by trying different rhythms. “Now observe the behavior of the breath as it swells and contracts—in long and out long, in short and out short, in short and out long, in long and out short, in heavy and out light, in light and out heavy, in light and out light.”<sup>371</sup> He also instructs that if any part of the body feels uncomfortable, one should adjust the breathing to make the whole body feel comfortable with both the in-breath and the out-breath. This will keep the mind from wandering off or being a victim of the hindrances.<sup>372</sup> One of the most unique points in his breath meditation is his instruction of letting the breath spread to connect and coordinate with other aspects of the breath in the body, which he compares to the air stream in a Coleman lantern that spreads kerosene throughout the threads of the mantle.<sup>373</sup> The purpose of this, as he says, is to expand the sense of mindfulness and awareness so that they are sensitive throughout the entire body. This practice, as a result, would lead to fixed penetration (*appanā samādhi*) or an absorption state.<sup>374</sup> In *A Refuge in Awakening*, Ajaan Lee even depicts the six aspects of breath energy. “The breath energy flowing

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<sup>370</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Starting Out Small: A Collection of Talks for Beginning Meditators*, trans. Thānissaro Bhikkhu, rev. ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2016), 28.

<sup>371</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 12.

<sup>372</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 24.

<sup>373</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 24.

<sup>374</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Basic Themes*, 31, 90.

down from the head to the spaces between the fingers and toes; the breath energy flowing from the spaces between the fingers and toes up to the top of the head; the breath forces in the stomach; the breath forces in the intestines; and the in-and-out breath.”<sup>375</sup> This depiction can be traced back to the *Mahā Hatthipadopama Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

What is the internal wind property? Whatever internal, belonging to oneself, is wind, windy, and sustained: up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the stomach, winds in the intestines, winds that course through the body, in-and-out breathing, or whatever else internal, within oneself, is wind, windy, and sustained: This is called the internal wind property.<sup>376</sup>

Both Ajaan Lee and the *sutta* make extensive use of descriptive language to give the meditator a sense of the endless possibilities of what the breath can feel like in the body. Ajaan Lee’s purpose here is to get the meditator to keep exploring. Since the same kind of descriptive language is used in the *sutta*, it is likely that the intention behind the instructions were similar.

In one of his *Dhamma* talks, “The Refinements of the Breath,” Ajaan Lee discusses three levels of the breath: common, refined, and profound. (1) The common breath is the breath that we breathe into the body. It has two kinds: the one mixed with polluted air is called harmful because it causes diseases to the body, whereas the other, mixed with pure air, is called beneficial, which is good for the body. (2) The refined breath is the delicate breath sensations, which derive from the in-and-out breath and permeate between the blood vessels and nerves. It is the breath that gives rise to the sense of feeling throughout the body. It is gentle and soft. (3) The profound breath grows from the development of the refined breath. When the refined breath fully spreads to every part in the entire body, the body then will feel light, empty, and quiet, and one is still mindful

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<sup>375</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 52.

<sup>376</sup> MN 28. See also MN 62

and alert. A bright light will then appear, making one feel as if the breath in the body has a white glow. This is called the profound breath, which lies deeper than the refined one.<sup>377</sup> In the breath meditation section of *Frame of Reference*, Ajaan Lee also gives some hints about the results of the practice—which the *sutta* does not—such as “discernment will arise; an inner light will appear, reducing distractive thought.”<sup>378</sup> Ajaan Lee’s elaboration of breath meditation here, by and large, is similar to that in the *sutta*. Not only is his basic guidance in accord with the *sutta*,<sup>379</sup> his detailed teaching on the refined and profound breaths, as well as the teaching on letting the breath spread to different parts of the body and uniting them together to make the body full and refreshed, can be considered an explanation for the framed instructions of the *sutta*. This is because the *sutta*, except for briefly mentioning the notions of breathing in-and-out sensitive to the entire body and breathing in-and-out calming bodily fabrication in its description,<sup>380</sup> does not provide further detail to explain how the practice should be carried out, which Ajaan Lee does.

With regard to breath meditation, again, it is important to note that Ajaan Lee composed several treatises on this meditation theme and developed a unique technique such as the seven steps in “Method Two.”<sup>381</sup> “Method Two” can be said to be a concise

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<sup>377</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Inner Strength and Parting Gifts*, 35–36.

<sup>378</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 12. The “inner light” here is one of the preliminary signs of the breath. It is a sense of relief-giving brightness that fills the heart, a lump or ball of white like cotton-wood that Ajaan Lee mentions in *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*. See Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 24.

<sup>379</sup> “Breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’” See MN 10.

<sup>380</sup> “He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.’” See MN 10.

<sup>381</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 17–27.



summary that includes most of Ajaan Lee's principal teachings on breath meditation from beginning to advanced. That is why it will be considered in detail here. In the beginning of "Method Two," meditators are told to start their meditation with a number of long in-and-out breaths, silently repeating *bud* along with the in-breath and *dho* with the out, and to be aware of the breath as it comes in and goes out. In the course of the practice, meditators can adjust the breath to make it comfortable, and then spread it to different parts of the body. It is also interesting to note that in this method Ajaan Lee provides maps for spreading the breath energy which are different between male and female.<sup>382</sup>

Here is the set of instructions given:

To begin with, inhale the breath sensation at the base of the skull and let it flow all the way down the spine. Then, if you are male, let it spread down your right leg to the sole of your foot, to the ends of your toes, and out into the air. Inhale the breath sensation at the base of the skull again and let it spread down your spine, down your left leg to the ends of your toes, and out into the air. (If you are female, begin with the left side first, because the male and female nervous systems are different.)

Then let the breath from the base of the skull spread down over both shoulders, past your elbows and wrists, to the tips of your fingers, and out into the air.

Let the breath at the base of the throat spread down the central nerve at the front of the body, past the lungs and liver, all the way down to the bladder and colon. Inhale the breath right at the middle of the chest and let it go all the way down to your intestines.

Let all these breath sensations spread so that they connect and flow together, and you'll feel a greatly improved sense of well-being.<sup>383</sup>

"Method Two" also includes four ways of adjusting the breath: "in long and out long; in long and out short; in short and out long; in short and out short."<sup>384</sup> It is also suggested that one should try to familiarize oneself with these four ways of breathing because they serve as good reference points with respect to the physical conditions of the

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<sup>382</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 17.

<sup>383</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 17.

<sup>384</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 18.

breath, which are always changing. In addition, several focal points are listed, as mentioned above, along with the suggestion that meditators should not focus on any spot above the base of the throat if they experience frequent headaches or nervous problems. Similar to the descriptions of the refined and profound breaths, the last two steps of “Method Two” also tell meditators to spread their awareness to the whole body, to unite the breath sensations in the body and let them flow together.<sup>385</sup>

Moreover, “Method Two” also devotes space to depicting signs, or *nimitta*, that may arise in the course of meditation. Note that there is nowhere in Ajaan Lee’s writings where the *nimitta* is described in as much detail as in “Method Two.”

[There are] various signs that arise from the breath and may appear as images—bright lights, people, animals, yourself, others; or as sounds—the voices of people, some you recognize and others you don’t. In some cases, the signs appear as smells—either fragrant or else foul like a corpse. Sometimes the in-breath can make you feel so full throughout the body that you have no sense of hunger or thirst. Sometimes the breath can send warm, hot, cold, or tingling sensations through the body. Sometimes it can cause things that never occurred to you before to spring suddenly to mind.<sup>386</sup>

Ajaan Lee also provides instruction in handling these *nimitta*. As opposed to breath meditation instructions in the *Visuddhimagga*—which treat the *nimitta* as having such central importance that once the *nimitta* arises one should abandon the breath and focus on it instead<sup>387</sup>—Ajaan Lee treats *nimitta* as guests, more peripheral than central.<sup>388</sup> According to him, meditators should make the breath and mind stable and secure before going out to receive the guests. When receiving the guests, meditators should bring them under their control. In the case that they are out of one’s control, he suggests simply

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<sup>385</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 18.

<sup>386</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 19.

<sup>387</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, VIII 218–221.

<sup>388</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 19.

leaving them alone. Otherwise, as he says, they might lead meditators astray. To be truly skillful, however, one must be able to work with *nimitta* at a high level and must be able to change them at will through the power of thought. Such changes include making them small, large; sending them far away and bringing them up close; making them appear and disappear; or sending them outside and bringing them in. Once meditators are truly skillful in handling the *nimitta*, then these *nimitta* can give rise to a variety of psychic powers such as clairaudience, clairvoyance, knowledge of past lives, the ability to give rise to certain feelings at will, and many others.<sup>389</sup> In the discussion of psychic powers, Ajaan Lee also gives advice on how to deal with these “guests”:

If you come across them in your practice, examine them thoroughly. Don’t be pleased by what appears. Don’t get upset or try to deny what appears. Keep your mind on an even keel. Stay neutral. Be circumspect. Consider carefully whatever appears, to see whether it’s trustworthy or not. Otherwise, it might lead you to mistaken assumptions. Good and evil, right and wrong, high and low: All depend on whether your heart is shrewd or dull, and on how resourceful you are. If you’re dull-witted, even high things can become low, and good things evil.<sup>390</sup>

According to Ajaan Lee, upon mastery of various aspects of the breath and its incidentals, meditators can gain the knowledge of the four noble truths.<sup>391</sup> In explaining the connection between concentration and discernment, Ajaan Lee again shows his creative manner and his mastery of the *Dhamma* in the way he uses the breath to elaborate the four noble truths, all the way through the noble eightfold path. Even though the direct quote below is relatively long, it is attached here so that we can have a taste of Ajaan Lee’s teachings on breath meditation.

The in-and-out breath is stress—the in-breath, the stress of arising; the out-breath, the stress of passing away. Not being aware of the breath as it goes in and out, not knowing the characteristics of the breath, is the cause of stress.

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<sup>389</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddhara, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 19–20.

<sup>390</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddhara, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 20.

<sup>391</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddhara, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 21.

Knowing when the breath is coming in, knowing when it's going out, knowing its characteristics clearly—i.e., keeping your views in line with the truth of the breath—is right view, part of the noble path.

Knowing which ways of breathing are uncomfortable, knowing how to vary the breath; knowing, 'That way of breathing is uncomfortable; I'll have to breathe like this in order to feel at ease': This is right resolve.

The mental factors that think about and correctly evaluate all aspects of the breath are right speech.

Knowing various ways of improving the breath; breathing, for example, in long and out long, in short and out short, in short and out long, in long and out short, until you come across the breath most comfortable for you: This is right action.

Knowing how to use the breath to purify the blood, how to let this purified blood nourish the heart muscles, how to adjust the breath so that it eases the body and soothes the mind, how to breathe so that you feel full and refreshed in body and mind: This is right livelihood.

Trying to adjust the breath until it soothes the body and mind, and to keep trying as long as you aren't fully at ease, is right effort.

Being mindful and alert to the in-and-out breath at all times, knowing the various aspects of the breath—the up-flowing breath, the down-flowing breath, the breath in the stomach, the breath in the intestines, the breath flowing along the muscles and out to every pore—keeping track of these things with every in-and-out breath: This is right mindfulness.

A mind intent only on issues related to the breath, not pulling any other objects in to interfere, until the breath is refined, giving rise to fixed absorption and then liberating insight right there: This is right concentration.

To think of the breath is termed *vitakka*, directed thought. To adjust the breath and let it spread is called *vicāra*, evaluation. When all aspects of the breath flow freely throughout the body, you feel full and refreshed in body and mind: This is *pīti*, rapture. When body and mind are both at rest, you feel serene and at ease: This is *sukha*, pleasure. And once you feel pleasure, the mind is bound to stay snug with a single preoccupation and not go straying after any others: This is *ekaggatārammaṇa*, singleness of preoccupation. These five factors form the beginning stage of right concentration.<sup>392</sup>

In Ajaan Lee's exposition, only when these eight factors of the noble path, which also perceived as the threefold training—virtue, concentration, and discernment—are brought together and fully developed can liberation be achieved. In his discussion of the threefold

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<sup>392</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadhara, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 21–22.

training, he strongly emphasizes the practice of centering mind, which to him is the groundwork of discernment and release.<sup>393</sup>

Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that Ajaan Lee is an expert in breath meditation. His teaching on breath meditation not only reveals his deep knowledge of the Buddha's teachings and a sense of innovation, but also makes him unique among the Thai Forest ajans in these respects.<sup>394</sup> It can be said that Ajaan Lee's breath meditation treatises, together with his *Dhamma* talks, are a great encyclopedia for whoever wants to explore breath meditation.

( 4 ) The treatment in *Frames of Reference* continues with the fourth meditation theme, investigating the four properties: earth, water, wind, and fire. In his treatment, Ajaan Lee gives an instruction to separate the four properties out so that one can perceive the nature of the body more deeply.

Imagine that you can take the earth property out and pile it in a heap in front of you, that you can take the water property out and pile it behind you, that you can pile the wind property in a heap to your left, and the fire property in a heap to your right. Place yourself in the middle and take a good look at the body, until you see that, when taken apart in this way, it vanishes into nothing, into ashes—what they call “death.”<sup>395</sup>

The four-properties investigation in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is described in a similar way.

The monk, in the *sutta*, is said to contemplate the body internally and externally, just as

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<sup>393</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 22–27.

<sup>394</sup> Unlike Ajaan Lee, both Ajaan Mahā Boowa and Ajaan Chah, for instance, often teach people to simply watch the breath, just keep watching the in and out breath all the way until it disappears leaving only the awareness. See Ajaan Chah, *It's Like This: 108 Dhamma Similes*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013), 24; Ajaan Chah, *In Simple Terms: 108 Dhamma Similes*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 2nd ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013), 40, Kindle; Ajaan Chah, *Still Flowing Water: Eight Dhamma Talks*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013), 11–22, Kindle; Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Things as They Are*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Udon Thani, Thailand: Forest Dhamma Books, 1988), 13–14.

<sup>395</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *Frames of Reference*, 12–13.

skilled butcher or his apprentice would cut a cow into pieces.<sup>396</sup> The purpose of this theme, as Ajaan Lee states it, is very much the same as the first two: to develop a sense of dismay and detachment toward the body.<sup>397</sup>

( 5 ) The sense of *samvega*, or dismay, with regard to the body also can be seen in the last meditation theme in Ajaan Lee's treatment, contemplating the three characteristics of the body, *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*, or inconstancy, suffering, and not-self.<sup>398</sup> As Ajaan Lee explains, once the body is born, it will then undergo all phases of aging, illness, and death. No matter how the body is taken care of, it is still subject to *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. With regard to this meditation theme, it can be said that Ajaan Lee has used the three characteristics in the service of a long description portraying the nature of the body in the *sutta*.<sup>399</sup> Note that although Ajaan Lee's treatment and the *sutta* share a similar goal—to help meditators develop a sense of detachment toward the body so that their mind would be cooled down from the fire of lust—their depictions are presented somewhat differently. Whereas the *sutta* uses the “outer body” in this contemplation, meaning it has meditators look at bodies of other people and apply them

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<sup>396</sup> “Furthermore...just as a skilled butcher or his apprentice, having killed a cow, would sit at a crossroads cutting it up into pieces, the monk contemplates this very body—however it stands, however it is disposed—in terms of properties: ‘In this body there is the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, and the wind property.’”

See MN 10.

<sup>397</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *Frames of Reference*, 13.

<sup>398</sup> Note that there is an inconsistency in rendering the third characteristics (sometimes as not-self, other times as no self) in this dissertation. It is because, in the teachings of the *suttas* and Ajaan Lee, the doctrine of *anattā* is rendered as not-self. However, in the explanations of the commentaries and Mahāsi Sayādaw, it is rendered as no self.

<sup>399</sup> “Furthermore, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground—one day, two days, three days dead—bloated, livid, and festering, he applies it to this very body, ‘This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate’...Or again, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground, picked at by crows, vultures, and hawks... various other creatures... a skeleton without flesh or blood, connected with tendons... bones detached from their tendons, scattered in all directions... the bones whitened, somewhat like the color of shells... piled up, more than a year old... decomposed into a powder: He applies it to this very body, ‘This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate.’” See MN 10.

to their own body, Ajaan Lee employs the “inner body,” meaning one’s own body. In its description, after depicting the various decomposing states of the body in a charnel ground, the *sutta* states that “[the meditator] applies [the decomposing body that he visualized] to this very body, ‘This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate.’”<sup>400</sup> Ajaan Lee, on the other hand, tells meditators to reflect on their own body as he says: “Consider the fact that the body, once it’s born, leaves you exposed on all sides to the steady onslaughts of old age, illness, and death. Ultimately, you are sure to be torn away from everything in the world.”<sup>401</sup> In addition, Ajaan Lee gives a more specific instruction in this case, for having explained that it is the nature of the body to undergo the three characteristics, he says that meditators will develop a sense of dismay that will make their mind steady, still, and firmly centered in concentration. Note that the three characteristics are used here for concentration and not equated with awakening knowledge as presented in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment.<sup>402</sup> The *sutta*, however, does not elaborate further except for the refrain discussed earlier. Except for this minor variation, Ajaan Lee’s explanation of the three characteristics is in accord with the *suttas*.<sup>403</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, the *suttas* also utilize the three characteristics as a strategy to foster a sense of dispassion and disenchantment.<sup>404</sup>

It is essential to note that, in the closing part of this section, Ajaan Lee again emphasizes the functions of the three qualities: *sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*. In his

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<sup>400</sup> MN 10

<sup>401</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *Frames of Reference*, 13.

<sup>402</sup> See Chapter Four for more detail.

<sup>403</sup> To learn more about Ajaan Lee’s teaching on the three characteristics, see also section 5.2.8 Difference in Explaining the Knowledge of the Regularity of the *Dhamma* in Chapter Five.

<sup>404</sup> For more detail, see the discussion on the Discrepancy in Explaining the Doctrine of *Anattā* in Chapter Two. See also the section discussing the Difference in Identifying the Knowledge Leading up to the Awakening in Chapter Five.

view, *kāyānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, or being mindful of the body as a frame of reference, is developed only when these three qualities have been fully developed. If mindfulness lacks alertness (*sampajañña*), it would head in a wrong direction and become wrong mindfulness.<sup>405</sup> Thus, when dealing with the inner body, outer body, or the body in and of itself, one has to use these three qualities. The accomplishment of such contemplation, in this theory, will lead to the development of both concentration and discernment which then will lead one to liberation. As he claims:

When you can follow the methods outlined above, you are sure to develop a disinterested steadiness of mind. You will come to feel a sense of dismay and detachment that will make the mind quiet, calm, and unperturbed. This is the ladder of liberating insight (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*), leading to *nibbāna*, which people of wisdom and experience have guaranteed: (*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*) *Nibbāna* is the ultimate ease.<sup>406</sup>

To sum up, Ajaan Lee presents a detailed treatment for the *kāyānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* or body as a frame of reference. It covers most of the meditation themes related to the body that are included in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, such as investigating the thirty-two parts of the body, investigating the various repugnant aspects of the body, investigating the in-and-out breath, investigating the four properties, and investigating the three characteristics of the body. In general, it can be said that Ajaan Lee's treatment of *kāyānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* is essentially based on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*'s outline. The main purpose of the *sutta* is the contemplation of the body, and Ajaan Lee's treatment of the topic is very close to the explanation in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. It is simply to develop a sense of dismay that can cut through the attachment to the body. The mind, as a result, can be released from the fever of sensuality and stay firmly in concentration.

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<sup>405</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 13–14.

<sup>406</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 14.



Apart from these similarities, Ajaan Lee's treatment, does contain some variations compared to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In his treatment, he not only looks at the body from three different aspects—the inner body, the outer body, and the body in and of itself—he also provides a clear definition for each category. This is absent from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Ajaan Lee's treatment also switches the order of breath meditation and body investigation. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, mindfulness of the breath is taught first, followed by body contemplation. But, in Ajaan Lee's treatment, the meditation themes of the thirty-two parts of the body and its foulness are taught before breath meditation, an order that is also found in the *Mahā Rāhulovāda Sutta: The Greater Exhortation to Rāhula*.<sup>407</sup> In addition, the way the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* expresses the contemplation of the four properties is relatively concise and simple compared to Ajaan Lee's explanation. Furthermore, Ajaan Lee's treatment does not contain the sections dealing with daily activities, as recorded in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and his description of the thirty-two parts of the body is brief compared to that found in the *sutta*. One other difference: Ajaan Lee states explicitly that the purpose of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is to give rise to concentration and insight.

However, the most significant variation between the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and Ajaan Lee's treatment is the emphasis on the three qualities: *sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*, or mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, these three qualities are briefly mentioned without further explanation as to how they should be construed and practiced. In Ajaan Lee's treatment, these three qualities are highlighted and their functions given extra attention. It is noteworthy how Ajaan Lee's articulation sheds light

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<sup>407</sup> MN 62

on the inter-connection of these three qualities. It offers a new perspective on understanding the role of these three qualities in the body contemplation that seems to be overlooked by modern meditation teachers.

Besides the similarities and differences, Ajaan Lee's explicit explanations of various key parts, which only mentioned in brief in the *sutta*, are essential. It seems that Ajaan Lee's treatment of *kāyānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* has elaborated the frame teaching of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which, at some points, does not provide complete explanations. Note that in the discussion of *kāyānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, the *sutta* seems to answer questions on only one part of the *satipaṭṭhāna* formula—what it means to keep the something in mind. It does not attempt to explain the rest of the formula, which is what Ajaan Lee is trying to do.

Contemplation of the body is one of the meditation techniques in which the Thai Forest ajaans frequently instruct their students.<sup>408</sup> Ajaan Mahā Boowa, for example, often reminds his students to keep contemplating on the foulness of the body until lustful desire has been overcome.<sup>409</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, another forest monk, says that “our lust after human form is what led us to be reborn. This is what keeps us wanting to come back, and it makes us do really stupid things.”<sup>410</sup> It is believed in the Buddhist tradition that if we never wonder why we are trapped in this human body, then it is hard for us to gain any liberating insight from this samsaric suffering. The Buddha's teachings indicate that if the craving for human form has not been exhausted and uprooted, one would still fall under its power no matter how one tries to avoid it. Perhaps this is why a well-known lay

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<sup>408</sup> See Ajaan Mun, *A Heart Released*, 14, 15, 29, 32, 34; Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Things as They Are*, 33–34, 87–88, 103–07, and 131–132.

<sup>409</sup> Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, *Things as They Are*, 88.

<sup>410</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Meditations 4*, 81.

meditation instructor with decades of training still marries in his seventies or why there have been a series of sexual scandals at Zen centers and Tibetan institutions.<sup>411</sup> Due to the lack of training in contemplation of the body, some people think that it is impossible to get rid of the body's temptation. This makes Paul David Numrich and other scholars claim that traditional Theravāda monasticism is unlikely to survive in the West where material and sensory pleasures dominate society.<sup>412</sup> Therefore, from their point of view, reforming the Buddha's teachings and establishing a lay-instructor movement to fulfill the urgent demand would be a good consideration. However, the existence of traditional Theravāda Buddhist monks in the United States<sup>413</sup> since the 1990s should make scholars reconsider their views on the matter.

### **3.7.2 *Vedanānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna*: Being Mindful of Feelings as a Frame of Reference**

Having expounded the *kāyānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, Ajaan Lee continues with the *vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, being mindful of feelings as a frame of reference. Before analyzing his treatment on this frame, let's first review the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*'s teaching on the matter.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discussion of *vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* is much shorter than the section on the body contemplation. The frame also starts with a question: "How does a monk remain focused on feelings in and of themselves?"<sup>414</sup> It is

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<sup>411</sup> Jack Kornfield, "Sex Lives of the Gurus," *Yoga Journal* 63 (July–August 1985): 26; Robinson, Johnson, and Ṭhānissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 303.

<sup>412</sup> Paul David Numrich, "Theravāda Buddhism in America: Prospects for the Saṅgha," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 150–151.

<sup>413</sup> A brief introduction of two well-known Thai Forest Tradition monasteries can be found on their websites: <https://www.watmetta.org/about.html> and <https://www.abhayagiri.org/about/origins-of-abhayagiri>.

<sup>414</sup> MN 10

important to note that in its explanation, the *sutta* seems to underline exclusively the “discerning” quality, which goes throughout the whole section. For instance:

There is the case where a monk, when feeling a painful feeling, discerns, “I am feeling a painful feeling.” When feeling a pleasant feeling, he discerns, “I am feeling a pleasant feeling.” When feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he discerns, “I am feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.”<sup>415</sup>

If we do not include the introductory instruction appearing at the beginning of the *sutta*— “[There is the case where a monk] remains focused on the feelings in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.”<sup>416</sup>—in which the three qualities are briefly mentioned, then it seems that “discerning” is the only quality functioning in this contemplating process. It appears that the *sutta* neglects to explain other related issues, such as how to handle the presence of each of these feelings. In other words, although the *sutta* mentions three sorts of feelings such as painful, pleasant, and neutral, which are also further divided into two categories—“of-the-flesh” and “not-of-the-flesh”<sup>417</sup>—it does not explain how to subdue negative feelings or how to expand the good ones in a way that is conducive to concentration. At the end of contemplation of feelings, the *sutta* also mentions internal feelings and external feelings but again does not provide any further explanation to elaborate what is meant by these terms.

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<sup>415</sup> MN 10

<sup>416</sup> MN 10

<sup>417</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Handful of Leaves* 2, 58. Bhikkhu Analayo in *Satipaṭṭhāna The Direct Path to Realization* uses “worldly and unworldly” instead of “of-the-flesh and not-of-the-flesh” as translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. I prefer the latter because, in my opinion, this way of expressing the feelings easier to perceive in the context of meditation. “Worldly and unworldly” would be obscure or sometimes even covers a larger context, for “unworldly” is often used to describe *nibbāna* and noble attainments. The pleasant feelings derived from the *jhānas*, however, could not be categorized as “unworldly” because a meditator who experiences certain *jhāna* but has not achieved noble fruits would still be considered to be in the world.

Note that “feelings of-the-flesh” refers to carnal pleasures, those fueling and involving sensual craving such as sexual pleasures and the hankering over of sensory pleasures. “Feelings not-of-the-flesh,” on the other hand, refer to feelings that arise from centering of the mind, such as rapture, pleasure, and equanimity, which appear in the *jhānas*. Although the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* does not include explanations of all the feelings that it mentions, they are explained in detail in other *suttas*, such as *Nirāmisā Sutta: Not of the Flesh*,<sup>418</sup> *Vibhaṅga Sutta: An Analysis of the Feeling Faculties*,<sup>419</sup> and many others, except for “painful feeling not-of-the-flesh.” There is nowhere in the Canon that provides any definition of “painful feeling-not-of-the-flesh.” However, it could be the feeling of distress that meditators experience when thinking about the desired goals that they wanted but have not achieved yet, as it mentioned in the *Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta: The Shorter Set of Questions and Answers*: “O when will I enter and remain in the dimension that the noble ones now enter and remain in?”<sup>420</sup> Another way to render this sort of feeling could be the sense of mental distress that occurs in *asubha* contemplation or the perception of death, which are painful ways to awakening.<sup>421</sup> It is interesting to learn that, as *Salāyatana-vibhaṅga Sutta: An Analysis of the Six Sense-Media*<sup>422</sup> reveals, this kind of feeling should be cultivated until one attains unbinding or arrives at feelings of pleasure and equanimity not-of-the-flesh.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> SN 36.31

<sup>419</sup> SN 48.38

<sup>420</sup> MN 44. See also MN 28 “It is a loss for me, not a gain; ill-gotten for me, not well-gotten, that when I recollect the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established within me.”

<sup>421</sup> AN 4.163

<sup>422</sup> MN 137

<sup>423</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Handful of Leaves* 2, 70–71.

With the expositions on “feelings not-of-the-flesh” of these *suttas*, it appears that in this section, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* indirectly mentions the *jhāna* or at least something related to concentration. If this is the case then it is evidence that supports a theory which argues that although *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is often said to be separate from the practice of *jhāna*, a number of *suttas*—such as *Dantabhūmi Sutta*<sup>424</sup> and *Saṅkhitta Sutta*<sup>425</sup>—equate the accomplishment of the first stage<sup>426</sup> in any of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* with the attainment of the first level of *jhāna*. This point is confirmed by other *suttas* such as *Ānāpanāśati Sutta*,<sup>427</sup> in which the development of *satipaṭṭhānas* is said to bring the culmination of the seven factors for awakening, which coincide with the factors of *jhāna*.<sup>428</sup> If so, it is reasonable to claim that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is another *sutta* revealing an un-separate connection between mindfulness and concentration.

Furthermore, similar to the refrain in the contemplation of the body, in the refrain of the contemplation of feelings, the *sutta* also describes three stages of the practice that indicate three different levels of contemplation of feelings. The first stage refers to the feelings themselves at a fundamental level whereas the second stage refers to events related to the feelings at this level such as the phenomenon of origination with regard to the feelings, the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the feelings, or both. And, the third stage refers to a higher level of non-clinging, which is described as: “Or his mindfulness that ‘There are feelings’ is maintained to the extent of knowledge and

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<sup>424</sup> MN 125

<sup>425</sup> AN 8. 63

<sup>426</sup> The first stage refers to the introductory part that appears at the beginning of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. “There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, or mind in and of itself, or mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.”

<sup>427</sup> MN 118

<sup>428</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Handful of Leaves 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2002), 135.

remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world.”<sup>429</sup> However, aside from these concise descriptions, the *sutta* does not explain anything further.

Ajaan Lee’s treatment of feelings, on the other hand, gives a detailed teaching. In *Frames of Reference*, he defines feelings as the experiencing of sensations that arise from one’s own actions or *kamma*.<sup>430</sup> In *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, feelings are defined as “the mental act of ‘tasting’ or ‘savoring’ the objects of the mind—e.g., taking pleasure or displeasure in them.”<sup>431</sup> He also divides the feelings into three kinds: inner feelings, outer feelings, and feelings in and of themselves, which are defined as:

- A. Inner feelings, in terms of how they feel, are of three kinds—
  1. *Sukha-vedanā*: good moods; a carefree sense of ease or well-being in the mind.
  2. *Dukkha-vedanā*: bad moods; a feeling of sadness, irritation, or depression.
  3. *Upekkhā-vedanā*: neutral moods, during intervals when happiness and sadness are not appearing.
- B. Outer feelings: are also of three kinds—
  1. *Somanassa-vedanā*: pleasure or delight in objects of the six senses— sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas; becoming attracted to and pleased with these things as they come into contact with the heart.
  2. *Domanassa-vedanā*: displeasure or discontent that arises from contact with objects of the senses such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc., as they appear to the eye, ear, nose, tongue, etc., and strike one as unsatisfactory or undesirable.
  3. *Upekkhā-vedanā*: a feeling of indifference or neutrality as one comes into contact with sights, sounds, etc....
- C. Feelings in and of themselves: refers to the act of focusing to investigate any single aspect of the above-mentioned feelings.<sup>432</sup>

Additionally, in *A Refuge in Awakening*, Ajaan Lee lists other types of feelings, such as physical pleasure but mental distress, physical pain but mental pleasure, pleasure both in

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<sup>429</sup> MN 10

<sup>430</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 15; See also *A Refuge in Awakening* in the *Frames of Reference*, 53.

<sup>431</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 26.

<sup>432</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 15–16.

body and mind, or pain both in body and mind.<sup>433</sup> Note that each of these feelings, as he said, can serve as an object for tranquility and insight meditation.<sup>434</sup>

It is crucial to note that Ajaan Lee not only gives the explicit description with regard to taking feelings as a frame of reference that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* neglects to provide, his account on “feelings in and of themselves” is also significantly different from that of the *sutta*. In his treatment, “contemplating feelings in and of themselves” is explained as focusing the investigation on any single aspect of a feeling until the true nature of that particular feeling is uncovered. For instance, when contemplating pleasant feeling in and of itself, one should set one’s mind on investigating only the pleasant feeling once it arises. In other words, the pleasant feeling should be firmly kept in mind and watched after so that it stays with oneself and that one stays within it. Then, he suggests using the powers of focused investigation to examine the truth of this particular feeling, and also using the quality of alertness to watch after the mind to make sure that the awareness stays in place. Ajaan Lee especially emphasizes that during the course of this pleasant-feeling contemplation, one should not let this frame of reference slip away or change to another meditation object. He also suggests that one should not let the mental current that causes stress arise.<sup>435</sup> It is because, as he explains, this mental current, which causes stress, arises only when alertness is weak and the mind vacillates. In his explanation, the vacillation of the mind is called craving for non-becoming (*vibhava-taṇhā*). When the movement becomes stronger, a mental current will arise and go straying out. The current that strays out is called craving for becoming (*bhava-taṇhā*).

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<sup>433</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *A Refuge in Awakening in the Frames of Reference*, 54.

<sup>434</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 28.

<sup>435</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 16.



When this mental current comes across a thought or a sensory object and grabs hold of one, it is called craving for sensuality (*kāma-taṇhā*). And this explanation of the causes of stress is apparently in accordance with the second noble truth described in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion*. In this *sutta*, the causes leading to suffering are delineated in this way: “And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion and delight, relishing now here and now there—i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.”<sup>436</sup>

In Ajaan Lee’s treatment, the process depicting the suffering created by desires, which tends to be caused due to the arising of a feeling, is well portrayed. It appears that the desire is the main cause of suffering rather than the feeling itself. This is in line with the way feeling and craving are treated in the *Paṭiccasamuppāda Vibhaṅga Sutta: An Analysis of Dependent Co-arising*, which states that, “...From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.”<sup>437</sup> As Ajaan Lee says:

When a good mood arises, we want that sense of wellbeing to stay as it is or to increase. This desire gives rise to stress, and so we receive results contrary to what we had hoped for. Sometimes a bad mood arises and we don’t want it, so we struggle to find happiness, and this simply piles on more suffering. Sometimes the heart is neutral—neither happy nor sad, neither pleased nor displeased—and we want to stay that way constantly, or else we start to think that staying neutral is stupid or inane. This gives rise to more desires, and we start to struggle for something better than what we already are.<sup>438</sup>

When “[one] start[s] to struggle for something better,” he means that one is not practicing contemplation on the feelings properly. This is despite the fact that one may be mindful

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<sup>436</sup> SN 56.11. See also *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: The Great Establishing of Mindfulness Discourse* (DN 22), *Atthi Rāga Sutta: Where There is Passion* (SN 12.64), *Paṭiccasamuppāda Vibhaṅga Sutta: An Analysis of Dependent Co-arising* (SN 12.2), *Sacca-vibhaṅga: An Analysis of the Truth* (MN 141), etc.

<sup>437</sup> SN 12.2

<sup>438</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Frames of Reference*, 17.

of the arising of one's feelings. Simply being mindful could not prevent the suffering caused by the desires that arise from feelings. As a consequence, one could not go beyond those feelings. In Ajaan Lee's theory, contemplation on the feelings is properly performed only with the nurture and support of all the three qualities.<sup>439</sup>

Similar to the section on the body, in this frame, alertness, mindfulness, and ardency are again treated with special attention. As he explains, meditators first should firmly establish their alertness, and then use mindfulness to connect the mind with its object. Mindfulness, thus, should be solidly maintained in reference to the contemplative object, and the mind should be watched to make sure that it stays fixed on its one object. And then "focused investigation" is used to examine the contemplating object until the truth is found.<sup>440</sup> Here, *ātappa* ("focused investigation", or ardency) turns into a function, not just of effort, but also of discernment.

Unlike the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which seems to suggest only discerning of the presence of feelings, in his treatment, Ajaan Lee encourages the meditator to investigate the feelings rather than simply being aware of them. This is one of the significant differences between Ajaan Lee's treatment and the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. This point is well described in the *Frames of Reference*. In this treatise, he states that in order to study the truth of the feelings, meditators should carry out investigations on certain feelings that they contemplate by asking questions such as: What does that feeling come from? Or, in what mental moment does that feeling occur? In his instruction, investigation of feelings has two rounds. The first round is to investigate the inner and outer feelings by using the power of analysis to search for the truth of the feelings. The second round is to

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<sup>439</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadhara, *Frames of Reference*, 17.

<sup>440</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadhara, *Frames of Reference*, 17–18.

investigate the feelings in and of themselves by (a) watching the arising of feeling in the present; (b) focusing on the fading of feelings in the present; (c) focusing on the passing away of feelings in the present; (d) staying with the realization that feelings do nothing but arise and fall away.<sup>441</sup> These instructions on investigating feelings appear to elaborate the concise teaching contained in the second stage of the refrain—discerning the origination and passing away of feelings. This corresponds to the meaning of origination in the *sutta*: origination is not just a matter of simply arising but rather a question of causation.

In the course of the contemplation of feelings, the three qualities are also interpreted as the standard threefold training—virtue, concentration, and discernment—in Ajaan Lee’s creative manner.

The alertness that constantly watches after the mind, keeping it at normalcy, making sure that it does not fall into unskillful ways, is virtue. The mindfulness that keeps the mind connected with its object so that it does not slip away to other objects is concentration. The focused investigation that penetrates into each object as it arises so as to know its true nature clearly—knowing both arising and disbanding, as well as non-arising and non-disbanding—is discernment.<sup>442</sup>

“Focused investigation” here is understood as the power of ardency, maintaining the practice with a heedful attitude. This is different from other interpretations that assert that mindfulness cultivation alone would guarantee a successful transformation in one’s spiritual development. It is also different from the commentaries’ position, which equates *sampajañña*—interpreted as comprehension in terms of the three characteristics—as the discernment faculty in mindfulness practice. Here, ardency becomes the discernment faculty.

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<sup>441</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 18.

<sup>442</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 18–19.

In his treatment, Ajaan Lee repeatedly stresses the operation of the three qualities. To him, when the three qualities are fully developed, they will connect with one another to form the path, which then functions on its own with its distinctive duties. Similarly, when dealing with feelings, he says that the co-arising of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency is able to handle all sorts of feelings: past, present, future, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

These three qualities have to arise together in a single mental moment for the Path to come together (*magga-samaṅgī*), and then the Path will function on its own, in line with its duties, enabling you to see clearly and know truly without having to let go of this or work at that, work at this or let go of that, let go of the outside or work at the inside, work at the outside or let go of the inside or whatever.<sup>443</sup>

According to Ajaan Lee, with the support of the three qualities, discernment will have a chance to develop, to clearly see in line with the truth the arising, maintaining, and vanishing of each feeling, and is able to handle them in a way that could prevent the arising of suffering. Only then one is said to have fully mastered the use of feelings as a frame of reference.<sup>444</sup>

To sum up, in *vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* or feelings as a frame of reference, Ajaan Lee not only categorizes the feelings into different groups, he also provides a clear definition for each sort of feeling. In addition, similar to the contemplation of the body, the functions of the three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—are also strongly emphasized in this frame. In his theory, the three qualities play a significant role in the contemplation of feelings, helping one to learn about all aspects of the feelings, and to eventually go beyond them through the power of discernment. In general, Ajaan Lee's presentation of the contemplation of feelings is much longer and more detailed than the

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<sup>443</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 19.

<sup>444</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 19.

*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*’s description. His account has extended and filled in the frame teaching of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which, at some points, does not provide complete explanations. In other words, in his treatises, Ajaan Lee has presented a clearer picture of contemplation of feelings than what is given only as a frame in the *sutta*.

Nevertheless, while Ajaan Lee’s treatment for contemplation on the feelings is apparently based on the outline teachings of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, it does not limit itself to a concise account of the *sutta*. In a number of places, his treatment adds layers of instruction that are not included in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* to help meditators arrive at a better understanding of this frame of reference, such as his explanation of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency; his definition of feelings; the connection between feeling and craving; and the exposition of “feelings in and of themselves.” These are Ajaan Lee’s distinctive contributions.

### **3.7.3 *Cittānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna*: Being Mindful of the Mind as a Frame of Reference**

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, contemplation of mind and contemplation of feelings are the two shortest sections. The *sutta*’s description in this section is similar to the previous frame of reference. In response to the question “How does a monk remain focused on the mind in and of itself?”<sup>445</sup> the *sutta* again seems to stress only the faculty of awareness, as it states that:

There is the case where a monk, when the mind has passion, discerns that the mind has passion. When the mind is without passion, he discerns that the mind is without passion. When the mind has aversion, he discerns that the mind has aversion. When the mind is without aversion, he discerns that the mind is without aversion. When the mind has delusion, he discerns that the mind has delusion. When the mind is without delusion, he discerns that the mind is without delusion.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> MN 10

<sup>446</sup> MN 10

Although the *sutta* continues its description with a list of more explicit mental states, both skillful and unskillful, its explanation remains the same with an instruction that one should be aware of each of these mental states when they arise in the mind. Unskillful mental states include: a mind with passion, a mind with aversion, a mind with delusion, a constricted mind, a scattered mind, an un-enlarged mind, a surpassed mind, a not concentrated mind, and a mind not released. Skillful mental states, in contrast, consist of: a mind without passion, a mind without aversion, a mind without delusion, an enlarged mind, an unsurpassed mind, a concentrated mind, and a mind released.<sup>447</sup> Note that in its description of these skillful and unskillful mental states, the *sutta* does not provide any further instruction on how to abandon or develop them, simply saying that meditator should discern their presence.

Again, as discussed in the *vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, if we did not include the three qualities that are briefly mentioned in the introductory instruction at the beginning of the *sutta*—“[There is the case where a monk] remains focused on the mind in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.”<sup>448</sup>—then it would appear that “discerning” is the only quality that the *sutta* emphasizes in the whole contemplating process. Only when we look at other *suttas* do we see instructions for how skillful and unskillful mental states should be treated once they are discerned.

Similar to the last two frames, in the refrain, the *cittānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* also describes three stages of the practice. The first stage refers to the mind itself at a

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<sup>447</sup> MN 10

<sup>448</sup> MN 10

fundamental level. The second stage refers to events that relate to the mind at this level, such as the phenomenon of origination with regard to the mind, the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the mind, or both. And the third stage refers to the level of non-clinging, which is delineated as: “Or his mindfulness that ‘There is a mind’ is maintained to the extent of knowledge and remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world.”<sup>449</sup> However, it neglects to provide a complete explanation elaborating how each task should be done, and so it seems meditators are expected to explore this for themselves.

Ajaan Lee’s treatment, on the other hand, provides a more detailed explanation than what is included in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In his treatise, Ajaan Lee talks about three aspects of the mind: the mind inside, the mind outside, and the mind in and of itself. “The mind inside” refers to a mental state that arises exclusively in the heart without the stirring of outer preoccupations. “The mind outside,” on the other hand, refers to its interaction with outer preoccupations, such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas. The reason these mental states are called “outside” is because when any of them arises, the mind often goes out and attaches to outer preoccupations, which makes the original state of passion, irritation, or delusion even worse. The mind, in these cases, usually does not truly understand its objects, construing suffering as happiness, not-self as self, or inconstant as constant. Both “the mind inside” and “the mind outside” have three modes—states of passion, irritation, and delusion. He also notes that “the mind inside” and “the mind outside” also cover states of mind free from passion, aversion, and delusion. And, “the mind in and of itself” refers to the act of singling out any one of the

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<sup>449</sup> MN 10

above-mentioned aspects of the mind.<sup>450</sup> Note that with regard to these three aspects of the mind, the *sutta* names them in its refrain but does not make the same distinctions as Ajaan Lee does.

What is distinctive in his treatment of contemplation of mind is again his perspective on how to apply the three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—to a particular mental state to learn and truly understand it. In Ajaan Lee’s theory, these three qualities play a significant role in one’s meditation. As he said, once mindfulness, alertness, and ardency are well established, they will have power to prevent the growth and spreading of existing defilements.

Whichever aspect may be arising in the present, single it out. With your alertness firmly in place, be steadily mindful of that aspect of the mind, without making reference to any other objects—and without letting any hopes or wants arise in that particular mental moment at all. Then focus unwaveringly on investigating that state of mind until you know its truth. The truth of these states is that sometimes, once they have arisen, they flare up and spread; sometimes they die away. Their nature is to arise for a moment and then dissolve away with nothing of any substance or worth. When you are intent on examining things in this way—with your mindfulness, alertness, and powers of focused investigation firmly in place—then none of these defilements, even though they may be appearing, will have the chance to grow or spread.<sup>451</sup>

However, according to Ajaan Lee, not all the mental states should be uprooted, but only the unskillful ones. Skillful mental states—devoid of passion, aversion, and delusion—should be maintained to observe them when they arise so that one can learn the level of the mind.<sup>452</sup> This is another point that not included in the *sutta*. Here he elaborates on an aspect of *cittānupassanā* that is not mentioned in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, but is treated elsewhere in the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

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<sup>450</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 20–21.

<sup>451</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 21.

<sup>452</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 22.



Ajaan Lee's treatise also mentions four levels of good mental states, namely, the level of sensuality, the level of form and the level of formlessness, all of which belong to the mundane level, and then a fourth level, which belongs to the transcendent level. The level of sensuality refers to a skillful mental state that arises and connects with a joyful sensory object: a sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensation, or idea. When the mind associates with these sorts of objects, it becomes happy. In his treatment, Ajaan Lee uses the image of the six levels of the Heaven of Sensual Bliss to describe this state. In Buddhist cosmology, heaven is higher than the human world. There, heavenly beings enjoy their sensual bliss created by their good sensory mental states. However, the lifespan at the Heaven of Sensual Bliss is limited, and when heavenly beings' merit is exhausted, they will fall down to lower realms. At the same time, though, they can go up to higher levels if their cultivation is more skillful.

The level of form, in Ajaan Lee's treatment, refers to the four states of *rūpa jhāna*. It is significant to learn that, in this section, Ajaan Lee provides a complete description of the first *jhāna*, which consists of five factors: directed thought, evaluation, rapture, pleasure, and singleness of mind (*vitakka*, *vicāra*, *pīti*, *sukha*, and *ekaggatārammaṇa*).

A mental state arises from thinking about (*vitakka*) a physical object that serves as the theme of one's meditation; and then analyzing (*vicāra*) the object into its various aspects, at the same time making sure that the mind doesn't slip away from the object (*ekaggatārammaṇa*). When the mind and its object are one in this way, the object becomes light. The mind is unburdened and can let go of its worries. Rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*) arise as a result. When these five factors appear in the mind, it has entered the first *jhāna*—the beginning stage in the level of form.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 23.

Note that the way Ajaan Lee depicts the first *jhāna* in this treatise, as well as the other *jhānas* in other treatises, is identical to the portrayal in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. Throughout his writings, the description of *jhānas* remains unvarying, which reveals his firmly established viewpoint on *jhāna* cultivation.<sup>454</sup> For instance, a similar depiction of the first *jhāna* can be found in *The Craft of the Heart*:

*Jhāna* means focusing the mind, making it absorbed in a single object, such as the form of the body. If you want *jhāna* to arise and not deteriorate, you have to practice until you are skilled. Here's how it's done: Think of a single object, such as the breath. Don't think of anything else. Practice focusing on your single object. Now add the other factors: *Vitakka*—think about the object; and *vicāra*—evaluate it until you arrive at an understanding of it, e.g. seeing the body as unclean or as composed of impersonal properties. The mind then becomes light; the body becomes light; both body and mind feel full and refreshed: This is *pīti*, rapture. The body has no feelings of pain, and the mind experiences no pain: This is *sukha*, pleasure and ease. This is the first level of *rūpa jhāna*, which has five factors: singleness (*ekaggatā*), directed thought, evaluation, rapture, and pleasure. When you practice, start out by focusing on a single object, such as the breath. Then think about it, adjusting and expanding it until it becomes dominant and clear. As for rapture and pleasure, you don't have to fabricate them. They arise on their own. Singleness, directed thought, and evaluation are the causes; rapture and pleasure, the results. Together they form the first level of *jhāna*.<sup>455</sup>

Regarding the five factors of *jhāna*, it is also worth noting that beginning with *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, Ajaan Lee's viewpoint on the meaning of *vicāra* is developed. In “Method 2,” when the breath is used as meditation object, *vicāra* means to adjust the breath and let it spread.<sup>456</sup> Similarly, in the “*Jhāna*” section of *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, he explains *vicāra* as gaining a sense of how to let the comfortable breath sensation spread and connect with the other breath sensation in the body up to the point they all

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<sup>454</sup> Phra Suddhidhammaraṇsī Gambhīramedhācariya, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee* 2, 37–41; See also *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 27–32; *Starting Out Small*, 58; *Inner Strength*, 74; *The Craft of the Heart*, 87–97; *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 31–33; *What is the Triple Gem*, 42–45; and *A Refuge in Awakening in the Frames of Reference*, 58–62.

<sup>455</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Craft of the Heart*, 87–88.

<sup>456</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 22.

connected to one another.<sup>457</sup> Here the function of *vicāra* or evaluation is depicted as playing the role of the faculty of discernment. Ajaan Lee uses various similes, such as a good cook who knows how to vary the food to satisfy her employer,<sup>458</sup> or a babysitter who knows how to look after a small child so that the child grows healthy and happy.<sup>459</sup> *Vicāra* is also being emphasized, as he said its development would include the development of mindfulness and discernment. “If you know how to adjust and vary the breath—if you’re always thinking about and evaluating the breath—you’ll become thoroughly mindful and expert in all matters dealing with the breath and the other elements of the body.”<sup>460</sup> It is clear that, in his meditation theory, right from the beginning of the practice, it is the power of *vicāra* that will decide the development of one’s meditation.

The mundane level, in Ajaan Lee’s treatment, also includes the level of formless attainments (*arūpa jhānas*), which refers to the four levels of formless *jhāna*: the dimensions of the infinitude of space, infinitude of consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception. In the formless states, as Ajaan Lee explains, although the mind is able to let go of its physical object of the form states, it still attaches to a very subtle mental notion, which, as a result, binds the mind there. Despite the fact that Ajaan Lee categorizes these formless states as skillful mental states, he also points out their limitation and provides meditators with insightful instructions to go beyond them.

The *jhāna* of infinite space, for instance, in which you are focused on a sense of emptiness and awareness with no physical object or image passing into your field

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<sup>457</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 27.

<sup>458</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 48.

<sup>459</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 49.

<sup>460</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 48.

of attention, so that you are unable to know its full range. What has actually happened is that you have curled up and are hiding inside. This is not the kind of “going in to know” that comes from finishing your work. It is the “going in to know” that comes from wanting to run away. You have seen the faults of what arises outside you, but have not seen that they really lie buried within you—so you have hidden inside by limiting the field of your attention. Some people, when they reach this point, believe that they have done away with defilement, because they mistake the emptiness for *nibbāna*. Actually, it is only the first stage in the level of formlessness, and so is still on the mundane level.<sup>461</sup>

The supramundane (*lokuttara*) level, on the hand, refers to the noble achievements: stream-entry, once-returner, non-returner, and then arahant as mentioned in the *suttas*.<sup>462</sup> Stream-enterers, in Ajaan Lee’s explanation, begin with the threefold training on the mundane level, but then gain their first true insight into the four noble truths, which helps them uproot the first three fetters: self-identification, doubt, and attachment to precepts and practices.<sup>463</sup> It is important to note that Ajaan Lee’s delineation of stream-entry is very much in line with what recorded in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta: The Water-Snake Simile*,<sup>464</sup> the *Sarakāni Sutta*,<sup>465</sup> or the *Sabbāsava Sutta*: All the Fermentations. In these *suttas*, the stream-enterer is said to attend appropriately to the suffering, its causes, its cessation, and the way leading to the cessation of the suffering. As a result, he or she abandons the first three fetters. “He attends appropriately, This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress. As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: self-identity view, doubt, and grasping at habits and practices.”<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 23–24.

<sup>462</sup> MN118; MN 22; MN 10; DN 22

<sup>463</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 25–26.

<sup>464</sup> MN 22

<sup>465</sup> SN 55.24

<sup>466</sup> MN 2

In this frame of reference, Ajaan Lee also discusses other fruits of the practice, such as “knowledge of previous births,” “knowledge of death and rebirth,” and “knowledge of the ending of mental effluents”<sup>467</sup> as listed in the *sutta*.<sup>468</sup> These intuitive knowledges, as he said, occur only to those who have their mind well trained in concentration.<sup>469</sup> The uniqueness of Ajaan Lee is in his explanation of these knowledges in terms of the arising and passing away of mental states in the present moment.

To know the arising and falling away of mental states of the past is one level of cognitive skill (*vijjā*), and deserves to be called “knowledge of previous births.” To know the states of the mind as they change in the present deserves to be called “knowledge of death and rebirth.” To know how to separate mental states from their objects, knowing the primal nature of the mind, knowing the current or force of the mind that flows to its objects; separating the objects, the current of mind that flows, and the primal nature of the mind: To be able to know in this way deserves to be called “knowledge of the ending of mental effluents.”<sup>470</sup>

It is vital to note that, these knowledges, according to Ajaan Lee, are gained through the power of focused investigation (ardency) as it functions together with the other two qualities. As he explained, “Keep your mindfulness, alertness, and powers of focused investigation firmly in place at the mind. To be able to gain knowledge, you have to use the power of focused investigation, which is an aspect of discernment, to know how mental states arise and fall: pulling out, taking a stance, and then returning into stillness. You must keep your attention fixed on investigating these things constantly in order to be able to know the arising and falling away of mental states—and you will come to know the nature of the mind that doesn’t arise and doesn’t fall away.”<sup>471</sup> Note that, in this section, we again encounter the second feature of the three qualities,

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<sup>467</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 29.

<sup>468</sup> MN 36

<sup>469</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 4.

<sup>470</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 29.

<sup>471</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 28–29.

functioning as tools to gain insightful knowledge in addition to the power of preventing the maintenance of existing defilements, as mentioned above.

This teaching is markedly different from the “bare attention” theory.<sup>472</sup> While “bare attention” requires the power of keeping awareness of a meditation object without adding any mental judgment, Ajaan Lee, on the other hand, suggests using the three qualities to investigate, examine, and study the mental states in order to uncover their truth. His theory requires more active skills and discernment to get the work done rather than merely “bare attention.” And the truth or discernment in Ajaan Lee’s conception of meditation seems to come to light through the power of focused investigation—i.e., arduousness—not through the activity of noting.

In Ajaan Lee’s conception of meditation, when mindfulness, alertness, and arduousness are brought to consummation, these three qualities will transform into intuitive understanding, awareness of release, and liberating insight, respectively, with their distinctive functions. He says that intuitive understanding (*ñāṇa*) then will fathom the cause of stress, whereas liberating insight (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) is able to attentively focus on the truth of stress without letting any other mental states of pleasure or displeasure for its object arise. And the awareness of release (*vijjā-vimutti*) understands the heart thoroughly. This is what Ajaan Lee regards as appropriate knowing.<sup>473</sup>

It is interesting to note that Ajaan Lee’s treatment of contemplation of the mind also includes a section on the four noble truths, which appear in the contemplation on

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<sup>472</sup> Recently, in mental health literature, mindfulness is often taught as bare attention or non-judgmental awareness. This notion of mindfulness is rendered by some modern meditation teachers such as Nyanaponika Thera, Joseph Goldstein, Jon Kabat-Zinn, etc. This interpretation, however, can be traced back to modern Burmese reform movements in the twentieth century, notably in the form of mindfulness that taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw. It will be treated in more detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>473</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *Frames of Reference*, 30.

mental qualities in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In his discussion, Ajaan Lee’s creativity in explaining the *Dhamma* lies in the way he innovatively uses the preoccupation of the mind, the current of the mind, the mental states, and the primal nature of the mind to elaborate the four noble truths.

“The objects or preoccupations of the mind are the truth of stress (*dukkha-sacca*). The current of the mind that flows into and falls for its objects is the truth of the cause of stress (*samudaya-sacca*). The mental state that penetrates in to see clearly the truth of all objects, the current of the mind, and the primal nature of the mind, is called the mental moment that forms the Path (*magga-citta*). To let go of the objects, the mental current, and the nature of the mind, without any sense of attachment, is the truth of the disbanding of stress (*nirodha-sacca*).”<sup>474</sup>

In a separate section at the end of the *cittānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, Ajaan Lee also added a supplemental discussion on the mind. According to him, the word “mind” covers three aspects: the primal nature of the mind, the mental states, and the mental states in interaction with their objects. In his discussion, each aspect of the mind has its own distinct function. “The primal nature of the mind is a nature that simply knows. The current that thinks and streams out from knowing to various objects is a mental state. When this current connects with its objects and falls for them, it becomes a defilement, darkening the mind: This is a mental state in interaction.”<sup>475</sup> It is interesting to learn that the mental states of both types, whether good or evil, as he explains, have to go through the process of arising, disbanding, and dissolving away by their nature. The primal nature of the mind, which is the source of these two types of mental states, on the other hand, is a fixed phenomenon that is always in place, and neither arises nor disbands. The primal nature of the mind, in his theory, means the ordinary, elementary state of knowing in the

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<sup>475</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *Frames of Reference*, 31.

present. Although the primal nature of the mind is radiant, whoever fails to penetrate in to know it would not gain any good from it.<sup>476</sup>

Ajaan Lee also uses these three aspects of the mind to explain *paṭicca samuppāda* or dependent co-arising. In his brief explanation of the nexus of the first two factors of the dependent co-arising, *avijjā*,<sup>477</sup> or ignorance, is explained as not knowing the three aspects of the mind. And, because of this, the mind becomes a fabricator or *saṅkhāra*. In other words, based on a condition of not knowing the primal nature of the mind, not knowing the mental states in interaction with their objects, and not knowing the current that thinks and streams out from the primal nature of knowing, the mind begins to fabricate. However, there is much that he adds that is not present in the *sutta*. Ajaan Lee gives the following explanation of the mind in a state of ignorance:

Thus the name given by the Buddha for this state of affairs is really fitting: *avijjā*—dark knowledge, counterfeit knowledge. This is in line with the terms ‘*pubbante aññāṇam*’—not knowing the beginning, i.e., the primal nature of the mind; ‘*parante aññāṇam*’—not knowing the end, i.e., mental states in interaction with their objects; ‘*majjhantika aññāṇam*’—not knowing the middle, i.e., the current that streams from the primal nature of knowing. When this is the case, the mind becomes a *saṅkhāra*: a fabricator, a magician, concocting prolifically in its myriad ways.<sup>478</sup>

The general framework for this exposition of Ajaan Lee can be found in the *Paṭiccasamuppāda-Vibhaṅga Sutta: Analysis of Dependent Co-arising*, which says that from ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.<sup>479</sup>

It is important to note that this understanding of mind underlies Ajaan Lee’s explanations of inner and outer feelings, mind states and mental qualities. For instance,

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<sup>476</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 31–32.

<sup>477</sup> *Avijjā* is the first causal factor leading up to stress in the dependent co-arising. It is often translated as ignorance, in Ajaan Lee’s discussion, however, means dark knowledge or counterfeit knowledge.

<sup>478</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 32.

<sup>479</sup> SN 12.2; SN 12.61



inner feelings, as he explains, are feelings that arise within the body, whereas outer feelings are feelings that arise when the senses meet with their objects.<sup>480</sup> It also underlies his proactive approach to mindfulness and concentration. It can be said that this discussion on the three aspects of the mind is unique to Ajaan Lee, as it also underlies the general Forest Tradition teachings on the mind as basically active, and certainly more active than the “bare attention” approach.

Ajaan Lee’s treatment of *cittānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* provides clear instructions for contemplating the mind. In his treatment, the mind is approached from three aspects—the mind inside, the mind outside, and the mind in and of itself—with clear explanations for each sort to help the meditator attain a better understanding of the mind. Similar to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Ajaan Lee presents two kinds of mind, skillful and unskillful. However, the distinctive features of Ajaan Lee’s treatment toward the third frame of reference in comparison to the *sutta* are as follows. (1) Ajaan Lee provides detailed elaborations for several teachings related to contemplating of mind that are mentioned only briefly in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, including the skillful and unskillful mind, and the three qualities. Note that similar to his treatment of the first and the second frame of reference, Ajaan Lee’s explanation of the three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—is unique in this section. (2) Whereas the *sutta* describes the fruits of meditation such as the *jhānas* and the four noble truths in the fourth frame, Ajaan Lee presents them in this section, as part of the third frame. His distinctive skill in elaborating the *Dhamma* also can be seen by the way he links scattered pieces together to make obscure points clearer, which can be seen in his skillful explanation of the four

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<sup>480</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 27; *Frames of Reference*, 15–16.

noble truths and dependent co-arising. (3) In addition, Ajaan Lee’s explanation of the three functions of the mind—the primal nature of the mind, mental states, and mental states in interaction with their objects—is especially unique to him. It seems to me that Ajaan Lee’s treatment of the mind in particular or the teaching on the mind of the Thai Forest Tradition in general sees the mind as basically active. This perhaps can explain why his approach to meditation is more active than the “bare attention” or the noting method applied by others.

#### **3.7.4 *Dhammānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna*: Being Mindful of Mental Qualities as a Frame of Reference**

Ajaan Lee’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* closes with the fourth and last frame of reference, *dhammānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*: being mindful of mental qualities as a frame of reference. In order to learn his distinctive interpretations on this particular issue, the following discussion first provides a summary of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*’s exposition and then investigates his treatment.

In *dhammānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* provides five meditation objects for meditators to contemplate, namely, the five hindrances, the five clinging-aggregates, the sixfold internal and external sense media, the seven factors for awakening, and the four noble truths. With regard to the four noble truths, there is a difference between the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Whereas the former gives a brief account, the latter provides a detailed depiction with a special elaboration on the second and third noble truths.<sup>481</sup> However, in the Thai version of the

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<sup>481</sup> R.M.L. Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 44.

Canon, both *suttas* contain this elaboration. In fact, DN 22 and MN 10 are the same in the Thai edition.<sup>482</sup>

Similar to previous frames of reference, it seems that the contemplation on “mental qualities”<sup>483</sup> is also aimed at answering only one part of the *satipaṭṭhāna* formula—what it means to keep something in mind. The frame begins with a question: “how does a monk remain focused on mental qualities in and of themselves?”<sup>484</sup> In its explanation, the *sutta* again underlines exclusively the “discerning” quality, which goes throughout the whole section. The following passage is an example indicating how contemplation on sensual desire, one of the five hindrances, is depicted in the *sutta*.

There is the case where a monk remains focused on mental qualities in and of themselves with reference to the *five hindrances*. And how does a monk remain focused on mental qualities in and of themselves with reference to the five hindrances? There is the case where, there being sensual desire present within, a monk discerns that “There is sensual desire present within me.” Or, there being no sensual desire present within, he discerns that “There is no sensual desire present within me.” He discerns how there is the arising of unarisen sensual desire. And he discerns how there is the abandoning of sensual desire once it has arisen. And he discerns how there is no future arising of sensual desire that has been abandoned. (The same formula is repeated for the remaining hindrances: ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty.)<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna*, written by Bhikkhu Anālayo, shows variations among *Satipaṭṭhāna suttas* recorded in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, *Madhyama-āgama* and the *Majjhima Nikāya*. It appears that the *Majjhima Nikāya* offers more *dhammas* than other collections. For instance, *Satipaṭṭhāna* in the *Ekottarika-āgama* presents only two *dhammas*: the seven factors for awakening and the four *jhānas*. The *Madhyama-āgama*, besides elaborating on the seven factors for awakening as the *Ekottarika-āgama* does, also includes the sense-spheres, hindrances, and awakening factors, but not the four *jhānas*. However, it is important to keep in mind that even though the *Majjhima Nikāya* does not list the four *jhānas* as a separate topic as does the *Ekottarika-āgama*, they appear under right concentration in the section on the four noble truths. See the right concentration presentation in the *Dīgha Nikāya* for more detail. This point is neglected by Bhikkhu Anālayo. For more detail on the variations among the various *sutta* collections see the section on “Contemplation of *Dhammas*” in *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna* (Boston: Windhorse Publications, 2014).

<sup>483</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu renders the word “*dhammas*” in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* as “mental qualities.” Others render it as “one’s thoughts,” or “phenomena.” See Prebish and Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, 52; Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, 87.

<sup>484</sup> MN 10

<sup>485</sup> MN 10

From this description, it seems that “discerning” is the only quality functioning in the contemplating process. However, how to discern the arising, remaining, or disappearing of these mental qualities the *sutta* neglects to explain. The *sutta* also does not explain how to abandon bad mental qualities or how to develop the good ones in a way conducive to concentration. It should be kept in mind that various unskillful mental qualities, such as sensual desire, hatred, or sloth and drowsiness would not be uprooted by “discerning” alone but with the development of other skillful qualities as mentioned in other *suttas*. For instance, the *Āhāra Sutta* provides different methods in dealing with different hindrances, such as contemplating unattractiveness to conquer sensual desire, or developing the four sublime attitudes to subdue ill-will.<sup>486</sup> The *Nīvaraṇa Sutta* recommends developing the four frames of reference to abandon these five hindrances.<sup>487</sup> Similarly, good mental qualities, such as mindfulness, serenity, concentration, etc., would not grow up to consummation merely by the faculty of “discerning” but they need to be cultivated with other factors such as effort, patience, alertness, persistence, and many others. Moreover, the *sutta* also does not provide any explanation to describe the connection between mindfulness and concentration in this frame.

In the refrain appearing at the end of each mental quality, the *sutta* also just provides a concise description stating that one should contemplate inner or outer mental qualities, or any phenomenon that related to the mental quality, etc., without any further explaining what it means by the term or how the task should be carried out.

In this way he remains focused internally on mental qualities in and of themselves, or externally on mental qualities in and of themselves, or both internally and externally on mental qualities in and of themselves. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to mental qualities, on the

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<sup>486</sup> SN 46.51

<sup>487</sup> AN 9.64

phenomenon of passing away with regard to mental qualities, or on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to mental qualities. Or his mindfulness that “There are mental qualities” is maintained to the extent of knowledge and remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on mental qualities in and of themselves with reference to the five hindrances.<sup>488</sup>

Note that in this refrain, although the *sutta* states in brief three stages that depict three different levels of one’s meditation as discussed in the previous frames, it does not provide all the details needed for contemplation of mental qualities in its description.

Ajaan Lee, however, interprets contemplation of mental qualities<sup>489</sup> in a slightly different way. Firstly, he divides them into three types: inner mental qualities, outer mental qualities, and mental qualities in and of themselves, with a clear explanation for each one. In the *Frames of Reference*, Ajaan Lee defines inner mental qualities as the ones that arise in the mind but have not yet streamed out to get involved with any particular external objects.<sup>490</sup> This is in line with his discussion of mind in the previous section. Inner mental qualities, according to this treatise, can be either skillful or unskillful.<sup>491</sup> In contrast, outer mental qualities are those that stream out and fix on external objects after arising in the mind. In other words, “when any mental quality first arises in the mind, it is called an inner quality. When it flares up, grows stronger and streams out to an outer object, it is called an outer quality.”<sup>492</sup> In his instruction, skillful

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<sup>488</sup> MN 10

<sup>489</sup> As noted above Ajaan Lee in his treatises does not translate the word “*dhamma*” into another Thai word because the Thai tends to absorb Pāli words into their language. It is Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu who renders “*dhammas*” in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* as “mental qualities” when he translates Ajaan Lee’s books into English. As for how the four noble truths and six sense media could be mental qualities, he explains, one should notice what the discussion in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* focuses on in each case. It is the fetters in the case of the six-sense media and craving in the context of the four noble truths. (Personal communication, July 2019).

<sup>490</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 34.

<sup>491</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 33.

<sup>492</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 34.

mental qualities such as the five factors of *jhāna* should be developed, and unskillful ones, i.e., the five hindrances, should be abandoned.<sup>493</sup> Focusing on mental qualities in and of themselves is the act of focusing on any particular mental quality and investigating it until one gains true insight into it.<sup>494</sup> The true insight here refers to the intuitive knowledge that arises after the factors of concentration have been developed, such as the knowledge in terms of the four noble truths and other supernatural abilities.<sup>495</sup>

Secondly, unlike the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which presents several mental qualities in the last frame of reference, Ajaan Lee's treatment often discusses the five hindrances and the *jhānas*<sup>496</sup> as a way to explain his conception of the contemplation of mental qualities. In his elaboration in the *Frames of Reference*, the five hindrances can be either inner or outer mental qualities. For example, he said, when the mind gives rise to sensual desire but has not streamed out to fix its desires on any particular object, it is classed as an inner mental quality. However, when sensual desire, having arisen, streams out to an external object, it is then called an outer mental quality.<sup>497</sup> In both cases, the five hindrances are always treated as unskillful mental qualities<sup>498</sup> which are obstacles to the development of *jhāna*, liberating insight, and the transcendent.<sup>499</sup> In order to eliminate these unskillful mental qualities, according to Ajaan Lee, meditators must first center the mind in concentration. Perhaps this is the reason he discusses the *jhānas* or explains the

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<sup>493</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 30–33. See also Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *A Refuge in Awakening in the Frames of Reference*, 57–61.

<sup>494</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 35.

<sup>495</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 33–34.

<sup>496</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 30–33. See also Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *A Refuge in Awakening in the Frames of Reference*, 57–61. As Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu explains, another reason that he uses the term “mental qualities” to translate the word “*dhamma*” is because Ajaan Lee's treatment of the last frame of reference only discusses the five hindrances and the *jhānas*.

<sup>497</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 33–34.

<sup>498</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 33.

<sup>499</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 35.

importance of centering the mind right after the five hindrances. In his theory, concentration is seen as a cure for the five hindrances. To develop concentration, meditators have to develop the three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and the power of focused investigation.<sup>500</sup> His exposition on this point again illustrates the inseverable relationship between the cultivation of mindfulness and concentration.

Thirdly, in contrast to the *sutta*, which emphasizes only the “discerning” quality, Ajaan Lee’s treatment of the contemplation of mental qualities again underlines the roles of all the three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. The following example is his instruction for the way one should carry out the contemplation on the mental qualities in and of themselves:

Suppose that sensual desire has appeared: Keep your alertness firmly in place at the heart, and use your mindfulness to keep the mind on the phenomenon. Do not waver, and do not let any hopes or wishes arise. Keep your mind firmly in one place. Do not go dragging any other objects in to interfere. Focus your powers of ardent investigation down on nothing but the quality appearing in the present. As long as you have not gained clear, true insight into it, do not let up on your efforts. When you can do this, you are developing mental qualities in and of themselves as a frame of reference.<sup>501</sup>

Ajaan Lee argues that when these three qualities are fully cultivated, they not only can assist the development of concentration, but also become a condition for the realization of genuine happiness.<sup>502</sup> The functions of the three qualities are explained as follows:

*Sampajañña*: alertness. Always have this firmly in place.  
*Sati*: mindfulness. Keep the mind in firm reference to whatever quality has arisen within it. Watch after the quality to keep it with the mind; watch after the mind to make sure that it does not lose aim and go slipping off to other objects. Once you see that the mind and its object have become compatible with each other, use—*Ātappa*—the power of focused investigation—to get to the facts of the quality. If you have not yet gained clear and true insight, do not relax your efforts. Keep focusing and investigating until the power of your discernment is concentrated

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<sup>500</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 35–36.

<sup>501</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 35.

<sup>502</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 35.

and strong, and you will come to know that mental qualities—whether inner, outer, or in and of themselves—simply arise, fade and disband.<sup>503</sup>

Mindfulness, alertness, and ardency occupy an important position in Ajaan Lee's soteriological theory, too. He says that these three qualities should be made permanent features in the heart to develop virtue, concentration, and discernment. Then one would have a chance to experience for oneself what the Buddha calls true happiness, the quality free from fabrication.<sup>504</sup>

It should be noted that *dhammānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* is also another frame of reference that shows Ajaan Lee's rendering the quality of *ātappa* as the discernment factor. This can be seen, for example, in his distinct approach in handling mental preoccupations. Whereas many people believe that even before starting to meditate and train the mind one has to abandon all mental preoccupations, Ajaan Lee instructs meditators to investigate right at the particular spot where the mind is engaged with those preoccupations—which is where the delusion lies—until the truth is uncovered. According to him, it is the power of investigation that helps meditators to penetrate into the nature of the mind to uproot ignorance. And ignorance is the fundamental cause of the cycle of death and rebirth and the condition of fabrication, which, in turn gives rise to mental preoccupations.<sup>505</sup>

In short, Ajaan Lee's treatment of *dhammānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* provides a specific instruction on how to cultivate mental qualities with the aid of the three qualities. Again, his emphasis of the three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—is one of the most distinctive features in the section. These instructions reflect the experience of

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<sup>503</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddhara, *Frames of Reference*, 35–36.

<sup>504</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddhara, *Frames of Reference*, 36–37.

<sup>505</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddhara, *Frames of Reference*, 37–39.



someone who is advanced on the path. They are evidence of the depth of his meditation skills, and are not simply a one-size standard formula meant to be repeated.

In comparison with the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*’s description, Ajaan Lee’s treatment again has a few unique features. In general, it can be said that although the *sutta* lists more mental qualities than Ajaan Lee’s treatment, it does not provide as detailed an account elaborating how the task should be done as Ajaan Lee does. What is more, whereas Ajaan Lee clearly defines three kinds of mental qualities—inner mental qualities, outer mental qualities, and mental qualities in and of themselves—the *sutta* only mentions these terms without further explanations. Ajaan Lee’s treatment, in addition, gives a more precise explanation of mental qualities in and of themselves, in which meditators are taught to keep focusing on one mental quality and investigating it until they gain the true understanding of that particular mental quality. The *sutta*, on the other hand, simply mentions that one should contemplate “the phenomenon of origination with regard to mental qualities, the phenomenon of passing away with regard to mental qualities, or both,” but does not provide any further detail to explain what meditators should do. Furthermore, in his treatment, Ajaan Lee shows an inseverable connection between mindfulness and concentration as he says that the cultivation of good mental qualities like the five factors of *jhāna* will lead to concentration, which, in return can suppress the five hindrances and also promote conditions for the arising of liberating insight as well. Neither the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* nor the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* illustrate the clear association between mindfulness and concentration other than listing the *jhānas* under the fourth noble truth.

### 3.8 Conclusion

The analysis of all four frames of reference reveals the significance of the three qualities—*sati* (mindfulness), *sampajañña* (alertness), and *ātappa* (ardency)—in Ajaan Lee’s treatment. In each section, these three qualities are repeatedly mentioned with detailed elaboration, as they seem to have been knitted together to form the backbone in Ajaan Lee’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. This reflects his unique perspective on the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, which is often neglected by other teachers.<sup>506</sup>

As the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* consists of these three particular qualities, it is unlikely to be considered the kind of “bare attention” “mindfulness” practice that has been interpreted and promoted by some scholars and meditation teachers. According to Ajaan Lee, even the word mindfulness alone could not fully render *satipaṭṭhāna*. Thus, in order to fully capture the phrase, one should carefully consider its whole context rather than just its title sentence. Each *satipaṭṭhāna* thus requires the involvement of several qualities, whose participation would help the cultivation of *satipaṭṭhāna* achieve its desired goal; *satipaṭṭhāna* is not the pursuit of any single exercise for its own sake, such as mindfulness or “bare attention.”

The way Ajaan Lee places considerable emphasis on the three qualities throughout his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is similar to what presented in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. However, whereas the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* merely mentions the three qualities briefly with no further explanations, Ajaan Lee defines them in detail.

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<sup>506</sup> A few examples include Thich Nhat Hanh, *Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*; Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*; Edward Conze, *Buddhist Meditation*; Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering*, 2nd ed. (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994); Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation: A Basic Buddhist Mindfulness Exercise*, trans. U Pe Thin (San Francisco: Unity Press, 1971).

The discussion in this chapter was intended to answer a question that was raised in the beginning, namely, whether Ajaan Lee’s elaborations of these three qualities accords with the *suttas*’ perspective. This calls for an investigation to learn if the three qualities are treated with any special attention elsewhere in the canonical literature, which has been done in Chapter Two. As discussed in Chapter Two, the examination of the *Sutta Piṭaka* shows that these three qualities have been explicitly elaborated in other *suttas* in greater detail compared to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In those *suttas*, the functions and definitions of *sati* (mindfulness), *sampajañña* (alertness), and *ātappa* (ardency) are clearly indicated, which help meditators have a better idea of what the *suttas* meant by rendering these terms in a practical meditation context. It is crucial to learn that Ajaan Lee’s articulation of these three qualities is fundamentally in line with those *suttas*. Like those *suttas*, throughout his treatment, *sati* and *sampajañña* are elaborated as neutral qualities, whereas *ātappa* is identified as the discernment factor.

With regard to the explanation of the quality of *ātappa*, it is important to note that Ajaan Lee has developed a theory that goes even further beyond the *suttas*. Whereas the *suttas*’ definition of *ātappa* simply implies the principle of right view and right resolve, the power of “focused investigation” that Ajaan Lee explains can not only be used to foster the development of concentration and discernment but is also effective and essential for the achievement of ultimate liberation. In the *kāyānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, *ātappa* is the power that helps generate a sense of dismay and detachment toward the body, which brings the mind to concentration and gives rise to liberating insight. In the *vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, *ātappa* is the power that penetrates into each feeling to know its true nature—both arising and disbanding as well as non-arising and non-

disbanding. In the *cittānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, *ātappa* is the power that helps meditators gain many special knowledges, such as knowledge of previous births, knowledge of death and rebirth, knowledge of the ending of mental effluents. In the *dharmānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, *ātappa* is the power that helps meditators see the unfabricated quality.

In general, Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is a treatment of body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. These four frames of reference are what the *suttas* utilize to explain the faculty of mindfulness. Compared to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which provides a concise description for each frame of reference, Ajaan Lee's treatment gives a relatively detailed and clear exposition. However, the variations between Ajaan Lee's treatment and the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* are attributable more to the way he presents the teachings rather than any difference in underlying philosophical understanding. For instance, in the contemplation on the body, Ajaan Lee places the contemplation of the thirty-two parts of the body and its foulness before breath meditation, the reverse of their order in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In the contemplation on the mind, Ajaan Lee presents the *jhānas* and the four noble truths, which actually appear in the last frame of reference in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. And, whereas the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* gives several mental qualities in the contemplation on *dharmas*, Ajaan Lee's treatment delineates only the five hindrances and the *jhānas*.

This investigation also demonstrates that Ajaan Lee's treatment seems to fill in details for what is given only as a bare framework in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and this actually makes them easier to understand. In other words, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* answers questions about only one part of the *satipaṭṭhāna* formula—what it means to keep the something in mind. It does not attempt to explain the rest of the formula, which is what

Ajaan Lee is trying to do. His additions, as illustrated, are largely consistent with other *suttas*, which do describe such things. Another example can be seen in the way he describes mindfulness and concentration as two different aspects of a single practice, rather than two radically separate practices. This point is demonstrated in particular by the way he shows how the practice of any of the four frames of reference will lead to concentration or *jhāna*, a central theme in his meditation teaching. His treatment of mindfulness and concentration is in accord with other *suttas* such as the *Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta* (MN 44) and the *Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta* (MN 117), which confirm that the four frames of reference are the themes of right concentration. This reveals his familiarity with the Canon, which was still not widely available in print during his time. Perhaps studying for the *Dhamma* exams and his subscription to the Dhammayut magazine, where many *sutta* translations were included, provided him a chance to access the Canon. As a consequence, he adjusts his teaching so that it is more in line with the *suttas*. Ajaan Lee's faithful representation of the *suttas*' meanings stands out when compared to other Thai Forest ajaans of his time.

The distinctive meditation theory that Ajaan Lee developed in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* can be said a combination of his intensive training with Ajaan Mun, his primary teacher in the forest; his formal monastic education; his self-study through subscribing to the Dhammayut magazines; together with his own personal insight gained through the practice in the wilderness. His active approach in training the mind has set himself apart from the "bare attention" practices which tend to be more passive. In order to highlight the differences between these two approaches, the next chapter will discuss Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

## Chapter Four: Mahāsi Sayādaw's Treatment of *Satipaṭṭhāna*

“When a Yogi has fully developed the Insights into Impermanence, Suffering, and Absence of A Self, he will realize Nirvana. From time immemorial Buddhas, Arhats and holy Ones realized Nirvana by this means of Vipassanā. It is a high way leading to Nirvana. As a matter of fact, Vipassanā consists of the four Applications of Mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhānas*) and is therefore the high way to Nirvana.”<sup>507</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

Burma has become a well-known cradle of *vipassanā* meditation since the last century. Throughout the country, thousands of meditation centers have been established, attracting a large number of people from the region and from overseas. Starting in the colonial period in the nineteenth century, many Burmese monks strongly promoted *vipassanā* meditation. This type of meditation expanded beyond monastic circles to form a mass lay meditation movement.<sup>508</sup> Among the renowned meditation teachers in Burma, Mahāsi Sayādaw is one of the most influential figures in modern meditation circles. His technique was promoted by the country's Prime Minister U Nu (1907-1995).<sup>509</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw dedicated most of his productive years to teaching meditation. Many of his instructions have been recorded and transcribed into meditation guidebooks, which have been widely used both in the East and the West. Over the course of his meditation teaching, Mahāsi Sayādaw, following his predecessors, enthusiastically advocated *vipassanā* or insight meditation. It is important to note that this *vipassanā* meditation is actually an interpretation of *satipaṭṭhāna*—the establishing of mindfulness.<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>507</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation: A Basic Buddhist Mindfulness Exercise*, trans. U Pe Thin (San Francisco: Unity Press, 1971), 34.

<sup>508</sup> Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 161. See also Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 15–55.

<sup>509</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 161. See also Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 255; Wilson, *Mindful America*, 24; Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 29. Robinson, Johnson, and Ṭhānissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 157–158.

<sup>510</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34. See also Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, trans. U. Pe Thin and Myanaung U. Tin (Rangoon, Burma: Department of Religious Affairs, 1979), 5–6.

In his explanation of *vipassanā* meditation, which he claimed would lead to awakening within a short period of time,<sup>511</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw acknowledges the importance of virtue, concentration, and discernment. Among these three, he puts the greatest emphasis on the development of discernment, the most important factor, in his view. The discernment that he refers to is the insight into the three characteristics—impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and “no-self”<sup>512</sup> (*anattā*)—of matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*).<sup>513</sup> This insight occupies a central place in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory because, as he says, when it is fully developed, nirvana will be achieved.<sup>514</sup> For this reason, Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* can be said to be aimed at developing this liberating insight through the realization of the three characteristics of matter and mind. This is the most significant feature of Mahāsi Sayādaw’s teaching. Another noteworthy point in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is the deemphasis of right concentration or the *jhānas*. The *jhānas* play no role in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s *vipassanā* meditation theory and are totally ignored. This is what is understood by his claims that only momentary concentration is sufficient for the realization of liberating insight.<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34. See also Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, trans. Maung Tha Noe (Rangoon, Burma: Buddha Sasananuggaha Organization, 1981), 67; Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 262–63.

<sup>512</sup> Like the commentaries, Mahāsi Sayādaw also explains the doctrine of *anattā* as no-self teaching. This is different from the *suttas*. See Chapter Two for the discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries on this point.

<sup>513</sup> I tend to agree with Thānissaro Bhikkhu that it is more accurate to render them as three perceptions instead of three characteristics. However, in order to avoid unnecessary confusion with the usage in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatises, the term three characteristics remains in use here. For more detail on the discussion of the term three characteristics, see Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Meditation 4* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2008), 177–181; *In the Elephant’s Footprint* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2018), 40–53; and *The Buddha’s Teachings* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2016), 18–19.

<sup>514</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34.

<sup>515</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, trans. Vipassanā Metta Foundation Translation Committee (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2016), 46–49; Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight: Treatise on Buddhist Satipaṭṭhāna Meditation*, trans. Nyānaponika Thera, 3rd ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), 5–8. See also Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 255; and Fronsdaal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 166.

Some key questions that may arise in the minds of scholars or meditators who are interested in exploring Mahāsi Sayādaw’s meditation conception are: What was Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* or right mindfulness? How did Mahāsi Sayādaw use *satipaṭṭhāna* to develop insight? In an attempt to rightly comprehend Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, this chapter will try to tackle these questions. In addition, the chapter will also examine other significant features of Mahāsi Sayādaw’s meditation theory such as the role of concentration in the path to awakening in bare insight meditation theory, as well as the factors that might have shaped his understanding of liberating insight. Furthermore, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw claims that his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is in accord with the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the *Visuddhimagga*, scholars such as L. S. Cousins argue that bare insight meditation is actually based on a view in the *Visuddhimagga* that can be traced further to the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*.<sup>516</sup> Therefore, this chapter will also investigate whether Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is aligned with the *Visuddhimagga*’s teachings or based on the *satipaṭṭhāna* teaching recorded in the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

Before examining Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* in detail, a brief summary of some significant points in his meditation theory are provided here. First of all, it should be noted that Mahāsi Sayādaw, in his meditation treatises such as *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, *Practical Insight Meditation*, or *The Progress of Insight*, equates mindfulness with a precise noting of fleeting mental and physical activities. Meditators are instructed to unremittingly pursue the noting until certain physiological and psychological reactions are produced that are identified with the stages

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<sup>516</sup> Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 35–58.



of insight delineated in the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>517</sup> This technique has been called the “Mahāsi method.”<sup>518</sup> Although in his treatise Mahāsi Sayādaw claims that his teaching of *vipassanā* is the teaching of the four *satipaṭṭhāna*,<sup>519</sup> his explanation seems neither in accord with the teachings the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* nor the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and not quite in line with other *suttas* that include more general explanations of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*.

One of the most noticeable discrepancies is where the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and other *suttas* emphasize the importance of *jhānas* or right concentration,<sup>520</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*—or rather, his dry insight meditation—downplays the role of concentration to the point that only momentary concentration is sufficient for the realization of nibbana to take place. Unlike the general view in the *suttas*, which suggests that *samatha* and *vipassanā* can be developed simultaneously or in either order, Mahāsi Sayādaw advocates the practice of exclusive *vipassanā* or dry *vipassanā*, dispensing with the traditional preliminary practice of tranquility (*samatha*).<sup>521</sup> This likely accounts for why Mahāsi Sayādaw and other Burmese meditation teachers who share the same view call their contemplative training “insight meditation” so as to distinguish their technique from other forms of meditation. However, this dry insight approach is not an invention of Mahāsi Sayādaw or other Burmese meditation teachers.<sup>522</sup> These methods, actually, are recorded in the work of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, the

<sup>517</sup> Robinson, Johnson, and Thānissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 157.

<sup>518</sup> A loose term used by Gil Fronsdal and other scholars. See Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 166.

<sup>519</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 5–8; *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34.

<sup>520</sup> DN 22

<sup>521</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practising Kammatthāna Meditation*, trans. U Min Swe (Rangoon, Burma: Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Organization, 1980), 6; Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 166.

<sup>522</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 86.

*Visuddhimagga*. In *The Origins of Insight Meditation*, an investigation of the literary sources of the Burmese *vipassanā* meditation, L.S. Cousins traces the method further to the *Paṭisambhidā-magga*, a commentary written in the second century BC.<sup>523</sup> The notion of “dry *vipassanā*,” however, has no source in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. Throughout the *suttanta* literature, the path to awakening has always been depicted with right concentration, often described as the four *jhānas*, as the last factor of the noble eightfold path. Mahāsi Sayādaw perhaps might not have noticed this discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries when he claimed that his teaching is based on both sources.

Another discrepancy between Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* and that of the *suttas* can be seen in his interpretation of *sampajañña*, which is one of the key factors in his teaching of mindfulness. Whereas the *suttas* explain *sampajañña* simply as being alert to the activities of the mind and body as they arise, remain, or disband,<sup>524</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw interprets it as clear-comprehension in term of the three characteristics. This exposition of *sampajañña* is in line with the commentaries. Moreover, whereas the *suttas* identify the knowledge that triggers awakening as coming from the direct understanding of the four noble truths, which may arise in any of the *jhānas*,<sup>525</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw follows the commentaries in identifying the knowledge in terms of the three characteristics.<sup>526</sup> Another point of divergence between the two is that whereas the *suttas* explain *satipaṭṭhāna* (frames of reference) as body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities,

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<sup>523</sup> Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 35–58.

<sup>524</sup> SN 47.35

<sup>525</sup> DN 2

<sup>526</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34; Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practising Kammatthāna Meditation*, 23.

Mahāsi Sayādaw teaches bare insight meditation in terms of matter and mind (*rūpa* and *nāma*). This way of explanation is more closely aligned with the *Visuddhimagga*.

By and large, Mahāsi Sayādaw's depiction of *satipaṭṭhāna* or *vipassanā* is relatively distinctive. Many of his meditation theories appear to take the flavor of the commentaries, especially the *Visuddhimagga*, as he declares in his treatise the *Practical Insight Meditation*,<sup>527</sup> despite the fact that as an erudite Pāli scholar monk, Mahāsi Sayādaw might have had access to a variety of meditation materials in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. This is likely the consequence of favoring the commentarial studies over the *suttas*, a phenomenon that has been widespread in Burma for centuries. It is probably one of the main reasons for differentiating Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation theory from others whose interpretations are based on the *suttanta* teachings.

To address the issues that arise in Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, this chapter first reviews the development of the *vipassanā* meditation movement in Burma and considers some common meditation techniques taught by modern-day Burmese *vipassanā* teachers before examining the life and meditation writings of Mahāsi Sayādaw.

## **4.2 *Vipassanā* Meditation in Burma up to the Time of Its Promotion by Prime Minister U Nu**

Before the burgeoning of the *vipassanā* movement, there were two conflicting beliefs within the Burmese Buddhist community recorded in the Burmese Buddhist Chronicles about the possibility of awakening in the Burmese *saṅgha*: either there were *arahants* alive or there weren't. As Patrick Arthur Pranke notes in his dissertation, "The

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<sup>527</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 7.

Treatise on the Lineage of Elders (*Vaṃsadīpanī*): Monastic Reform and the Writing of Buddhist History in Eighteenth-Century Burma,” the *Vaṃsadīpanī* (c. 1797) and *Sāsanasiddhidīpaka* (1784) take for granted claims that there are no arahants in the *saṅgha*, whereas the *Thathanalikhara Sadan* (1831) says that it is possible to attain awakening through meditation and the *Sasanavamsa* (1861) even assures that there are living arahants in the *saṅgha*.<sup>528</sup>

In the early eighteenth century (1720s and 1730s), a *vipassanā* movement was advocated by Waya-zaw-ta, a monk who lived in the Sagaing Hills, soon to become a historic center of monastic life in Burma. Soon after he died, however, the movement was suppressed.<sup>529</sup> Vernacular meditation manuals are believed to have been written down for the first time in 1754 by Taung-lei-lon Sayādaw.<sup>530</sup> According to Erik Braun, in his research on Ledi Sayādaw and *Abhidhamma*, the most that can be said about these isolated accounts is that prior to the nineteenth century, monks and perhaps the laity as well were interested in meditation. A passing historical glance certainly suggests that further in-depth examination in this area would be beneficial in providing more understanding of the subject.

During the reign of King Mindon (1808-1878), meditation gained some popularity in the court, at least by way of scholarly writing. King Mindon and one of his

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<sup>528</sup> Patrick Arthur Pranke, “The Treatise on the Lineage of Elders (*Vaṃsadīpanī*): Monastic Reform and the Writing of Buddhist History in Eighteenth-Century Burma” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2004), 26–29. See also Erik Christopher Braun, “Ledi Sayādaw, *Abhidhamma*, and the Development of the Modern Insight Meditation Movement in Burma” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2008), 305; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 29.

<sup>529</sup> Braun, “Ledi Sayādaw, *Abhidhamma*, and the Development of the Modern Insight Meditation Movement in Burma,” 305; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 28–29.

<sup>530</sup> Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 197. See also Braun, “Ledi Sayādaw, *Abhidhamma*, and the Development of the Modern Insight Meditation Movement in Burma,” 305; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 29.

queens commissioned several texts on meditation, and the Yaw Atwin Wun minister U Hpo Hlaing (1830-1883), an advisor of the royals, even wrote three books on meditation. In addition to the emphasis on meditation text publishing in the court, meditation practice also increased in Burmese society. In Htut-kaung Sayādaw (1798-1890) received patronage from Mindon's chief queen and apparently more than 300 students came to study meditation with him.<sup>531</sup> Hngettwin Sayādaw (1831-1910), who had a great impact on the reform of the Burmese *saṅgha*, also emphasized meditation practice in his program. It is interesting to learn that these monks and many others had formed a monastic movement in the Sagaing Hills. They all showed an interest in meditation practice and ascetic life as well. The spread of meditation can also be seen in the writings of lay people. The *General Catalogue of Books*, the list of publications preserved by the British colonial government in Burma, records at least three lay authors, and many other monks, who produced meditation books.<sup>532</sup>

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writing on *vipassanā* meditation continued to develop. This can be seen especially in the work of Ledi Sayādaw (1846-1923). Ledi Sayādaw was probably one of the most well-known meditation teachers during this time. He traveled across the country and wrote various treatises to promote meditation. Braun notes the huge impact of Ledi Sayādaw on the *vipassanā* movement at that time. His writings tapped into an ongoing and growing interest. He also developed an approach to meditation that highlighted lay involvement and particularly the use of the *Abhidhamma*. Ledi Sayādaw and Mingun Sayādaw are

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<sup>531</sup> Houtman, "Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma," 269–70; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 30.

<sup>532</sup> Braun, "Ledi Sayādaw, *Abhidhamma*, and the Development of the Modern Insight Meditation Movement in Burma," 305–308; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 30–34.

believed to have pointed the interest in meditation in specific directions, especially the development of the lay meditation movement.<sup>533</sup>

Mingun Sayādaw (1870-1955) was another influential meditation teacher in Burma. Although Mingun Sayādaw, as noted by Braun, neither traveled nor put his work into writing as extensively as Ledi Sayādaw, he was the first person to teach meditation to lay people in a group setting. One of the reasons Mingun Sayādaw became well known was because he trained Mahāsi Sayādaw, who then gained even greater popularity due to the promotion of prime minister U Nu (1907-1995).<sup>534</sup> The fact that Mingun Sayādaw was Mahāsi Sayādaw's teacher can also be seen in Mahāsi Sayādaw's writings, in which he mentions that the method he teaches actually came from Mingun Sayādaw, and was not his own invention.<sup>535</sup> Indeed, Mingun Sayādaw's promotion of meditation to the laity on a large scale had a great impact on the way Mahāsi Sayādaw set up his system. Besides these two important figures, other well-known meditation teachers of this period were Sunlun Sayādaw (1877-1952), Kan-ni Sayādaw (1879-1966), Webu Sayādaw (1895-1977), and Mogok Sayādaw (1899-1962), just to name a few.<sup>536</sup> Apparently, by the time of Mahāsi Sayādaw, *vipassanā* meditation can be said already firmly developed and widely spread in Burma.

Many of the more influential teachers had a strong interest in the *Abhidhamma*, and as such, they developed their meditation methods based on the commentarial theory. Generally speaking, their *vipassanā* meditation methods promoted quick awakening by

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<sup>533</sup> Braun, "Ledi Sayādaw, *Abhidhamma*, and the Development of the Modern Insight Meditation Movement in Burma," 316; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 150–169.

<sup>534</sup> Braun, "Ledi Sayādaw, *Abhidhamma*, and the Development of the Modern Insight Meditation Movement in Burma," 316; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 160–62.

<sup>535</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 6–7.

<sup>536</sup> Houtman, "Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma," 13. See also Braun, "Ledi Sayādaw, *Abhidhamma*, and the Development of the Modern Insight Meditation Movement in Burma," 316.

using dry insight, a method that forgoes *jhāna*. This tendency was widespread in Burma during this time, and gave shape to meditation theory for the next generation of meditation teachers, including Mahāsi Sayādaw.

### **4.3 Common Meditation Techniques Taught by *Vipassanā* Teachers in Burma**

The insight meditation that has been taught in Burmese Theravāda Buddhism is relatively varied and diverse, as different teachers developed and continue to develop their distinct techniques. Up to the present day, the insight meditation methods advocated by Mahāsi Sayādaw,<sup>537</sup> S. N. Goenka, and Pa Auk Sayādaw have become three discrete lineages that are the well-known to people in the East and the West.<sup>538</sup> S.N. Goenka (1924-2013) was an Indian Burmese student of the lay Burmese *vipassanā* teacher U Ba Khin (1899-1971), who studied with Saya Thetgyi, a disciple of Ledi Sayādaw. In Goenka's method, *vipassanā* is presented as a scientific method of mind-training rather than a religious practice and is generally free of any sectarian flavor. It has been successfully adapted for non-Buddhist circles, and has become a popular technique taught in prisons. However, the Goenka model tends to avoid the Buddhist label and he did not encourage his followers to make any lifelong commitment to monasticism.<sup>539</sup> Goenka's technique became known sometime after the Mahāsi method had already become widespread.

Goenka's approach is divided into two main steps. The first step is to develop a certain level of tranquility through mindfulness of breathing, which serves as a

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<sup>537</sup> The Mahāsi method will be discussed when we examine his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

<sup>538</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation," 25.

<sup>539</sup> Robinson, Johnson, and Thānissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 142. See also Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 159–60.

foundation of the practice. Unlike Ajaan Lee, mindfulness of breathing in Goenka's approach does not encourage adjusting the breath but instead, one just observes its natural flow. The second step is observing bodily sensations with equanimity followed by repeatedly scanning the body from top to bottom. This practice is said to lead to a penetrative awareness of body and mind.<sup>540</sup> Goenka, in an attempt to promote his technique, boldly characterized it as being handed down without any change since the time of the Buddha: "Five centuries after the Buddha, the noble heritage of *Vipassanā* had disappeared from India. The purity of the teaching was lost elsewhere as well. In the country of Myanmar, however, it was preserved by a chain of devoted teachers. From generation to generation, over two thousand years, this dedicated lineage transmitted the technique in its pristine purity."<sup>541</sup> However, despite claims to purity and unbroken ties to the Buddha, Goenka's theory actually appears to be shaped by the *Abhidhamma* teaching that was promoted by Ledi Sayādaw and developed by his teacher U Ba Khin. One example of *Abhidhamma* influence is the practice of focusing on the *kalāpas*, the basic subatomic structures out of which all physical matter is composed. Observing such fleeting entities, which come into existence and then just as quickly disappear, is said to help meditators realize the three characteristics: there is direct proof of *anicca*. The use of *kalāpas*, as Braun noted, indicates a strong connection with the *Abhidhamma*. The existence of such entities is first presented in the *Abhidhamma* commentaries.<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation," 26.

<sup>541</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 159. See also the website of Goenka's *vipassanā* tradition. *Vipassanā* Research Institute, "What is *Vipassanā*," Vridhamma.org, May 23, 2020, <https://www.vridhamma.org/What-is-Vipassana>.

<sup>542</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 157–9. As Braun notes in the footnotes, although Ledi Sayādaw discusses the *kalāpas*, their use in meditation is U Ba Khin's innovation. See Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 226–27, and Ledi 1995, 450–51.



The teaching of Pa Auk Sayādaw (1934—) have also become widely known at present. Meditators at Pa Auk’s centers are often recommended to first develop the *jhānas* by practicing any of the forty *samatha* subjects listed in the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>543</sup> With regard to *jhāna* cultivation, Pa Auk Sayādaw seems to follow closely the *Visuddhimagga*. For instance, followers of this tradition believe that the emergence of “counterpart images” is said to come from the development of “laser-like” “unwavering focus”<sup>544</sup> at a “tiny spot.”<sup>545</sup> The mind will then become suspended from receiving sensory input as it becomes “extremely focused.”<sup>546</sup> According to Pa Auk adherents, meditators should not let their attention leave the meditation object but should always maintain that attention at the tiny focal point at all time.<sup>547</sup> Afterward, *vipassanā* meditation will proceed. However, similar to the Mahāsi method, Pa Auk Sayādaw also provides a dry insight meditation approach that omits the cultivation of *jhānas*. But while the Mahāsi method requires momentary concentration as a foundation for dry insight meditation, Pa Auk’s teaching asks meditators to develop access concentration by contemplating the four elements—earth, water, fire, and wind—prior to the development of *vipassanā*.

Similar to the Mahāsi method, the aim of *vipassanā* meditation in Pa Auk’s teaching is to discern the three characteristics—impermanence, suffering, and no-self—of matter and mind in past, present, and future; internal and external; gross and subtle;

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<sup>543</sup> Pa-Auk Tawya Sayādaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, 4th ed. (Singapore: Pa-Auk Meditation Center, 2010), 41.

<sup>544</sup> Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen, *Jhāna Advice from Two Spiritual Friends: Concentration Meditation as Taught by Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw* (N.p.: Kalyana Mitta Publishing, 2008), 58–59

<sup>545</sup> Snyder and Rasmussen, *Jhāna Advice from Two Spiritual Friends*, 46–47

<sup>546</sup> Snyder and Rasmussen, *Jhāna Advice from Two Spiritual Friends*, 60–61

<sup>547</sup> Snyder and Rasmussen, *Jhāna Advice from Two Spiritual Friends*, 47. See also William Chu, “The Myth of ‘Fixed Focus’ in *Jhāna/Dhyāna*,” unpublished 2009.

inferior and superior; far and near. If this is accomplished, practice then will continue to be developed in line with the progress of insight recorded in the *Visuddhimagga*. In Pa Auk's theory, there is a middle step between the development of *samatha* and *vipassanā*. Meditators are taught the four protective meditations to protect their practice: *metta*, recollection of the Buddha, foulness contemplation, and recollection of death. This is similar to Mahāsi Sayādaw's instruction in the *Practical Insight Meditation*.<sup>548</sup> In addition, there is also the teaching of using the "light of wisdom" to discern ultimate materiality and mentality, and dependent co-arising. This, they say, is all in preparation for *vipassanā* meditation.<sup>549</sup>

It is worthwhile to note that these teachers claim that their insight meditation teachings are based on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as reference discourse. They also make strong attempts to persuade meditators that their teachings can lead to nibbana, a belief that is held widely by various insight meditation teachers in Burma. However, many points in their teachings are found to rely on the commentaries, especially the notion of dry insight, the method that is advocated by all three lineages, which dispenses with the development of *jhāna* but still promises full awakening. It seems that many—if not most—well-known Burmese *vipassanā* meditation teachers take the *Visuddhimagga* as an authoritative teaching equivalent with the *suttas* without realizing certain contradictions between the two. This incongruity, as has we have seen, is shown by the fact that whereas the *suttas* assert that the path to full awakening consists of the eight

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<sup>548</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 10.

<sup>549</sup> A brief introduction of Pa-Auk Sayādaw's meditation technique from its website. Pa-Auk Tawya Meditation Centre, "Meditation: What is taught and practiced in Pa-Auk," Paaukforestmonastery.org, 2017, <https://www.paaukforestmonastery.org/meditation>. See also Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation," 27. Other similarities and differences of these three *vipassanā* lineages in Burmese Buddhism can also be found in Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Dynamics of Theravāda Insight Meditation," 25–56.

factors of the path from right view all the way to right concentration, the *Visuddhimagga*, on the other hand, advocated a dry insight meditation method that omits the development of *jhāna*.

Reviewing the development of insight meditation in Burma reveals vital features conducive to the comprehending of Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* which will be treated below. In addition to this, it is also necessary to examine his life and his writings on meditation. Several significant details regarding his education, his training, and the soteriological vision that might have shaped his meditation theory will be reviewed in the next section.

#### 4.4 Mahāsi Sayādaw's Childhood

Mahāsi Sayādaw<sup>550</sup> (1904-1982) was born into a peasant proprietor family in Seikhun, a large, developed and attractive village located to the west of the historic Shwebo town in Upper Burma. Mahāsi Sayādaw had contact with Buddhism since his young age. At the age of six, his parents sent him to a village monastery to receive monastic education.<sup>551</sup> In Theravāda Buddhist countries such as Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, young boys are often sent to monastery for educational purposes, especially to receive ethical training to prepare for later household life. As a traditional

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<sup>550</sup> Unlike Ajaan Lee, Mahāsi Sayādaw did not write an autobiography. A concise delineation of his life and career, however, can be found in his treatises, such as *The Progress of Insight*, *Thought on the Dhamma*, *Manual of Insight*, and *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, and in the work of others, such as *Living Buddhist Masters* and *Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw A Biographical Sketch* written by U Nyi Nyi, a disciple of Mahāsi Sayādaw and a member of the Executive Committee Yangon, Myanmar Buddhasasana Nuggaha Association. Note that the biography of Mahāsi Sayādaw in the *Fundamental of Vipassanā Meditation* published by the Tathagata Meditation Center in the United States actually comes from *A Biographical Sketch* written by U Nyi Nyi. It also appears in *The LokaChanta*, A Newsletter 6, no. 2 (April-May 1996).

<sup>551</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, trans. Maung Tha Noe, ed. Sayādaw U Silananda (San Jose, CA: Tathagata Meditation Center, 2000z), 13, Kindle. This is a revised version of the one published by Buddha Sasananuggaha Organization in Burma cited above. In order to differentiate the two, I include the publisher to the revised version whenever it is referred.

practice, young men are also encouraged to participate in a short ordination that lasts from weeks to months or even years. It is also considered a meaningful expression of paying tribute to one's parents who have just passed away.

## 4.5 Entering the Monkhood

Mahāsi Sayādaw was ordained as a novice at the age of twelve and was given the name Shin Sobhana. When his mentor U Adicca disrobed,<sup>552</sup> he went to study with another teacher, Sayādaw U Parama of Thugyi-kyaung monastery in Ingyintaw-tail. Mahāsi Sayādaw received his full ordination as a bhikkhu in 1923 when he turned twenty, with Sumedha Sayādaw Ashin Nimmala acting as his preceptor.<sup>553</sup>

Mahāsi Sayādaw was an intelligent monk who was very good at scriptural studies. Over the course of decades of learning, he passed all the rigorous examinations conducted by the government, such as the Pāli scriptural studies and the Dhammācariya. Before shifting his interest to meditation, Mahāsi Sayādaw spent many years on scriptural studies. With a strong learning passion, he even traveled to Mandalay to search for eminent Sayādaws in order to advance his studies. With regard to Mahāsi Sayādaw's education, it should be noted that Burmese Buddhism puts a great emphasis on *Abhidhamma* studies, and as such, their scholars are specialists of the field.<sup>554</sup>

A common saying within the monastic community is that Sri Lankan monks are experts of the *suttas*, Thai monks are the *Vinaya* holders, while Burmese monks are the

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<sup>552</sup> It is said that having a teacher who left the monkhood is an immense discouragement in one's spiritual pursuits.

<sup>553</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation* (San Jose, CA: Tathagata Meditation Center, 2000z), 13–14.

<sup>554</sup> Robinson, Johnson, and Thānissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 155; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 45–76.

*Abhidhamma* specialists. This saying is perhaps derived from an apocryphal story noted by Erik Braun:

“It is said that long ago a ship carrying the Tipitaka foundered at sea. The ship sank, but the baskets of the Buddhist canon floated to the surface to be carried on the ocean’s currents. The books of the *Vinaya* floated to Thailand, and the *suttas* went to Sri Lanka. As one might suspect, the story tells that the books of the *Abhidhamma* washed up on the beaches of Burma.”<sup>555</sup>

Regardless of its doubtful veracity, the folk tale expresses the Burmese predilection for *Abhidhamma* literature. The interest in *Abhidhamma* studies in Burma can be traced back to the Pagan period (849-1297) as inscriptions suggest.<sup>556</sup> However, most scholars believe that the pronounced stress on *Abhidhamma* studies in Burma truly began in the seventeenth century,<sup>557</sup> the period that Bischoff calls “the dawn of the *Abhidhamma* age.”<sup>558</sup> During this time, many Pāli texts were translated into Burmese. A system for memorizing the relationship among the *dharmas* was later promoted by the king. In addition, there was a trend to translate religious texts into Burmese in order to extend the reach of Buddhist learning.<sup>559</sup>

The importance of *Abhidhamma* in Burmese scholarly tradition can also be seen in the monastic curricula. Prior to the colonial period, although Burmese monasteries did not share a common course of study, a loose standardization was gradually developed.

*Abhidhamma* was introduced to students between the age of fifteen and seventeen if they

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<sup>555</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 62–63.

<sup>556</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 63. See also Than Tun, “History of Buddhism in Burma A.D. 1000-1300,” *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 61, parts 1 and 2 (1987), 82; Niharranjan Ray, *An Introduction to the Study of Theravāda Buddhism in Burma: A Study in Indo-Burmese Historical and Cultural Relations from the Earliest Times to the British Conquest* (Bangkok: Orchil Press, 2002), 192–95; Mabel Bode, *The Pāli Literature of Burma* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1909), 102.

<sup>557</sup> Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 63. See also Bode, *The Pāli Literature of Burma*, 58.

<sup>558</sup> Roger Bischoff, *Buddhism in Myanmar* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995), 21.

<sup>559</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 63.

decided to pursue advanced studies after finishing their fundamental level.<sup>560</sup> However, the widespread dissemination of *Abhidhamma* studies as well as the Pāli studies in Burma had occurred since the colonial period. This, as scholars argue, was a result of the British rule. First, the colonial government arranged for monks to elect their own ecclesiastical leaders<sup>561</sup> and allowed ecclesiastical examinations to be given on a regular basis.<sup>562</sup> Second, there was a belief well-circulated among Burmese Buddhists that when the teachings of the Buddha disappear, the books of *Abhidhamma* will vanish first. Alicia Turner has identified three Burmese texts written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that described the decline such as the *Thathanalinkara Sadan*, the *Anagatavamsa*, and the *Anagatawin Kyam*.<sup>563</sup> It is important to note that this belief can actually be traced back to the *Manorathapurani*, a commentary on the *Anguttara Nikāya* written by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa in the 500 AD. Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa even says the seven books of the *Abhidhamma* will disappear in the reverse of their order in the canon.<sup>564</sup>

Under the British rule, the anxiety over the health of Buddhism, and especially the *Abhidhamma*, was intense. Perhaps, this was the reason that the Burmese put out immense effort in advocating and preserving the *Abhidhamma*. King Mindon engraved the *Abhidhamma* on stone posts and set them up as milestones along all the roads of the

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<sup>560</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 63.

<sup>561</sup> Note that the authority of the head of the *saṅgha* had been muddled by the last king, Thibaw, who appointed two monks to be in charge instead of one as was normal. See Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 66; and Donald E. Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 49.

<sup>562</sup> Robinson, Johnson, and Thānissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 155.

<sup>563</sup> Alicia Turner, "Buddhism, Colonialism, and the Boundaries of Religion: Theravāda Buddhism in Burma, 1885-1929" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2009), 64. See also Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 70–71.

<sup>564</sup> Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanity Press, 1991), 56. See also Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 70.

kingdom (completed in 1868) and built a Patthana Hall with a purpose to prolong the teachings of the Buddha. The monks, in addition, strongly encouraged monastics as well as the laity to study *Abhidhamma*.<sup>565</sup> One of the most noticeable figures who enthusiastically advocated this work is Ledi Sayādaw.<sup>566</sup> Masoyein Sayādaw, the head of the Thudhamma sect who worked with Ledi Sayādaw on a Pāli dictionary, also shared this view:

I urge you to teach and learn with great effort the extraordinary *Abhidhamma*. In the matter of the disappearance of the tradition of learning [*pariyatti*], it is the case that the *Abhidhamma* will disappear first.... The Buddha often warned his disciples: “The *sassana* of the Buddha will endure only if the *Abhidhamma* endures.”<sup>567</sup>

Burmese monastic education and especially the development of *Abhidhamma* studies during this time certainly shaped Mahāsi Sayādaw’s soteriological vision. This would become one of the defining foundations for Mahāsi Sayādaw’s comprehension of meditation, particularly *vipassanā* meditation that he pursued after spending decades on scriptural study.

The biography states that Mahāsi Sayādaw did not stay at Mandalay long before he left for Lower Burma upon an invitation of the head monk<sup>568</sup> of Taik-kyauing monastery in Taungwainggle, who asked him to come assist in teaching his pupils. During his time teaching at Taungwainggle, Mahāsi Sayādaw became especially interested in the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* while he was continuing his own scriptural

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<sup>565</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 72. Erik Braun notes that the ascendancy of the *Abhidhamma* in Burma is still obvious.

<sup>566</sup> For more detail on the propagation of *Abhidhamma* study by Ledi Sayādaw, see Braun, *The Birth of Insight*.

<sup>567</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 72. Braun quotes this from U” Jotika. 1987. *Abhidhamma sa muin ‘khyup’*, [An Abbreviated History of the Abhidhamma]. Ran’ kun’: Sāsana re” u” ci” thāna pum hnip ‘tuik.’

<sup>568</sup> According to the biography this monk is a countryman of Mahāsi Sayādaw.

studies.<sup>569</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw became interested in meditation probably because of the growing spread of the *vipassanā* movement in Burma at the time. According to Houtman, the large-scale growth of *vipassanā* meditation in the early twentieth century that attracted monastics and especially lay people can be attributed mainly to students of Ledi Sayādaw (1846-1923) and Mingun Jetavan Sayādaw U Narada (1868-1955). Notable figures in the 1920s and 1930s also include Kyaungban Sayādaw (1860-1927), Nyaunglun Sayādaw (1864-1933), Theikchadaung Sayādaw (1871-1937), Mohnyin Sayādaw (1873-1952), Hsaya Thetgyi (1873-1946), Hanthawadi Sayādaw (1886-1959), Sunlun Sayādaw (1878-1952), Myat Thein Htun (1896-), and Webu Sayādaw (1896-1977). All of them, except possibly Nyaunglun Sayādaw, had been influenced in one way or another by the writings of Ledi Sayādaw and Mingun Sayādaw or through direct personal contact with these two teachers.<sup>570</sup>

It should be noted that although both Ledi Sayādaw and Mingun Sayādaw were popular meditation teachers, their impact was confined to a certain extent. Ledi Sayādaw's contributions were mainly limited to preaching and writing. He personally never conducted any practical meditation course to the laity on any scale. Mingun Sayādaw, on the other hand, did not become involved in meditation writing as deeply as Ledi Sayādaw, but he was the earliest-known teacher who provided *vipassanā* meditation practicum courses for lay people at a center established by his disciples as early as 1911.<sup>571</sup> According to Braun, Mahāsi Sayādaw might have come across Ledi

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<sup>569</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation* (San Jose, CA: Tathagata Meditation Center, 2000z), 14.

<sup>570</sup> Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 8.

<sup>571</sup> Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 8.



Sayādaw's writings in his learning journey.<sup>572</sup> Ingrid Jordt even reports that according to her Burmese informants, Mahāsi Sayādaw used to study with Mohnyin Sayādaw, a student of Ledi Sayādaw.<sup>573</sup> Nevertheless, it is Mingun Sayādaw whom Mahāsi Sayādaw claims as the source of his lineage.

It is said that with a strong desire to explore *satipaṭṭhāna*'s teaching in practice, in the year 1931 Mahāsi Sayādaw went to Thaton, a neighboring province of Moulmein, to study *vipassanā* meditation with Mingun Sayādaw.<sup>574</sup> As Mahāsi Sayādaw revealed, he received the most intensive practical training on *vipassanā* meditation under Mingun Sayādaw's direct instruction.<sup>575</sup> According to Ingrid Jordt, Mingun Sayādaw even sent Mahāsi Sayādaw and another monk, Taung Pulu Sayādaw, into the forest for practice.<sup>576</sup> Besides this concise account, there are no other detailed records depicting his training. The biography only states that the training produced great fruit within a period of merely four months and he was able to teach his first three disciples at Seikkhun on a visiting occasion sometime in 1938.

Mingun Sayādaw is believed by many to have attained *arahantship*.<sup>577</sup> In his quest for a system of meditation that could offer a direct way to awakening, he wandered throughout the country to see various meditation teachers but was not satisfied with their teachings. His searching took him to famous meditation caves in Sagaing Hills in Upper Burma, where he met Aletawya Sayādaw,<sup>578</sup> who was reputed to have realized nibbana.

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<sup>572</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 161.

<sup>573</sup> Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 23.

<sup>574</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 86.

<sup>575</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 7. See also Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation* (San Jose, CA: Tathagata Meditation Center, 2000z), 14.

<sup>576</sup> Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 21.

<sup>577</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 86.

<sup>578</sup> In the *Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma*, the story of Mingun Sayādaw is noted differently. It states that Mingun Sayādaw become a novice at the age of 14 but disrobed for a while after that. He then

Having been told by Aletawya Sayādaw that the only way to liberation is in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Mingun Sayādaw reexamined the text and its commentaries, put it into practice and realized the truth by himself. He then developed a theory and method, which is called the Burmese Satipaṭṭhāna Method.<sup>579</sup> Because Mahāsi Sayādaw advocates this method and taught it to many Westerners, it is also called the Mahāsi Method. The Mahāsi *satipaṭṭhāna* methodology is actually said to be traced to Thilon Sayādaw (1786-1860), a forest monk whose teachings had great impact on king Mindon.<sup>580</sup>

After practicing *vipassanā* meditation with the Mingun Sayādaw for a period of time, Mahāsi Sayādaw returned to Taik-kyauṅ monastery to resume his teaching mission and to take care of the monastery, as the abbot had grown severely ill and subsequently died. It is during this time, in the year 1941, just prior to the outbreak of World War II, that he sat for the *Dhammācariya* examination and passed with distinction. However, upon the invasion of the Japanese into Burma during World War II, Mahāsi Sayādaw left Moulmein to return to his hometown. During this time, he stayed at Mahāsi monastery to devote himself to *vipassanā* meditation and, at the same time, teaching it to an increasing number who showed interest. To respond to the request of his disciples, Mahāsi Sayādaw wrote his first treatise, the *Manual of Insight*, to elaborate *satipaṭṭhāna*

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ordained again at the age of 17 under his cousin. He remained in the monkhood and took his full ordination in 1887. Mingun Sayādaw traveled to many monasteries to study. His travels even took him to Lower Burma where he studied with Weiluwn Sayādaw in Shwei-daung Myo. However, he disrobed after his sixth rain retreat at the request of his sisters, but then re-ordained again under Aletawya Sayādaw in 1896 after leaving the monkhood for more than a year. Mingun Sayādaw is said to have first developed interest in meditation under Aletawya Sayādaw. However, according to Teik-hka-sa-ra, Mingun Sayādaw is alleged to have said that Aletawya Sayādaw did not distinguish between this and that method of the [*satipaṭṭhāna*] practice. He also was dissatisfied with Aletawya Sayādaw's answer that neik-ban, or liberation, could be found in *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation and went on to find the way by himself. For more detail see Teik-hka-sa-ra 1958: 35–37; and Houtman, "Tradition of Buddhist Practice in Burma," 277.

<sup>579</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 85–86.

<sup>580</sup> Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 8.

meditation consisting of doctrinal analysis as well as practical training. Mahāsi Sayādaw's reputation soon spread widely in the region.<sup>581</sup>

Mahāsi Sayādaw became known nationwide as a meditation teacher after he was invited by the Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu, to head a newly founded meditation center in Rangoon—the Sāsana Yeiktha. According to Mahāsi Sayādaw's biography, it appears that Mahāsi Sayādaw's arrival at the Sāsana Yeiktha meditation center was well arranged by U Thwin. U Thwin wanted to set up a meditation center to promote the Buddha Sāsana, which was threatened by the British colonialism, as the Burmese viewed it. Promoting the Buddha Sāsana during colonial times became the responsibility of every Burmese when their king, who once was in charge of this work, was forced into go exile.<sup>582</sup> It is said that Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation teaching and his personal manner persuaded U Thwin, who, after investigating him, asserted that this was the teacher he was searching for. U Thwin then donated a five-acre piece of land to the Buddhasāsana Nuggaha Association to establish a meditation center. He himself was the first president of the Association. And it was U Thwin who "told the Association that he had found a reliable meditation teacher and proposed that the then Prime Minister of Burma invite Mahāsi Sayādaw to the Centre."<sup>583</sup>

Indeed, this was in the plan of U Nu, who wanted to incorporate mental culture into his program for national independence from the British. His plan appears to have answered Hpo Hlaing's call to involve *vipassanā* in a reformed government.<sup>584</sup> First, U

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<sup>581</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation* (San Jose, CA: Tathagata Meditation Center, 2000z), 15.

<sup>582</sup> Erik Braun, "Meditation En Masse: How Colonialism Sparked the Global *Vipassanā* Movement," *Tricycle* 23, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 56–60.

<sup>583</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation* (San Jose, CA: Tathagata Meditation Center, 2000z), 16.

<sup>584</sup> Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 205.

Nu founded the Buddhasāsana Nuggaha Association at a meeting with his team that included two cabinet ministers, two high-ranking functionaries, and four rich traders and industrialists at his house in November 1947. This took place right after he signed the Nu-Attlee national independence agreement and went on pilgrimage as a way to look for new beginnings for a newly independent country. The Buddhasāsana Nuggaha Association then started its most vital project, which was to set up a meditation center and propagate it. To accomplish this plan, they needed a meditation teacher.

According to Houtman, in order to find a reliable meditation teacher, it appears that the U Nu cabinet had conducted a secret inquiry. Mahāsi Sayādaw was not invited until another forest *vipassanā* monk, Sunlun Sayādaw, had been investigated. Houtman says U Nu favored Mahāsi Sayādaw and appointed him because, “he was renowned not only for his fine scholarly learning and his mental culture, but in particular for his ordination, regional affiliation and practice lineage within the pure forest tradition of the Thilon Sayādaw so favoured by King Mindon and his successor King Thibaw.”<sup>585</sup>

Mahāsi Sayādaw came to Sāsana Yeiktha Meditation Center in Rangoon and started his *vipassanā* meditation teaching program in the year 1949, after Burma regained independence from the British. Right after coming to the center, he embarked on conducting *vipassanā* meditation training. Under Mahāsi Sayādaw’s instruction, Sāsana Yeiktha Meditation Center became a serious training ground, as Ingrid Jordt observes: “The first impression striking the observer is the industrious preoccupation of hundreds of *saṅgha* (monks) and lay yogis (men, women, and in the months of April and May,

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<sup>585</sup> Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 206.

scores of children as well) sitting or walking in parallel, intensely undertaking practices of meditation.”<sup>586</sup>

The very first cohort had twenty-five meditators, but the number of people coming to the center and register for the course soon increased rapidly.<sup>587</sup> However, it seems that the widespread *vipassanā* meditation and especially Mahāsi method was partially involved with the political situation in Burma at the time. Again, we will see the involvement of U Nu in the development of Sāsana Yeiktha Meditation Center (later known as Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha). For instance, in an effort to spread the *vipassanā* meditation, U Nu described the center as a good place to transform people’s spirituality.

Soon its instructors were able to report that the results were astonishing. With the attainment of Thawtapatti Megga, the primary plane of spiritual experience, the minds of the devotees seemed to undergo a change. U Nu, wishing to experience, sent a friend to the centre. This was a notorious person of whom the people went in dread, because he drank, lied, stole, fornicated, and would not have stopped at murder. On completion of the retreat at the centre, he emerged a reformed character. He himself was so impressed by the religious experience that he brought his wife to share in the experience.<sup>588</sup>

He even described how his rebellious daughter had been changed as a result of visiting the *vipassanā* meditation center. According to him, his daughter “‘came out loving and obedient to her parents’. She no longer begrudged her father for giving her a beating and ‘was no longer capable of being rude to her mother.’”<sup>589</sup>

U Nu also strongly supported the establishment of Mahāsi *vipassanā* meditation centers throughout Burma. The number of Mahāsi centers increased rapidly after the

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<sup>586</sup> Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 15.

<sup>587</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation* (San Jose, CA: Tathagata Meditation Center, 2000z), 17.

<sup>588</sup> U Nu, *U Nu, Saturday’s Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 198–99. See also Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 206.

<sup>589</sup> U Nu, *U Nu, Saturday’s Son*, 299. See also Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 206.

patronage of U Nu. By 1981, Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha had 293 centers in its network in Burma alone. Between 1947-1995, Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha network claimed 1,174,255 yogis had come to 385 centers in thirteen states of Burma.<sup>590</sup> And the 1973 census revealed that the number of meditators who had come to Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha center alone had gone up to some 15,000.<sup>591</sup> Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha also opened many branches overseas in places such as Thailand,<sup>592</sup> Sri Lanka, Cambodia, India, Japan, France, and the United States,<sup>593</sup> attracting hundreds of thousands of meditators all over the world. In 1995, Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha reported to have had 152 foreign meditators from twenty-seven countries coming to this center.<sup>594</sup> One of the more noticeable features of the Mahāsi centers is the participation of lay people in administration work.<sup>595</sup>

Mahāsi Sayādaw is also reputed to be a revolutionary monk because he contributed to the development of the mass lay meditation movement in the last century that started in Burma and then flourished in the world. This is because, as Ingrid Jordt argues in her book *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, under the instruction of Mahāsi Sayādaw and other contemporary Sayādaws, lay people now also began to strike for awakening instead of only accumulating merit as they often did in the past. It is

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<sup>590</sup> Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 206.

<sup>591</sup> Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism," 255.

<sup>592</sup> Wat Mahathat in Bangkok is one of the first temples to teach *vipassanā* meditation. The abbot of the temple, as reported by Tambiah, also established branch temples to spread this method since 1950s. See Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest*, 170–71. See also Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism," 254; Jack Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1988), 53; and Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 216. According to the Mahāsi Sasana Yeiktha, the Thai Minister for Saṅgha Affairs supported the introduction of the Mahāsi method. See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation* (San Jose, CA: Tathagata Meditation Center, 2000z), 22, and Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 206.

<sup>593</sup> For more detail on the spread of the Mahāsi method in the United States, see Fronsdaal, "Insight Meditation in the United States," 163–180.

<sup>594</sup> Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 206.

<sup>595</sup> Ingrid Jordt states that at Mahāsi Sasana Yeiktha monks sometimes were not happy as they are under the thumb of lay administrators. For more detail see Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*.

worthwhile to note that the lay people under Mahāsi Sayādaw’s training became meditation teachers, who after that were be assigned to teach at other centers in Mahāsi network. Others went on to develop their own centers.

During the course of his teaching, Mahāsi Sayādaw travelled abroad to the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Nepal, etc., to hold meditation retreats and religious cultural exchange programs. He also devoted his time to composing meditation treatises and translating Buddhist scriptures.<sup>596</sup> In recognition of his distinguished scholarship and spiritual achievement, the Prime Minister of the Union of Burma honored him with the prestigious title, *Aggamahapandita* (the Exalted Great Wise One). As an expert in *Abhidhamma*, Mahāsi Sayādaw also had the great reputation to be selected as a Questioner and Final Editor who would be responsible for editing commentarial literature and making critical analysis during the Sixth Buddhist Council held in Burma in the year 1954.<sup>597</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw died on 14 August 1982 following a massive stroke.

#### **4.6 Mahāsi Sayādaw’s Writings on Meditation**

As revealed in his biography, Mahāsi Sayādaw spent many years studying Buddhist scriptures, especially the *Abhidhamma* and its commentaries. It is a deep-rooted tradition in Burma that monastics devote their time to learning the commentaries because it is believed that the Buddha’s teachings will be better preserved by such study. In addition to teaching *vipassanā* meditation, Mahāsi Sayādaw also dedicated his time to translation work and writing. One of his biggest projects was the translation of the *Visuddhimagga* into Burmese. There are nearly seventy volumes published under his

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<sup>596</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw’s writing work will be discussed in more detailed in the section below.

<sup>597</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation* (San Jose, CA: Tathagata Meditation Center, 2000z), 17–22.

name. Mahāsi Sayādaw's writings reflect his years of long *Abhidhamma* study together with an intensive course of meditation training with Mingun Sayādaw.

Most of Mahāsi Sayādaw's books are particularly devoted to developing a systemization of *vipassanā* meditation. His detailed explanations of the way to practice *vipassanā* meditation are often written in simple language for the sake of lay practitioners who may not have an extensive background of Buddhist scriptural knowledge. The availability of meditation texts is also considered to have been a significant contributing factor to the establishing of an ongoing lay meditation movement which burgeoned first in Burma and then spread overseas. With regard to Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation treatises, they can be loosely divided into two sorts: written and spoken. "Written treatises" such as the *Manual of Insight* and the *Progress of Insight* are the books that make reference to Canonical sources. "Spoken treatises," on the other hand, are the books that were transcribed from his tape-recorded talks, such as *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation* and *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*.

In order to study Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation theory, especially his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, in the general analysis that follows, I will examine his writings that directly relate to *satipaṭṭhāna*. After providing a brief overview of his meditation treatises, I investigate his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* in detail. The general survey consists of *Manual of Insight*, *Practical Insight Meditation*, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, *Buddhist Meditation and Its Forty Subjects or Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, *The Progress of Insight: A Treatise on Buddhist Satipaṭṭhāna Meditation*, *Thoughts on the Dhamma*, and *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation: A Basic Buddhist Mindfulness Exercise*.



The *Manual of Insight* (translated by Vipassanā Metta Foundation Translation Committee and published recently by Wisdom Publications in 2016) is a lengthy treatise of more than five hundred pages. This is Mahāsi Sayādaw’s earliest book. It was written within a time frame of approximately seven months in Seikhun, west of Mandalay, in 1945,<sup>598</sup> when Burma was at war fighting against foreign invasions. It is intended to be “a comprehensive and authoritative treatise that expounds the doctrinal and practical aspects of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) and the development of insight knowledge (*vipassanā*) up to and including the attainment of the Buddha’s ideal of enlightenment (*nibbāna*).”<sup>599</sup>

The book has seven chapters devoted to explaining Mahāsi Sayādaw’s meditation theory and practice method. Chapter four of the book contains the most detailed treatment on the *satipaṭṭhāna* among his treatises. Despite this fact, Mahāsi Sayādaw did not use it for his daily *vipassanā* courses. Instead, he used a much shorter treatise—*The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*—which is transcribed from his recorded talks. It is said that most of the *vipassanā* teachings of Mahāsi Sayādaw in later books were originally derived from this enormous treatise.

The treatise not only explains the ultimate purpose of *vipassanā* meditation—the realization of the three characteristics, as is repeatedly stated in other works—but also puts significant effort toward clarifying the differences between “concentration vehicle” and “insight vehicle.” Many fragments of evidence quoted from the commentaries and sub-commentaries are utilized to back up this distinction. Mahāsi Sayādaw appears to take the perspective of the commentaries in attempting to clearly separate concentration

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<sup>598</sup> There is a difference in regard to the date of composition. Whereas the *Manual of Insight* states that it was written in 1945, the *Practical Insight Meditation* says that Mahāsi Sayādaw completed the treatise in 1944. See *Manual of Insight*, xxiii; and *Practical Insight Meditation*, 7.

<sup>599</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, xxiii.

practice from the development of liberating insight. To step back for a moment, to see the bigger picture, it is worth noting that the *suttas* never make any clear partition between these two qualities in meditation training. The *suttas* only mention that meditators who possess tranquility but lack insight should go consult the ones who have insight and vice versa.<sup>600</sup> The commentarial literature is the only source in the Tripitaka that divides these two qualities into two vehicles.

*Practical Insight Meditation* (published by Unity Press in 1972 and by the Department of Religious Affairs in Rangoon, Burma in 1979) appears as a book; however, it is actually chapter V of the *Manual of Insight*.<sup>601</sup> While the *Manual of Insight* was translated into English and published relatively recently, *Practical Insight Meditation* was introduced to Western audiences decades earlier. The “book” has two parts, which were translated into English by two individuals: U Pe Thin translated the first part and Myanaung U Thin the second. It was then edited and revised by Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera and Mary McCollum.<sup>602</sup> Unlike other chapters in the *Manual of Insight* that focus on explaining the theoretical aspects of insight meditation with detailed reference to the Canonical sources, *Practical Insight Meditation* is written in common language to provide instructions for actual practice. This is especially designed for the purpose of helping beginning meditators to easily approach meditation. It is important to note that the “book” is said to be written in line with the *Visuddhimagga*, although other texts are also cited.<sup>603</sup>

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<sup>600</sup> AN 4.94

<sup>601</sup> Steve Armstrong makes a mistake by saying that Chapter V of the *Manual of Insight* was published in 1965 in Sri Lanka under the title *The Progress of Insight* when he gives a brief summary of the Chapter. See *Manual of Insight*, xxv. *The Progress of Insight* and *Practical Insight Meditation* are actually two different books as introduced in this section.

<sup>602</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 7.

<sup>603</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 7.

*Practical Insight Meditation* is intended to offer an elaboration of the “Mahāsi method” from beginning through to advanced levels. This method, Mahāsi Sayādaw claims, is based on the foundations of mindfulness or *satipaṭṭhāna* that had been practiced by the Buddha and enlightened people. The text also includes a narrative description of meditative experiences from the initial approaches to the practice, all the way through to the final stage of awakening. *Practical Insight Meditation* can be said to be one of the most detailed descriptions of the “Mahāsi method.” It begins with instructions on observing the precepts, taking refuge in the Buddha, and having conviction in the teacher, finding a comfortable sitting posture, and a brief reflection on the four protections: the Buddha, loving-kindness, the loathsome aspects of the body, and death. The actual practice of the “Mahāsi method” then starts with the noting of the physical rising and falling of the abdomen as well as other mental occurrences that appear in the course of meditation. This noting practice is also applied to all daily activities as well as any nimitta that appears in one’s meditation. This practice, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory, will lead to all stages of enlightenment. *Practical Insight Meditation* also includes an appendix consisting of assurances that the technique and the theory of insight meditation are closely based on Canonical sources and re-confirms that liberation can be achieved through dry insight meditation without the development of jhāna,<sup>604</sup> a consistent statement in all of Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatises.

*The Progress of Insight: A Treatise on Buddhist Satipaṭṭhāna Meditation* was written first in the Burmese language in 1944 and Mahāsi Sayādaw also translated it into the Pāli language in May 1950. The Pāli version of the book was translated into English

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<sup>604</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 58–64.

by Nyanaponika Thera in 1954 with the assistance of Mahāsi Sayādaw and U Pe Thin. *The Progress of Insight*, as it states, “is a brief sketch of the methodical practice of insight.”<sup>605</sup> The treatise is a concise description of the seven stages of purification as recorded in the *Visuddhimagga*: purification of conduct, purification of mind, purification of view, purification by overcoming doubt, purification by knowledge and vision of what is path and not-path, purification by knowledge and vision of the course of practice, and purification by knowledge and vision. It is not difficult to notice the similarity between his and Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa’s work: the sequence of these purifications is exactly the same. It explains the progress of insight meditation, which goes along with the corresponding stages of purification, with a purpose to help meditators understand their experience in meditation.<sup>606</sup> Different phases of insight knowledge are developed as meditators step by step reach these stages, and that sequence is standard and unvarying from person to person.

Similar to the *Manual of Insight*, *Progress of Insight* also devotes attention to explaining the notion of two vehicles—*samathayana* and *vipassanāyana*. This is another instance in which Mahāsi Sayādaw draws on the commentarial literatures such as the *Visuddhimagga* and other subcommentaries as a main reference to certify his bare insight meditation theory.<sup>607</sup> The section on purification of mind engages in a detailed discussion of momentary concentration. It attempts to clarify how the degree of momentary concentration is what qualifies meditators to reach all the way to full awakening by means of the vehicle of bare insight. One of the most significant points Mahāsi Sayādaw

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<sup>605</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 5.

<sup>606</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 1.

<sup>607</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 2–5.

makes here is that momentary concentration—a concentration that is still vulnerable to alteration—has a worth and potential equivalent to access concentration and absorption concentration—the higher and more stable states of concentration—because it has the capacity to suppress the five hindrances.<sup>608</sup> In other words, momentary concentration in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory has various degrees, or there is no clear line between these three kinds of concentration.

The *Buddhist Meditation and its Forty Subjects* or the *Purpose of Practicing Kammatthana Meditation* is another treatise explaining Mahāsi Sayādaw’s meditation theory. This treatise was translated into English by U Pe Thin in 1957 and by U Min Swe in 1980, respectively. In this treatise, Mahāsi Sayādaw focuses on elaborating both tranquility meditation and insight meditation as in *Manual of Insight* and *The Progress of Insight*. However, in this treatise, Mahāsi Sayādaw engages in a more detailed discussion on the *samatha-yānika* or tranquility meditation. According to Mahāsi Sayādaw, *samatha-yānika* can be practiced by means of the forty meditation themes that are enumerated in the *Visuddhimagga*. *Samatha* cultivation, as he says, will lead to the attainments of four *rūpa jhānas* (form-based concentration) and four *arūpa jhānas* (formless concentration), in which a variety of supernatural powers will be achieved. However, in his view, practicing merely tranquility meditation leads only to the heavenly world but not to ultimate liberation. The end of suffering, as he emphasizes, is attained only by insight meditation.<sup>609</sup> The procedure of *samatha-yānika* (tranquility meditation), thus, is first to develop concentration. Upon attaining the *jhānas*, the contemplation of the

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<sup>608</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 5–8.

<sup>609</sup> Sayādaw Mahāsi, *Purpose of Practising Kammatthana Meditation* (Rangoon: Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization, 1980), 3–6.

sensations at the six sense doors should be proceed for the purpose of realizing the impermanence, suffering and not-self of the mind and matter. According to him, when full knowledge of the three characteristics is accomplished, the insight-knowledge of *magga* (path) and *phala* (fruit) will arise. As a consequence of that, nibbana will be realized.<sup>610</sup> The second part of *samatha-yānika* (tranquility meditation), which should be cultivated after attaining *jhānas*, is in fact the same as the description of *suddha-vipassanā-yānika* (bare insight meditation).

In this section, Mahāsi Sayādaw also comments on the concentration development in these meditation subjects. According to him, different meditation subjects produce different levels of concentration. For instance, contemplation of *pathavī-kasiṇa* (earth-*kasiṇa*) will lead to *appanā-samādhi* (absorption concentration) or four *jhānas*, whereas *asubha* (foulness of the body) contemplation leads only to the stage of first *jhāna*. Contemplation on thirty-two parts of the body will lead to the first *jhāna*, whereas the other eight *anussatis* lead only to *upacāra samādhi*, or neighborhood concentration.<sup>611</sup> To reiterate, many of Mahāsi Sayādaw’s explanations here closely follow the teaching in the *Visuddhimagga*. Another instance can be seen in the section expounding the method to develop *samatha*. Similar to the *Visuddhimagga*,<sup>612</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw says that meditators can stare at an external object such as the element of “earth” while mentally noting “earth, earth, earth” until the image of the object is imprinted in their mind. The contemplation of this *nimitta* then gives rise to a countersign which indicates the attainment of threshold concentration.<sup>613</sup> This approach of developing *jhānas*, however,

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<sup>610</sup> Sayādaw Mahāsi, *Purpose of Practising Kammatthana Meditation*, 13–23.

<sup>611</sup> Sayādaw Mahāsi, *Purpose of Practising Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 17–18.

<sup>612</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, IV 21–31.

<sup>613</sup> Sayādaw Mahāsi, *Purpose of Practising Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 13–17.

bears little resemblance to the description of the *Sutta Piṭaka*.<sup>614</sup> It bears mentioning that the noting technique is being applied in his explanation of all these meditation subjects for the sake of attaining concentration.

The description of *suddha-vipassanā-yānika* (bare insight meditation) in this treatise is actually a combined form drawing from both the *Practical Insight Meditation* and *The Progress of Insight*. In this section, it is necessary to highlight another difference between tranquility meditation and insight meditation in Mahāsi Sayādaw's theory: this time regarding the of dispelling of the hindrances to concentration. That is, during the course of meditation, when the mind leaves its meditation object to wander, followers of tranquility meditation do not have to contemplate the wandering mental states, but just abandon them and instantly come back to their meditation object, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw's followers of insight meditation have to contemplate those wandering mental states before they come back to their original meditation object. This is because, as he explains, if wandering mental states are not contemplated, wrong view and attachment to their nature as permanent, pleasant, and self would arise. That is why one needs to contemplate them to know their real nature and characteristics in order to detach from them.<sup>615</sup>

The *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation* is a series of talks given during the Burmese New Year in 1959 and it appeared in book form in 1961. The treatise went through several editions before being translated into English in 1981 by Maung Tha Noe. In this book, Mahāsi Sayādaw addresses various fundamental topics of *vipassanā*

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<sup>614</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Wings to Awakening: An Anthology from the Pāli Canon*, 7th ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013), 249.

<sup>615</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practising Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 33–35.

meditation to assist followers who are new to the practice. Similar to the *Purpose of Practising Kammatṭhāna Meditation*, this treatise also gives a brief account on the differentiation between concentration and insight. One of the most interesting points is that, in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s view, among the forty meditation subjects, only mindfulness of breathing and contemplating on the four elements of the body can be used to develop insight. The rest are only subjects of concentration meditation for they cannot give rise to insight.<sup>616</sup> Further instructions on how to develop insight meditation are also provided, echoing what is presented in other texts. This treatise also shows Mahāsi Sayādaw’s attempts to ensure how his noting method is in accordance with the Canonical teaching of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. In his explanation, the practice of noting any movement of the body and mind is in line with each frame of reference in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. For example, the practice of noting “hot, hot or pain, pain once the heat or the pain arises” is supposedly consistent with the *sutta*’s instruction which states that an individual discerns a painful feeling when it arises in him.<sup>617</sup>

In addition to writing meditation treatises, Mahāsi Sayādaw also delivered many *sutta* expositions. *Thoughts on the Dhamma*<sup>618</sup> is an anthology of excerpts that come from some of those *sutta* expositions. To be more specific, this anthology of excerpts is derived from a set of seven books<sup>619</sup> translated into English by different people. The set was published in 1980. It includes selections pertaining to concentration and insight meditation, along with other related topics that Mahāsi Sayādaw addressed in his lectures.

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<sup>616</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 10.

<sup>617</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 107–108.

<sup>618</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Thoughts on the Dhamma* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1983).

<sup>619</sup> 1. Discourse on *Nibbāna via the Noble Eightfold Path*, 2. Discourse on the *Wheel of Dhamma*, 3. Discourse on *Hemavata Sutta*, 4. Discourse on *Ariyāvāsa Sutta*, 5. Discourse on *Bhāra Sutta*, 6. Discourse on *Lokadhamma*, and 7. Discourse on *Sakka-pañha Sutta*.



The anthology was compiled and edited by Nyanaponika Thera in 1982. Mahāsi Sayādaw passed away while this book was in preparation.

The central theme of *satipaṭṭhāna* or insight meditation is consistent throughout Mahāsi Sayādaw's expositions. In his *Dhamma* talks, Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to acknowledge the importance of *jhāna*. However, according to his perspective, it is not the only way to achieve awakening. As he says: "*Jhāna-samādhi* is indeed the best to attain, but failing that, one should have acquired momentary concentration (*khanika samādhi*) which is equivalent to access-concentration. Otherwise, it is not real insight-wisdom."<sup>620</sup> In other words, he acknowledges the possibility of *jhāna* but downplays its significance by relegating the various levels of concentration attainment to the same status, i.e., less significant than insight itself.

Among Mahāsi Sayādaw treatises, meditators trained in the Mahāsi system are probably most familiar with *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation: A Basic Buddhist Mindfulness Exercise*.<sup>621</sup> This is because, as indicated in the treatise's introduction, it "has been in constant use daily"<sup>622</sup> as the main guidance at Yeiktha Meditation Center in Rangoon as well as at other meditation branches in the Mahāsi network. With regard to the background of this treatise, it is interesting to learn that right from the start, on the opening day at the Center, Mahāsi Sayādaw would give—daily—a detailed explanation on *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā* meditation—the practice method, its purpose, and its benefits, etc.—to every group that came for an intensive training. This daily talk took ninety minutes and this undertaking lasted for almost two years until a tape recorder was offered

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<sup>620</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Thoughts on the Dhamma*, 42.

<sup>621</sup> Note that another version of this treatise is also published under a different title, *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā: Insight Through Mindfulness* by Buddhist Publication Society in Sri Lanka.

<sup>622</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, i.

in 1951. The book, as a result, was transcribed from the tape recording in which Mahāsi Sayādaw gives “a methodical training in the right system of *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā* (*Insight Meditation through Mindfulness*).”<sup>623</sup> It was published in book form in 1954 and was translated into English by U Pe Thin, a disciple of Mahāsi Sayādaw who was an interpreter in many *vipassanā* courses at the center in its early days.<sup>624</sup> So with regard to this *satipaṭṭhāna* treatise—somewhat similar to Ajaan Lee’s case—Mahāsi Sayādaw did not write the book himself, but his lectures were converted into book form.

The Mahāsi Sayādaw treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* recorded in *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation* as well as in other treatises are consistent and almost identical. They can be summed up as the bare observation of matter and mind for a purpose of realizing the three characteristics—impermanent, suffering and no-self. According to his theory, awakening is achieved once these knowledges of the three characteristics are acquired.<sup>625</sup> This explains why insight into the three characteristics occupies a central role in his *vipassanā* meditation. In his treatment, the practice is carried out by constantly noting all the actions of either matter or mind as they occur at the six sense-doors. To be more specific, it is a practice of fixing one’s bare attention on all activities occurring on both physical and mental levels, such as seeing, hearing, sitting, walking, lying down, sleeping, washing, eating, thinking, imagining, feeling, or simply in the rising and falling of the abdomen. This practice, as a result, will lead to the development of momentary concentration. This form of concentration, in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory, is sufficient to cultivate *vipassanā* meditation.<sup>626</sup>

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<sup>623</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, i.

<sup>624</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, ii.

<sup>625</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 11.

<sup>626</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 3.

In order to understand Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, let’s examine his interpretation of the matter further. Although references to other treatises are also included, the investigation below is mainly based on *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation* for two reasons: 1) this treatise has been used as daily instruction at his centers; and 2) it reflects Mahāsi Sayādaw’s teaching as it was directly transcribed from his recorded talks. In the following section, I will first review Mahāsi Sayādaw’s perspective on *samatha-yānika* and *suddha-vipassanā-yānika*, and then analyze the main factors that play key roles in his treatment. Other issues such as his point of view on concentration and liberating insight are also discussed. The section subsequently closes up with a discussion about some objections toward the Mahāsi method.

## **4.7 Mahāsi Sayādaw’s Treatment of *Satipaṭṭhāna***

### **4.7.1 Bare Insight Vehicle**

Before discussing Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* or his teaching on *vipassanā* meditation in depth, it should be kept in mind that, according to his theory, there are two separate forms of meditation—tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*).<sup>627</sup> This theory, as he says, is based on the *Papañcasūdanī: Clarifier of Proliferation*, a commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya*, and the *Visuddhimagga*, both attributed to Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa. In the *Progress of Insight*, Mahāsi Sayādaw provides direct quotes from commentary literature to clarify this point. For instance, he cites the *Papañcasūdanī*’s comments to the *Dhammadāyāda Sutta*, which state that: “Herein, a certain person first produces access concentration or full concentration; this is tranquility.

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<sup>627</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 2–5. See also *Purpose of Practicing Kammatthāna Meditation*, 4–33; *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 1; and *Manual of Insight*, 46–52.

He then applies insight to that concentration and to the mental states associated with it, seeing them as impermanent, etc.; this is insight.”<sup>628</sup> A similar explanation in the *Visuddhimagga* is also cited to reinforce this view: “He whose vehicle is tranquility should first emerge from any fine-material or immaterial *jhāna*, except the base consisting of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and he should then discern, according to characteristic, function, etc., the *jhāna* factors consisting of applied thought, etc., and the mental states associated with them.”<sup>629</sup> So, tranquility meditation or *samatha-yānika*, in his definition, is a practice in which meditators first have to develop either access concentration or full concentration before contemplating the five aggregates to develop insight.

Similarly, Mahāsi Sayādaw also draws on the same commentary literature to explain *suddha-vipassanā-yānika* or bare insight meditation. To him, unlike *samatha-yānika* or tranquility meditation, *suddha-vipassanā-yānika* or bare insight meditation is a practice in which meditators right from the beginning apply insight to the five aggregates without developing either access concentration or absorption concentration. As he says, this theory is also well explained in the *Papañcasūdanī*, which states that: “There is another person, who even without having produced the aforesaid tranquility, applies insight to the five groups of grasping, seeing them as impermanent, etc.”<sup>630</sup> And, to strengthen this point, Mahāsi Sayādaw, also quotes an exposition of the *Visuddhimagga* which holds that “One who has pure insight as his vehicle...contemplates the four

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<sup>628</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 2–3.

<sup>629</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 3. See also Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, XVIII 3.

<sup>630</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 3. To be more specific, this notion, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, is explained in the commentary to the *Dhammadāyāda Sutta* in the Majjhima Nikāya.

elements.”<sup>631</sup> In other words, Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to agree with the commentaries that there is a method called bare insight meditation which does not have to depend on the cultivation of tranquility.

Mahāsi Sayādaw not only used the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Papañcasūdanī* as evidence to support his view of two vehicles, in *Manual of Insight* he also referenced a similar explanation from the subcommentary on the *Visuddhimagga* to claim that this theory is well rooted in the Pāli texts.<sup>632</sup> It is obvious that, in his perspective, meditation consists of two different forms. Whereas tranquility meditation requires meditators to first cultivate either access concentration or absorption concentration before developing insight, the followers of insight meditation can develop bare insight without the support of these sorts of concentration. And, of these two forms of meditation, Mahāsi Sayādaw strongly promotes the latter. Most of his treatises, if not all, are devoted to explaining *vipassanā* as bare insight meditation. Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* that will be examined below is actually his teaching on this *vipassanā* or bare insight meditation. In his treatment, he argues that this form of meditation alone can lead meditators from *sotapana* to *arahantship*, in other words, from the first level of awakening all the way to full liberation. And the theory of bare insight meditation that Mahāsi Sayādaw advocates is very much in line with the commentaries’ perspective.

However, the notion of bare insight meditation that Mahāsi Sayādaw explaining is significantly different from the kind of insight described in the *suttas*. As discussed in

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<sup>631</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 3. See also Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, XVIII 5.

<sup>632</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 47.

Chapter Two,<sup>633</sup> the *suttas* often indicate that both factors—tranquility and insight—can be cultivated simultaneously or in either order. The eightfold path to awakening described in the *suttas* always includes both of these two factors. Insight or discernment can be seen in the factors of right view, right resolve, and right action, while tranquility can be seen in the factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In addition to the fact that the last factor of the noble eightfold path—right concentration—is explicitly defined in terms of the four *jhānas*, the discussion in Chapter Three<sup>634</sup> shows that even the development of right mindfulness—the cause leading to the attainment of *jhāna*—also consists of both discernment factor and tranquility factor. Examining the *suttas*, thus, shows that this notion of bare insight meditation that Mahāsi Sayādaw promotes is not recorded in the *suttas*, but was influenced by commentarial and subcommentarial analyses.<sup>635</sup> A detailed examination of his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* will reveal additional evidence in support of this view: that Mahāsi Sayādaw’s teaching on mindfulness tends to base on the commentarial perspective rather than that of the *suttas*.

#### 4.7.2 Contemplation of Materiality (*Rūpa*) and Mentality (*Nāma*)

In his treatises, Mahāsi Sayādaw repeatedly claims that the *vipassanā* meditation that he teaches is a practice of four *satipaṭṭhānas*—body contemplation, feeling contemplation, mind contemplation, and mental objects contemplation, as recorded in the

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<sup>633</sup> For more detail, see section 2.2.4 Discrepancy in Explaining the Way to Practice *Satipaṭṭhāna* in Chapter Two.

<sup>634</sup> See Ajaan Lee’s discussion of the three qualities—*sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*—in Chapter Three.

<sup>635</sup> Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 42. For more detail on the discussion of these two qualities see L.S. Cousins, “*Samatha-yāna* and *Vipassanā-yāna*,” in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Hammalava Saddhātissa*, ed. Gatārē Dhammapāla, Richard Francis Gombrich, Kenneth Roy Norman (Nugegoda, Sri Lanka: Hammalava Saddhātissa Felicitation Volume Committee, 1984), 55–68.

*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.<sup>636</sup> Despite this claim, in most of his expositions of the way to practice *vipassanā* meditation, it appears that Mahāsi Sayādaw does not follow this outline of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.<sup>637</sup> Instead, as mentioned above, his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is a practice of simply observing matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*) with a purpose to comprehend their characteristics—impermanence, suffering, and no-self.<sup>638</sup> As he explains: “The method of developing this wisdom is to observe materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*)—the two sole elements existing in a living being—with a view to knowing them in their true nature.”<sup>639</sup> The questions then arise are: what is Mahāsi Sayādaw’s understanding of matter (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*)? How does one observe them in order to foster discernment? And, what kind of insight does he aim to develop in this practice? To explore his *satipaṭṭhāna-vipassanā* theory, let’s first examine what Mahāsi Sayādaw considers to be matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*).

In *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, Mahāsi Sayādaw provides a relatively detailed explanation of these two elements. In his view, matter and mind are two primary elements existing in a body, in which, *rūpa*, or matter, is the solid substance that consists of twenty-eight elements.<sup>640</sup> This detailed analysis of *rūpa* (matter) is based on the account in the *Abhidhamma* and the *Visuddhimagga*. In the *Visuddhimagga*, for example, twenty-eight elements are enumerated as the four primary elements—i.e., earth, water,

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<sup>636</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34. See also *Practical Insight Meditation*, 6; and *Manual of Insight*, 143–261; *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 107–108.

<sup>637</sup> The only treatise in which the division of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* of the *sutta* aligns with Mahāsi Sayādaw’s view is in *Manual of Insight*. Still, the main theme of his treatment remains unvaried as it also aims at developing the realization of the three characteristics of matter and mind through the practice of simply noting the six sense-doors. For more detail, see Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 143–261.

<sup>638</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 2–5; *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 3; and *The Purpose of Practicing Kammatthana Meditation*, 23–33.

<sup>639</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 3.

<sup>640</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 4.

fire, and wind—and the twenty-four derived matters: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, visible datum, sound, odor, flavor, femininity faculty, masculinity faculty, life faculty, heart-basis, bodily intimation, verbal intimation, space element, lightness of matter, malleability of matter, wieldiness of matter, growth of matter, continuity of matter, aging of matter, impermanence of matter, and physical nutriment.<sup>641</sup> According to Mahāsi Sayādaw, matter is called “matter” because its form changes under contrary physical conditions. He also notes that, in the *Abhidhamma* literature, *rūpa*, or matter, does not possess any faculty of knowing an object.<sup>642</sup>

The element of mind—*nāma*—on the other hand, has an object, or holds an object, or knows an object. As he explains, it is called element of mind (*nāma*) because it inclines to an object. In other words, *nāma*, or mind, comes into being depending on matter. For instance, he notes, depending on the eye, eye-consciousness (seeing) arises; depending on the ear, ear-consciousness (hearing) arises; depending on the nose, nose-consciousness (smelling) arises; depending on the tongue, tongue-consciousness (tasting) arises; depending on the body, body-consciousness (sense of touch) arises; and depending on mind-base, mind-consciousness (thoughts) arises.<sup>643</sup> With regard to these elements of mind, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, the sense of touch has a much wider sphere than the sense of seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting. It is because it can run throughout the body both inside and outside, whereas the others can come into being in their particular field such as eye, ear, nose, and tongue, respectively.<sup>644</sup>

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<sup>641</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, XIV 35–36; or the *Dhammasaṅgani* in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, 596, which omits the heart-basis. See also Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience: The Constitution of the Human Being according to Early Buddhism* (London: Luzac Oriental, 1996), 7.

<sup>642</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 4.

<sup>643</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 4–5.

<sup>644</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 5.



In the *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, Mahāsi Sayādaw explains *rūpa* and *nāma* as the five aggregates. The five aggregates, in his theory, means “the phenomena of existence which are clearly perceived at every moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and arising of mind-consciousness.”<sup>645</sup> Therefore, his teaching of *rūpa* and *nāma* also refers to all the physical and mental phenomena that arise at the six sense-doors.<sup>646</sup> These are the basic understandings pertaining to *rūpa* (matter) and *nāma* (mind) that Mahāsi Sayādaw mentions in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* or *vipassanā* meditation. It appears that Mahāsi Sayādaw considers these two elements from an *Abhidhammic* analytical angle that was recorded in the *Visuddhimagga* and other *Abhidhamma* literature.

One essential point in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s explanation of *nāma* that needs to be discussed is that, in his view, the element of *nāma* is always dependent on *rūpa*. As he says, “It is the element of mind which comes into being depending on matter.”<sup>647</sup> In *The Progress of Insight*, a similar point explaining the pair-existence of *nāma* and *rūpa* is also made. The section on analytical knowledge of body and mind in the purification of view in this treatise states: “There is here only that pair: a material process as object, and a mental process of knowing it; and it is to that pair alone that the terms of conventional usage ‘being,’ ‘person’ or ‘soul,’ ‘I’ or ‘another,’ ‘man’ or ‘women’ refer. But apart from that dual process [*nāma* and *rūpa*] there is no separate person or being, I or another, man

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<sup>645</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practising Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 24.

<sup>646</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practising Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 24.

<sup>647</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 4.

or woman.”<sup>648</sup> In other words, it means that consciousness is impossible without an object.

This view contradicts at least the *suttas*’ presentation of *viññāṇam anidassanam*—consciousness without surface. In the *suttas*, *viññāṇam anidassanam*—consciousness without surface—is a kind of consciousness which has no object, and is clearly independent of the six sense spheres.<sup>649</sup> For instance, in a conversation with Baka Brahma, the Buddha describes this *viññāṇam anidassanam*—consciousness without surface—as “endless, radiant all around, has not been experienced through the earthness of earth ... the liquidity of liquid ... the fieriness of fire ... the windiness of wind ... the allness of the all.”<sup>650</sup> The all is explained in the *suttas* as the six sense-medias and their objects, such as the eye and form, ear and sounds, nose and aromas, tongue and flavor, body and tactile sensations, intellect and ideas.<sup>651</sup> A similar explanation can also be found in *Atthi Rāga Sutta* in which *viññāṇam anidassanam* is likened to a sun ray that does not have any supporting condition to land on. It is a consciousness that does not land or increase because it has no more passion for further becoming.

“Just as if there were a roofed house or a roofed hall having windows on the north, the south, or the east. When the sun rises, and a ray has entered by way of the window, where does it land?”

“On the western wall, lord.”

“And if there is no western wall, where does it land?”

“On the ground, lord.”

“And if there is no ground, where does it land?”

“On the water, lord.”

“And if there is no water, where does it land?”

“It does not land, lord.”

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<sup>648</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 10. See also Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 32.

<sup>649</sup> MN 49; SN 12.61; AN 10.81; SN 35.117; Ud 8.1; DN 11

<sup>650</sup> MN 49

<sup>651</sup> SN 35.23

“In the same way, where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food ... contact ... intellectual intention ... consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or grow. Where consciousness does not land or grow, name-and-form does not alight. Where name-and-form does not alight, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, and death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair.”<sup>652</sup>

This *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ* differs greatly from the sort of consciousness that is explained in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment. It seems that what Mahāsi Sayādaw describes of *nāma* is only up to the level of normal sensory consciousness, which has a surface—sense organs and their objects—upon which it lands. The consciousness without surface, on the other hand, according to Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “is directly known, without intermediary, and free from any dependence on conditions at all.” This consciousness without surface is, as he explains, also different from the consciousness factor indicated in the dependent co-arising and in the five aggregates. This is because the consciousness factor in dependent co-arising and consciousness-aggregate is often defined in terms of the six sense media, the all,<sup>653</sup> and is still a subject of time and space, whereas *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ* lies outside of time and space in a dimension where there is no here, there, or in between,<sup>654</sup> no coming, no going, or staying, and cannot be described as permanent or omnipresent.<sup>655</sup> *Viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ*, as Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu suggests, can also be equated with *nibbāna*.

Some have objected to the equation of this consciousness with *nibbāna*, on the grounds that *nibbāna* is nowhere else in the Canon described as a form of consciousness. Thus they have proposed that consciousness without surface be regarded as an *arahant’s* consciousness of *nibbāna* in meditative experience, and not *nibbāna* itself. This argument, however, contains a flaw: If *nibbāna* is an

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<sup>652</sup> SN 12.64

<sup>653</sup> SN 35.23

<sup>654</sup> Ud 1.10

<sup>655</sup> Ud 8.1

object of mental consciousness (as a *dhamma*), it would come under the all, as an object of the intellect. There are passages in the Canon (such as AN 9.36) that describe meditators experiencing *nibbāna* as a *dhamma*, but these passages seem to indicate that this description applies up through the level of non-returning. Other passages, however, describe *nibbāna* as the ending of all *dhmmas*. For instance, Sn V.6 quotes the Buddha as calling the attainment of the goal the transcending of all *dhmmas*. Sn IV.6 and Sn IV.10 state that the *arahant* has transcended dispassion, said to be the highest *dhamma*. Thus, for the *arahant*, *nibbāna* is not an object of consciousness. Instead it is directly known without mediation. Because consciousness without feature is directly known without mediation, there seems good reason to equate the two.<sup>656</sup>

In this argument, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu provides evidence to argue that the description of *viññāṇam anidassanam* in the *suttas* can be understood as the description of *nibbāna* rather than merely the arahant's consciousness of *nibbāna* in meditation experience as proposed by others. As he points out, *nibbāna* is described in the *suttas* as the ending of all *dhmmas* and the transcendence of passion. This is similar to the description of the sun ray that has nothing to land on, or the consciousness that does not have anything to land and grow. Also, both *nibbāna* and *viññāṇam anidassanam* are said to be directly known without mediation. That is why for him it is feasible to equate the two. Apparently, this indication of *viññāṇam anidassanam* is far beyond Mahāsi Sayādaw's description of the element of *nāma*. In other words, Mahāsi Sayādaw has not touched on this aspect of the mind in his treatment.

With regard to the issue of how to observe these two elements of *rūpa* and *nāma*, Mahāsi Sayādaw explains:

The method of the Buddha does not require any kind of instruments or outside aid. It can successfully deal with both materiality and mentality. It makes use of one's own mind for analytical purposes by fixing **bare attention** on the activities of materiality and mentality as they occur within oneself. By continually repeating

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<sup>656</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Handful of Leaves 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2014), 263–264. For more discussion on *viññāṇam anidassanam*, see also Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Handful of Leaves 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya*, expanded ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2016), 57.

this form of exercise, the necessary concentration can be gained, and when concentration is keen enough, the ceaseless course of arising and passing away of materiality and mentality will be vividly perceptible.<sup>657</sup> (Emphasis mine)

In this explanation, three factors that play significant roles in Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* are given. They are “bare attention” (*sati*), concentration,<sup>658</sup> and clear-comprehension (*sampajañña*) of the true nature of materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*). The latter is equivalent to knowledge of the three characteristics.

The first factor is “bare attention.” This, in his instruction, means fixing bare attention on the activities of materiality and mentality as they occur within oneself. It means to merely note all the successive events that arise through the six sense-doors without adding any judgment or comment. Six sense-doors here refers to the “seeing,” “hearing,” “smelling,” “tasting,” “touching,” and “thinking.” And the method for this practice is that while noting the events of these six sense-doors, meditators are instructed to mentally recite “seeing,” “hearing,” “smelling,” “tasting,” “touching,” and “thinking.” In other words, meditators are instructed to just observe the mental and physical phenomena that successively arise at the six sense-doors and at the same time mentally note “seeing,” “hearing,” “smelling,” “tasting,” “touching,” and “thinking” right at the moment the event is perceived without reacting or giving any commenting or adjusting.

This practice, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, can prevent the arising of a kind of wrong view that there is a self.<sup>659</sup> This particular wrong view involves perceiving experiences in terms of permanence, happiness, and self (*nicca*, *sukha*, and *atta*). In other words, it is the wrong understanding of the three characteristics—impermanence,

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<sup>657</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 3.

<sup>658</sup> The concentration that he refers to is momentary concentration, the lowest level of the three: momentary concentration, access concentration, and absorption concentration.

<sup>659</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 7–8.

suffering, and no-self (*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*). This wrong view, as Mahāsi Sayādaw says, is often possessed by ordinary people who think that there is an “I” or “Self” in any activity of the six sense-doors. And these bodily and mentally activities are permanent and joyful.<sup>660</sup> For example, in the case of seeing, people usually think that “it is the eye which actually sees,”<sup>661</sup> “seeing and eye are one and the same thing,”<sup>662</sup> or “seeing is I: I see things: eye and seeing and I are one and the same person.”<sup>663</sup>

According to Mahāsi Sayādaw, the reason people have this wrong view is because they do not know that “eye is one thing and seeing is another and there is no separate entity such as ‘I’ or ‘Ego.’”<sup>664</sup> To make the point clear, Mahāsi Sayādaw gives an example of a person sitting in a house and points out that the house and the person are two separate things, i.e., the house is not the person and the person is not the house. Another version of this point is an image of a person who see many things through a window of a room: it is the person who has the ability to see things, not the window. But without the window, the person is unable to see things outside of his room. Likewise, the act of seeing cannot take place without the eye.<sup>665</sup> Therefore, in his theory, meditators should carry out the practice of this bare attention (*sati*) until they are free from this wrong view. The detail of this practice, i.e., noting the six sense-doors: “seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking” is expounded as follows.

In the case of seeing, meditators should know the existence of two distinct elements—matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*). To be more specific, within the seeing one

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<sup>660</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 5–8.

<sup>661</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 5.

<sup>662</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 5.

<sup>663</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 5.

<sup>664</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 5.

<sup>665</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 5–6.

should know the eye, the visual object, and the seeing consciousness. The eye and visual object belong to the material group whereas the seeing consciousness belongs to the mental group. Therefore, noting “seeing,” in his insight meditation theory, means to note the existing elements in every act of the seeing. The existing elements that he refers to during the course of seeing are “a visual object,” “consciousness of seeing,” or “eye-base.”<sup>666</sup> In his explanation, in order to serve the purpose of the contemplation, meditators are instructed to notice any distinct element of these three as it appears in their awareness.<sup>667</sup> In addition to this, meditators are also instructed to mentally recite “seeing, seeing” right at the moment that the existing elements are perceived in the course of their noting.

Similarly, in the case of hearing, smelling, and tasting, Mahāsi Sayādaw also mentions two distinct elements of matter and mind that meditators should be aware of: ear and sound, nose and smell, tongue and flavor, belong to the material group (*rūpa*), whereas the sense of hearing that arises depending on the ear, the sense of smelling that arises depending on the nose, and the sense of tasting depending on the tongue belong to the mental group (*nāma*). Again, in his theory, in order to properly comprehend any one of these two kinds of matter and mind, meditators should mentally note “hearing,” “smelling,” and “tasting” on every occasion of hearing, smelling, and tasting, respectively, when any of the three existing elements of each sense are perceived by one’s awareness.<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>666</sup> The “eye base” is the place from which it sees. See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 8.

<sup>667</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 8.

<sup>668</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 8.

In the case of touching, Mahāsi Sayādaw also instructs meditators to note the existing elements that appear in their contemplation. As he explains, the sense-organ and impression of touch belong to *rūpa*, whereas the knowing of touch belongs to *nāma*. As in the other cases, in order to understand the matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*), the practice of mentally noting “touching, touching” should be carried out. According to him, the noting practice in this case is divided into two ways. With the common form of sensation of touch, meditators should simply note “touching, touching.” However, in the special forms associated with specific feelings such as, hot, tired, painful, etc., meditators should note “feeling hot, feeling tired, feeling painful, etc.”<sup>669</sup>

The case of touching also includes the sensations of touch in the hands, legs, and so forth, on each occasion of bending, stretching, or moving. These activities, when being noted, should also be seen in terms of matter and mind. The intention, the desire that wants to perform these activities, is considered the element of mind. The material activities such as stiffening, bending, stretching or moving belong to the matter. The touch consciousness, or the feeling, will arise on the collision of the material and sensitive qualities. According to Mahāsi Sayādaw, in these cases, the material activities are the predominating factors.<sup>670</sup>

With regard to the case of thought or imaginations, similarly, the practice of mentally noting “thinking,” or “imagining” also should be carried out. Mahāsi Sayādaw’s explanation of thinking is that the mind-base or the body belongs to the matter (*rūpa*) whereas thinking or imagining belongs to the element of mind (*nāma*). The mental activities are said to arise depending on the mind-base or the body. In other words, the

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<sup>669</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 8–9.

<sup>670</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 9.



activities of *nāma* arise based on the *rūpa*. In this case, Mahāsi Sayādaw also emphasizes that in order to rightly perceive matter and mind, meditators should mentally note “thinking, thinking,” or “imagining, imagining.”<sup>671</sup>

It should be noted that Mahāsi Sayādaw’s description of the practice of noting matter and mind that arise at the six sense-doors is described slightly differently from one treatise to another. For example, in the *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, *nāma* (the mental group) not only refers to the consciousness that arises in dependence on a corresponding sense door as described in *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, but it also includes the feeling (*vedanā*), perception of the object (*saññā*), and exertion to perceive the object, or mental volitional energy (*saṅkhāra*).<sup>672</sup> A variation also can be found in the description of the *Manual of Insight*. For instance, with regard to the factors that will appear in the course of seeing, whereas *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation* mentions only three factors, the *Manual of Insight* records five—(1) eye-sensitivity, (2) form base, (3) eye-consciousness, (4) the mental contact between eye and object, and (5) feelings that are pleasant, unpleasant, or neither unpleasant nor pleasant. Mahāsi Sayādaw states that meditators will experience one of these five factors from any of its four aspects, namely, characteristics, function, manifestation, and proximate cause.<sup>673</sup> The detailed description of these five factors in this treatise would also help to comprehend the underlying theory of “Mahāsi method” so it is included here.

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<sup>671</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 10.

<sup>672</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 25.

<sup>673</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 148.

- (i) Factors that appear in the course of seeing: (1) Eye-sensitivity:

When meditators experience their eye clearly, so that a visual object appears to it, the eye-sensitivity is then understood in terms of its *characteristic*. When meditators experience eye-sensitivity carrying their attention to an object, the eye-sensitivity is understood in terms of its *function*. When meditators experience eye-sensitivity as the basis for seeing, it is understood in terms of its *manifestation*. When meditators are aware of the solid, bodily eye, eye-sensitivity is understood from the aspect of its *proximate cause*.<sup>674</sup>

- (ii) Factors that appear in the course of seeing: (2) the visual object (form base):

The form base for seeing is the visual object, which is understood in terms of the four aspects such that when meditators rightly understand a visual object, they know that it appears to the eye. This is its *characteristic*. Its *function* is understood as it is seen. A visual object's *manifestation* is understood as it is an object of sight. Its *proximate cause* is understood as the four elements on which it is based. Mahāsi Sayādaw claims that this explanation is in accord with the Canonical description which states that "...understands the eye, understands forms..."<sup>675</sup> This explanation, he notes, is well-explained by the commentaries that "the eye-sensitivity and visible form are understood in terms of characteristic and function."<sup>676</sup>

With regard to the visual object, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, contemplating the physical body by seeing it broken—as it were—into its component organs and parts is not

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<sup>674</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 148.

<sup>675</sup> In the footnote, it is said that this quotation is based on the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (MN 10) and the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (DN 22). See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 546.

<sup>676</sup> This quotation, as noted in his treatises, is from the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, (*Dhīga-nikāya-aṭṭhakathā*). See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 546.

suitable for insight meditation, but rather for the sake of tranquility, because contemplating the body in terms of its parts would make it impossible to be aware of objects in terms of the four aspects. This point significantly contradicts the recommendation for body contemplation in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, where the body is to be observed in terms of its thirty-one<sup>677</sup> actual parts and various decomposing stages.<sup>678</sup>

(iii) Factors that appear in the course of seeing: (3) Eye-consciousness:

For eye-consciousness, it is also understood from any of the four following aspects. It occurs in the eye or sees visual forms. This is its *characteristic*. It takes only visible forms as its object or simply sees. This is its *function*. It is a meeting of the eye, a visual object, and sight. This is its *manifestation*. Its *proximate cause* is that it occurs because of attention, the conjunction of functioning eyes with visual objects, or good or bad karma.<sup>679</sup>

(iv) Factors that appear in the course of seeing: (4) Mental contact between eye and object:

When meditators accurately understand visual contact, they know that it contacts a visual object. This is its *characteristic*. It encounters a visual object. This is its *function*. It is a meeting of the eye, a visual object, and sight. This is its *manifestation*. And what that visual object gives rise to is called its *proximate cause*.<sup>680</sup>

(v) Factors that appear in the course of seeing: (5) Feelings that are pleasant, unpleasant, or neither unpleasant nor pleasant:

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<sup>677</sup> In a few places such as Khp. p.2 and Paṭi I.6, the body is described with thirty-two parts. This is because the brain is identified as a separate part whereas in other versions it is included in the bone marrow. For more detail, see Hamilton, *Identity and Experience*, 23–24.

<sup>678</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 148.

<sup>679</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 149.

<sup>680</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 149.

When meditators truly understand a feeling, they know the type of feeling that they experience. This is called its *characteristic*. Its *function* is perceived in terms of how it feels. Its *manifestation* is understood as the type of feeling that arises in the mind. And its *proximate cause* is perceived by the fact that it is caused by contact with a certain kind of feeling or a certain state of mind.<sup>681</sup>

This notion of the five factors in the course of noting “seeing, seeing” is, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, in line with what is described in the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*. To support his exposition, he quotes a passage which states that:

Bhikkhu, the eye should be fully understood, forms should be fully understood, eye-consciousness should be fully understood, mental contact between eye and form should be fully understood, and whatever feeling arises with mental contact whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant should be fully understood.<sup>682</sup>

And, his explanation of the four aspects—characteristics, function, manifestation and proximate cause—of these five factors is also found in the *Visuddhimagga*. In this commentary, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa states that:

By its means they remember (*saranti*), or it itself remembers, or it is just mere remembering (*sarana*), thus it is mindfulness (*sati*). It has the characteristic of not wobbling. Its function is not to forget. It is manifested as guarding, or it is manifested as the state of confronting an objective field. Its proximate cause is strong perception, or its proximate cause is the foundations of mindfulness concerned with the body, and so on (see MN 10). It should be regarded, however, as like a pillar because it is firmly founded, or as like a door-keeper because it guards the eye-door, and so on.<sup>683</sup>

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<sup>681</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 149.

<sup>682</sup> Patis; Vism. Translated by Vipassanā Metta Foundation Translation Committee. See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 150–151. In the treatise, Mahāsi Sayādaw says that this is the teaching of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*. However, the editors of the book state in the footnote that they can locate the exact quotation only in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and the *Visuddhimagga*. *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 35:25–27 does contain a similar teaching but with a slightly different emphasis. See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 546.

<sup>683</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, XVIII 141. The four aspects—characteristics, function, manifestation and proximate cause—are also mentioned at the beginning of the chapter XIV

These are the descriptions of noting the six sense-doors that Mahāsi Sayādaw explains in his treatises. However, it should be kept in mind that the practice of noting is not only applied to the abovementioned six sense-doors, but also to all activities that meditators are involved in such as sitting, walking, lying, eating, washing, etc. The noting is instructed to be precise in each activity. This can be seen, for example, in *Practical Insight Meditation* where Mahāsi Sayādaw provides detailed instruction for each activity in a series.

You must attend to the contemplation of every detail in the action of eating:  
When you look at the food, looking, seeing.  
When you arrange the food, arranging.  
When you bring the food to the mouth, bringing.  
When you bend the neck forwards, bending.  
When the food touches the mouth, touching.  
When placing the food in the mouth, placing.  
When the mouth closes, closing.  
When withdrawing the hand, withdrawing.  
Should the hand touch the plate, touching.  
When straightening the neck, straightening.  
When in the act of chewing, chewing.  
When you are aware of the taste, knowing.  
When swallowing the food, swallowing.  
While swallowing the food, should the food be felt touching the sides of the gullet, touching.<sup>684</sup>

In addition to the practice of noting the six sense-doors, another practice that is also taught in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s meditation system is observing the “rising” and “falling” of the abdomen. This practice is often recommended for beginners for it is more simplified and easier to do than noting the bodily and mental processes that constantly appear at the six sense-doors. It is reckoned to be an easy practice because the movements of the abdomen are coarse and prominent, which make it more suitable for

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Description of the Aggregates in Part III Understanding. See Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XIV 7.

<sup>684</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 20.

beginners to keep track of.<sup>685</sup> To practice this technique, meditators are instructed to mentally note “rising” and “falling” as they perceive the air coming into and going from their abdomen.

With regard to the practice of this method, Mahāsi Sayādaw instructs that it should be carried out in slow motion for the practice to produce a good result. In *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, he says:

During the course of practice it is most appropriate if a Yogi acts feebly and slowly in all activities just like a weak sick person. Perhaps the case of a person suffering from lumbago would be a more fitting example here. The patient must always be cautious and move slowly to avoid pains. In the same manner a Yogi should always try and keep to slow motions in all actions.<sup>686</sup>

The reason for slow motion practice is because, he explains, in the beginning stage, the powers of mindfulness, concentration, and insight of meditators are still weak. They cannot catch up with the movements of the physical and mental processes which are moving at their top speed. That’s why it is necessary to reduce the speed of these processes to the lowest gear so that mindfulness, concentration and knowledge can keep pace with them.<sup>687</sup> However, even though this slow motion is practiced by many, especially meditators in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s network, it is sometimes—as Cousins notes in his article “The Origin of Insight Meditation”—criticized by devotees of other schools of insight.<sup>688</sup> The notion of slow motion, in fact, can be found nowhere in the Pāli Canonical

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<sup>685</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 13; *Purpose of Practising Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 26.

<sup>686</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 22–23.

<sup>687</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 23. See also Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 42.

<sup>688</sup> An example of the criticisms, as Cousins notes, is disciples of Ajaan Naeb, a well-known Thai female teacher. See Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 42.

literature.<sup>689</sup> It seems this is an invention of either Mahāsi Sayādaw or his teacher Mingun Sayādaw.

In addition to partaking of these slow-motion exercises throughout the course of the training, Mahāsi Sayādaw also recommends meditators imitate a blind person. That is because a blind person cannot see: he never turns around to look at anything. Even if people come and talk to him, he never turns around. In the same way, meditators should not let their mind turn to anything other than their contemplation object alone, and always keep their noting in mind. Likewise, meditators are urged to behave like a deaf person. This is because a deaf person behaves in a composed manner. He never replies to any sound or talk for he never hears it. In the same manner, he says, meditators should restrain their senses, paying attention to their training instead of the distractions outside.<sup>690</sup> In other words, it seems that in the course of contemplating, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, meditators should shut down their senses to reduce outside distractions. “When he sees any sights, he must ignore them as if he does not see. So too, he must ignore voices or sounds as if he does not hear.”<sup>691</sup> For this reason, meditators at Mahāsi Sayādaw’s centers are often seen going about with an extremely slow walk, while usually keep their eyes looking down.

In explaining the way to practice noting at the six sense-doors and noting the rising and falling of the abdomen, Mahāsi Sayādaw interprets mindfulness (*sati*) as bare attention; this quality is strongly emphasized in his treatment. In his theory, the practice of noting fleeting events is considered the way to practice *sati* or mindfulness.<sup>692</sup>

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<sup>689</sup> Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 43.

<sup>690</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 23–24.

<sup>691</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 24.

<sup>692</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 7.

Meditators are asked to do nothing other than just noting matter and mind, i.e., the thoughts and actions that occur in the course of their contemplation.

According to Mahāsi Sayādaw, this interpretation of *sati* (bare attention) in practical context is based on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*'s teaching. To back up his point, Mahāsi Sayādaw quotes a concise instruction of the *sutta* on contemplation of feeling as an evidence: "When feeling a pleasant feeling, a bhikkhu understands: 'I feel a pleasant feeling.'"<sup>693</sup> He states that to practice *sati* means to just discern what happens in one's frames of reference (either the body, the feelings, the mind, or the *dhamma*).

However, it is evident that Mahāsi Sayādaw's interpretation of *sati* is not supported by the *suttas*. Nowhere in the *suttas* is *sati* rendered as bare attention. Instead, as discussed in previous chapters, *sati* or mindfulness is defined as memory, remembrance, the act of calling to the mind, or recollecting.<sup>694</sup> This interpretation of *sati* as bare attention, in fact, reflects Mahāsi Sayādaw's partial understanding of the teaching of *satipaṭṭhāna* in the *suttas* when taken as a whole. As shown in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*<sup>695</sup> only present a concise teaching but not a complete description. They answer only one part of the *satipaṭṭhāna* formula: to keep something in mind. The rest of the formula, such as how to develop skillful mental states and how to subdue the unskillful ones, which all conduce to the practice of meditation, is not included in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, but is included in other *suttas*.

Another example to demonstrate this point is that although the *suttas* state that meditators should train themselves to be sensitive to the entire body and to calm the

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<sup>693</sup> MN 10 translated by Vipassanā Metta Foundation Translation Committee. See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 195.

<sup>694</sup> For more detail, see the discussion on the quality of *sati* in Chapter Two.

<sup>695</sup> MN 10; DN 22.



bodily fabrication while breathing in and out, they do not explain how to do it. “He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.’”<sup>696</sup> This passage obviously provides only an outline teaching. In order to accurately understand these instructions, meditators have to examine other *suttas*. In this case, the instructions lacking in this *sutta* passage can be found in the *Kāyagatā-sati Sutta*<sup>697</sup> and the *Samādhanga Sutta*.<sup>698</sup> The explanation of the development of *jhānas* in these *suttas* is explicitly a supplement for the section just mentioned in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.<sup>699</sup>

Apparently, in the course of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, in addition to keeping the meditation object in mind, meditators have to apply the lessons they learned in the past together with their discernment in order to develop the meditation as a skill. Therefore, it is inaccurate to say that the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is to simply pay just bare attention to one’s meditation object. In this case, Mahāsi Sayādaw’s exposition of *sati* seems to reveal the fact that he has not fully captured the teaching on *satipaṭṭhāna* recorded in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, where different discourses often supplement one another in their articulations.<sup>700</sup>

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<sup>696</sup> MN 10; DN 22

<sup>697</sup> MN 119

<sup>698</sup> AN 5.28

<sup>699</sup> For more detail see Chapter Three.

<sup>700</sup> It is interesting to note that Mahāsi Sayādaw’s instruction of mentally noting the six sense-doors as “seeing, seeing, hearing, hearing, etc.,” while noting the arising of mental and physical phenomena occurring is similar to the *kaṣiṇa* method taught in the *Visuddhimagga*. In its description of concentration, the *Visuddhimagga* instructs meditators to mentally repeat, for instance, “earth, earth,” while staring at the earth *kaṣiṇa* to develop their *nimitta*, which in the end gives rise to access concentration. (Vism IV 21–32) Although this textual evidence is not sufficient to lead to the conclusion that it is the origin of the noting method that Mahāsi Sayādaw advocates, it at least makes a little sense base on the facts that: 1) Mahāsi Sayādaw assures in his treatises of *satipaṭṭhāna* that his explanation is based on the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. See *Practical Insight Meditation*, 5–8; 2) Mahāsi Sayādaw, like his predecessors, devoted significant time to commentarial study, especially the *Visuddhimagga*.

Despite its lack of doctrinal support, Mahāsi Sayādaw’s interpretation of *sati* as bare attention has been widely adopted by scholars and many modern-day meditation teachers. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a psychotherapist who is well known for his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program that is widespread in the United States, defines *sati* or mindfulness thus: “mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”<sup>701</sup> Another relatively well-known scholarly meditation teacher who also adopts this definition is the German monk, Venerable Nyanaponika Thera (1901-1994). In his book, the *Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, he says:

Bare Attention is the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us, at the successive moments of perception. It is called ‘bare’, because it attends just to the bare facts of a perception as presented through...the senses or through the mind...When attending to that sixfold sense impression, attention or mindfulness is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed, speech or by mental comment which may be one of self-reference (like, dislike, etc), judgement or refection. If during the time, short or long, given to the practice of Bare Attention, any such comments arise in one’s mind, they themselves are made objects of Bare Attention.<sup>702</sup>

Venerable Nyanaponika Thera’s interpretation of mindfulness (*sati*) as bare attention seems to be consistent. In another of his books, *The Power of Mindfulness*, he also provides a similar explanation of *sati* that

[Mindfulness] (*sati*) is mostly linked with clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) of the right purpose or suitability of an action, and other considerations. Thus, again, it is not viewed in itself. But to tap the actual and potential power of mindfulness it is necessary to understand and deliberately cultivate it in its basic, unalloyed form, which we shall call bare attention.<sup>703</sup>

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<sup>701</sup> Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, 4. See also Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness for Beginners*, 17.

<sup>702</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 30. One would not be surprised to come across this definition of mindfulness interpreted as bare attention or paying attention without judgment because both Nyanaponika Thera and Jon Kabat-Zinn are themselves followers of the Mahāsi method.

<sup>703</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Power of Mindfulness* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2014), 3.

His emphasis on the role of bare attention can be seen by his strong statement that bare attention is the key of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, which opens the door to mind's mastery and final liberation.<sup>704</sup>

Mahāsi Sayādaw's interpretation of *sati* as bare attention is also shared by Venerable Bhikkhu Anālayo. In his article, "The Bāhiya Instruction and Bare Awareness," he says:

The idea of bare attention has been criticized as requiring an elimination of time, as a recent innovation without a grounding in early Buddhist or traditional Theravāda thought and practice, and as not being at all relevant to the path to liberation. Yet, the instructions given to Bāhiya and Māluṅkyaputta undeniably involve a form of bare awareness. They entail precisely what Nyanaponika Thera describes when one "attends just to the bare facts of a perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind." In this way, "attention or mindfulness is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them." The discourses to Bāhiya and Māluṅkyaputta leave no doubt about the liberating potential of such bare awareness.<sup>705</sup>

In Ven. Bhikku Anālayo's perspective, mindfulness (*sati*) can be understood as bare attention, and the practice of this sort of mindfulness (bare attention) can lead to awakening. This view, according to him, is in line with the teachings recorded in the *Udāna (Bāhiya Sutta)* and *Samyutta Nikāya (Māluṅkyaputta Sutta)*. Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo uses as justification those instructions that the Buddha gives to both Bāhiya and Māluṅkyaputta to argue against other scholars and meditation teachers who might reject this view. The instructions that the Buddha gives Bāhiya are as follows:

Then, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then,

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<sup>704</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Power of Mindfulness*, 3.

<sup>705</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Bāhiya Instruction and Bare Awareness," *Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 19, (2018): 15–16.

Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress.<sup>706</sup>

In this *sutta* passage, the Buddha tells Bāhiya to train himself that in reference to the sensed there is only the sensed. On the surface, it may sound as though the Buddha is recommending a practice of bare awareness, as the language is quite similar. However, contrary to what Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo argues, the teaching of the Buddha in these cases is not about the practice of bare attention. The instructions to Bāhiya and Ven.

Mālun̄kyaputta, as Thānissaro Bhikkhu explains, seems to depict the teaching of training the mind in appropriate attention at a very high level of practice, which would shift the state of mind from equanimity to non-fashioning. Understanding this teaching is what leads Ven. Mālun̄kyaputta (and Bāhiya) to attain awakening and become an arahant. The instructions, on the surface, might sound like the practice of bare attention as venerable Bhikkhu Anālayo and others have described: i.e., simply noting what arises at the sense doors. However, this would be a simplistic interpretation. Thānissaro Bhikkhu points out, there is more going on here than just bare attention.

...The training is still operating on the conditioned level of cause and effect. It's something to be done. This means it's shaped by an intention, which in turn is shaped by a view. The intention and view are informed by the "result" part of the passage: The meditator wants to attain the end of stress and suffering, and so is willing to follow the path to that end. Thus, as with every other level of appropriate attention, the attention developed here is conditioned by right view—the knowledge that your present intentions are ultimately the source of stress—and motivated by the desire to put an end to that stress.<sup>707</sup>

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<sup>706</sup> Ud 1.10. For the instructions to Ven. Mālun̄kyaputta, see *Mālun̄kyaputta Sutta* in SN 35.95. Because the teachings in these two discourses are similar, here I provide only one direct quotation.

<sup>707</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Head and Heart Together: Essays on the Buddhist Path* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2016), 64.

In other words, the emphasis is on training, motivation, and action: even equanimity—the kind that allows a meditator to observe the content from the senses simply as such, without adding to it—is willed, intentional. To strengthen his argument, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu quotes the verse Ven. Mālunkyaputta uses to describes his understanding of the Buddha’s instruction—a verse that the Buddha affirms as correct—to explain that “[the practice] involves more than bare attention. It requires right view about how passion works and what’s necessary to thwart it.”<sup>708</sup>

Not impassioned with forms  
—seeing a form with mindfulness firm—  
dispassioned in mind,  
one knows  
and doesn’t remain fastened there.  
While one is seeing a form  
—and even experiencing feeling—  
it falls away and doesn’t accumulate.  
Thus one fares mindfully.  
Thus not amassing stress,  
one is said to be  
in the presence of Unbinding.  
(Similarly with sounds, aromas, flavors, tactile sensations, and mental qualities or ideas.)<sup>709</sup>

Obviously, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu’s explanation of the teaching in these *suttas* is significantly different from Bhikkhu Anālayo. Whereas Bhikkhu Anālayo believes that mindfulness in this case should be understood as bare attention without any reacting to the registering objects,<sup>710</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu argues that attention in this case is not really bare. Mindfulness entails keeping in mind an understanding of passion and the way of putting an end to it. A closer reading of the *sutta* passage in which Ven. Mālunkyaputta describes his understanding of the Buddha’s teaching shows that

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<sup>708</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Head and Heart Together*, 66.

<sup>709</sup> SN 35.95.

<sup>710</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, “The Bāhiya Instruction and Bare Awareness,” 15–16.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu’s view is more in line with the *sutta*’s instruction. As Ven.

Māluṅkyaputta reveals, the practice of in reference to the sensed there is only the sensed includes several factors that meditators have to develop intentionally: (1) retain a dispassioned mind toward sense objects, (2) do not fasten at the contact. All these factors indicate that at the contact with the sense objects, meditators are not only aware of the passion, the delight, and the craving that arise from such contact, but also have to keep in mind how to eliminate them. The duty of mindfulness here is to keep these things in mind. It is doing a lot more than just noting. This explanation of the Buddha’s instruction is greatly different from Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo’s interpretation.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu’s exposition on passion and the elimination of passion is also in accordance with the teaching on the origination and cessation of stress recorded in the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In the section on the origination of stress (*dukkha*), “the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion and delight, relishing now here and now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming”<sup>711</sup>—is seen as the cause. And, the craving is said to arise and dwell on the six senses, objects of the six senses, consciousness of the six senses, contact of the six senses, feeling born of the contact of six senses, perception of six senses, intention for six senses, craving for six senses, thought directed at six senses, and evaluation of six senses. The discourse then states that when passion on these is abandoned, that is how suffering is brought to the end.

And what is the noble truth of the cessation of stress? The remainderless fading and cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, and letting go of that very craving.

And where, when being abandoned, is this craving abandoned? And where, when ceasing, does it cease? Whatever seems endearing and agreeable in terms of the

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<sup>711</sup> DN 22

world: that is where, when being abandoned, this craving is abandoned. That is where, when ceasing, it ceases.

And what seems endearing and agreeable in terms of the world? The eye seems endearing and agreeable in terms of the world. That is where, when being abandoned, this craving is abandoned. That is where, when ceasing, it ceases.

(Similarly with the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the intellect, objects of the six senses, consciousness of the six senses, contact of the six senses, feeling born of the contact of six senses, perception of six senses, intention for six senses, craving for six senses, thought direct at six senses, and evaluation of six senses.)<sup>712</sup>

In addition to these, in the *suttas*, meditators are instructed not only to discern the appearance of mental objects, but also to know how they arise and pass away—and this means knowing and keeping in mind the activities and processes by which they are created, not just passively seeing the sense objects float up to the surface and fizzle out. Sense experience cannot itself be noted out of existence, but the component of experience that leads to stress can be abandoned if the practice of concentration is developed to the point where those components of experience processing can be distinguished from each other. That particularly pernicious component—that “fetter”—is the desire that arises in conjunction with the sense, the eye, per se. In the words of the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*: “There is the case where he discerns the eye, he discerns forms, he discerns the fetter that arises dependent on both. He discerns how there is the arising of an unarisen fetter. And he discerns how there is the abandoning of a fetter once it has arisen. And he discerns how there is no future arising of a fetter that has been abandoned.”<sup>713</sup> So only when one discerns all of the activities that comprise experience, through carefully developing a concentration practice, can one ultimately discern that “the future arising of a fetter” has been prevented. This kind of mindfulness that leads to this ultimate objective involves

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<sup>712</sup> DN 22

<sup>713</sup> DN 22

acts of memory and a more active and actively reflective approach than bare attention. And so the interpretation of *sati* as bare attention that Mahāsi Sayādaw, Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo and others meditation exponents suggest again seems not to be supported by the *suttas*. This controversy may seem like a lot of fuss over a minor issue, but the issue is not minor, for two reasons: (1) Advocates of the Mahāsi method base their claims for the objectivity of the method on the idea that bare awareness is free of any other mental factors that would color it in any way; (2) As Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu point out, if the existence of these factors is denied even when they are present, that prevents true insight into the workings of the mind.<sup>714</sup>

#### **4.7.3 Concentration in Mahāsi Sayādaw's Treatment of *Satipaṭṭhāna***

In Mahāsi Sayādaw's theory, the practice of bare attention—merely noting the matter and mind that arise at the six sense-doors—is said to help develop concentration. As he says, meditators will find that their mind no longer wanders but stays with their meditation object. In addition, the power of noting also improves. On every act of noting, meditators only notice two processes of matter and mind. As a consequence, a parallel set of matter and mind that results from the noting itself comes into existence. However, meditators then will notice that nothing remains permanent but everything is in a state of flux as they proceed their contemplation.<sup>715</sup> This brief description provides a clue for the understanding of concentration practice developed in bare insight meditation.

As mentioned earlier, in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, Mahāsi Sayādaw advocates the practice of dry insight meditation and forgoing the cultivation of *jhānas* or right concentration, but he still promises the possibility of full awakening. Mahāsi Sayādaw

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<sup>714</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Right Mindfulness*, 79.

<sup>715</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 10.



makes this claim in several treatises. This is what he says, for example, in the *Manual of Insight*:

A person who develops one of the three kinds of concentration and insight knowledge of the three universal characteristics can attain *arahantship* and solve the problem of attachment...It is clear, following the above sub-commentary[the *Visuddhimagga-mahāṭīkā*], that those who take the vehicle of insight to enlightenment need not develop access or absorption concentration. Momentary concentration alone is enough for them to bring about the mental purification required for path knowledge and fruition knowledge.<sup>716</sup>

This is to say, in his theory of dry insight meditation, as Gil Fronsdal,<sup>717</sup> Robert H. Sharf,<sup>718</sup> and L.S. Cousins<sup>719</sup> all carefully articulated, meditators only need to develop momentary concentration, the weakest degree among the three forms of concentration. And momentary concentration for him would be sufficient for the attainment of even *arahantship*. To reiterate, it can be said that right concentration or the development of *jhānas*, is rendered unnecessary in Mahāsi Sayādaw's dry insight meditation theory.

It should be acknowledged that Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to be aware of the fundamental importance of concentration. Right at the beginning of *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, Mahāsi Sayādaw says—as most Buddhist masters would say—that concentration, together with virtue and discernment, form the core teachings of the Buddha. This is the common understanding held by most Buddhist communities. In addition to cultivating virtue and discernment, Mahāsi Sayādaw agrees that meditators should develop concentration. In his definition, concentration is a fixed and tranquil state of mind that has the function of preventing thoughts from wandering. In this treatise, Mahāsi Sayādaw divides concentration into two forms—ordinary concentration and

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<sup>716</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 49.

<sup>717</sup> Fronsdal, "Insight Meditation in the United States," 163–180.

<sup>718</sup> Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism," 255.

<sup>719</sup> Cousins, "The Origin of Insight Meditation," 43.

supramundane concentration. Ordinary concentration includes the four form *jhānas* (*rūpa-jhānas*) and four formless *jhāna* (*arūpa jhānas*). It is called ordinary concentration because through the development of these two types of absorptions meditators can only be reborn in the Brahma world, which does not free one from the cycle of death and rebirth. Supramundane concentration, on the other hand, is nothing but Path and Fruition Concentration (*magga samādhi* and *phala samādhi*), which will be attained by developing wisdom.<sup>720</sup>

With regard to this supramundane concentration, Mahāsi Sayādaw, however, does not provide further elaboration. In his explanation of dry insight meditation in *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, he mentions only briefly that by continuously practicing this method meditators will gain personal experience of highly developed concentration. This, as he says, is a pure state of concentration that meditators have never known before, and they will enjoy many innocent pleasures as a result of this advanced concentration.<sup>721</sup> However, this notion could lead to some confusion as it pertains to Mahāsi Sayādaw's viewpoint on advanced concentration. But what Mahāsi Sayādaw is really promoting is just the dry insight meditation, which totally forgoes the cultivation of *jhānas*. His theory, as mentioned above, asserts that the only form of concentration needed for this approach is momentary concentration.<sup>722</sup> This does lead one to wonder what kind of advanced concentration is being taught in Mahāsi Sayādaw's method. And it begs the question: should momentary concentration be considered as advanced concentration?

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<sup>720</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 2.

<sup>721</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34.

<sup>722</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 46–49.

Despite the fact that Mahāsi Sayādaw is following the commentaries in promoting the notion of bare insight meditation, his understanding of concentration seems to go past the commentaries. This can be seen in his statement that “momentary concentration alone is enough for them to bring about the mental purification required for path knowledge and fruition knowledge.”<sup>723</sup> In the commentaries, mental purification needs at least the degree of access concentration. To explain this issue, Mahāsi Sayādaw argues that:

But is it not said in the Commentaries that the term “purification of mind” applies only to access concentration and fully absorbed concentration? That is true; but one has to take this statement in the sense that momentary concentration is included in access concentration. For in the *Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* it is said: “The remaining twelve exercises are subjects of meditation leading only to Access Concentration.” Now, in the case of the subjects dealt with in the sections of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* on postures, clear comprehension and elements, the concentration of one who devotes himself to these exercises will be definitely only momentary concentration. But as the latter is able to suppress the hindrances just as access concentration does, and since it is the neighbourhood of the noble-path attainment concentration, therefore that same momentary concentration is spoken of by the name of “access” (or “neighbourhood”) and also the meditation subjects that produce that momentary concentration are called “meditation subjects leading to access concentration.” Hence it should be understood that momentary concentration, having the capacity to suppress the hindrances, has also the right to the name “access” and “purification of mind.” Otherwise purification of mind could not come about in one who has made bare insight his vehicle by employing only insight, without having produced either access concentration or fully absorbed concentration.<sup>724</sup>

In this argument, Mahāsi Sayādaw tries to explain that momentary concentration is included in access concentration. As a result, he assigns all the powers of access concentration to momentary concentration arriving at the conclusion that momentary concentration has similar power as access concentration and absorption concentration in terms of bringing about mental purification, a necessary condition in bare insight meditation for awakening to take place. Momentary concentration also possesses the

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<sup>723</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 49.

<sup>724</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 7–8.

capacity to suppress the five hindrances. This point seems to go beyond the view of the commentaries.

A similar argument is made in *A Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma*. In this book, Mahāsi Sayādaw explains that the momentary concentration that he refers to is actually access concentration. The reason he explains it in terms of momentary concentration is so that it can be in line with the teachings of the commentary and the subcommentary.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, momentary concentration for insight is mentioned as momentary unification of the mind (*khaṇika-cittekaggatā*); in its Subcommentary it is referred to as concentration lasting for a moment (*khaṇamattaṭṭhitiko samādhi*). Thus based on the authority of the Commentary and the Subcommentary, we have employed the term “momentary concentration for insight” to describe the concentration which is, by virtue of identity, access concentration.<sup>725</sup>

If this is the case, then, this argument would directly contradict the statement he repeatedly makes in his teaching of bare insight meditation that this form of practice does not need access concentration or absorption concentration.

It seems that Mahāsi Sayādaw’s understanding of concentration is both not consistent on its own terms and also not in line with the *suttas*. First, nowhere in the *suttas* is it mentioned that concentration is divided into such forms as ordinary and supramundane. Instead, the *suttas* provide a clear definition of right concentration as the four *jhānas*. For example, the *Magga-Vibhaṅga Sutta: An Analysis of the Path* defines concentration in this way.

And what, monks, is right concentration? (i) There is the case where a monk — quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful (mental) qualities — enters and remains in the first *jhāna*: rapture and pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. (ii) With the stilling of directed

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<sup>725</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *A Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma*, trans. U Ko Lay, ed. Bhikkhu Pesala, rev. ed. (Rangoon: Buddha Sāsānānuggaha Organization, 2013), 67–69, Kindle.

thoughts and evaluations, he enters and remains in the second *jhāna*: rapture and pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation — internal assurance. (iii) With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, and alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters and remains in the third *jhāna*, of which the Noble Ones declare, “Equanimous and mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.” (iv) With the abandoning of pleasure and pain — as with the earlier disappearance of elation and distress — he enters and remains in the fourth *jhāna*: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This, monks, is called right concentration.<sup>726</sup>

This *sutta* passage describes four levels of *jhāna*. The first level consists of rapture and pleasure which arise from directed thought and evaluation. When concentration is getting stronger, coarse factors are dropped gradually. In the second level of *jhāna*, unification of mind is said to be free from directed thought and evaluation. Then rapture is dropped in the third *jhāna*, leaving meditators with just pleasure and singleness of preoccupation. In the fourth level of *jhāna*, the mind is free from pleasure and pain, leaving only purity of equanimity and singleness of preoccupation. Right concentration is depicted in terms of these four *jhānas*.

Secondly, in the *suttas*, liberating insight is said to be able to arise in either the first, second, third, or fourth *jhāna*.<sup>727</sup> In other words, the *jhānas* in the Buddha’s teachings play a crucial role: their cultivation is a requisite condition for liberating insight. In his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* or dry insight meditation, Mahāsi Sayādaw, however, seems to ignore this point. His explanation of concentration seems to reveal that although he briefly came across the teaching of the four *jhānas*,<sup>728</sup> his understanding of the last factor of the noble eightfold path—right concentration—is insufficient. With the statement that development of right concentration is necessary only for those who take

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<sup>726</sup> SN 45.8

<sup>727</sup> AN 9.36

<sup>728</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practicing Kammatṭhāna Meditation*, 4–5, 15–17.

the vehicle of *samatha* but not for the ones who follow the vehicle of pure *vipassanā*,<sup>729</sup> he renders the eighth factor of the noble eightfold path superfluous.

#### **4.7.4 *Sampajañña* and Liberating Insight in Mahāsi Sayādaw's Teaching of *Vipassanā* Meditation**

Mahāsi Sayādaw's understanding of the purpose of the practice is well described in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. As he says, when meditators continue their meditation, they will notice that matter and mind (*rūpa* and *nāma*) are subjects of impermanence, suffering, and no-self. This clear-comprehension of the three characteristics of the matter and mind is the second quality that also plays a central role in Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. And, the realization of the three characteristics, *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*—or impermanence, suffering, and no-self—is considered the goal of *vipassanā* practice. It is because, according to him, this realization helps to eliminate *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—the view that there is a self—an erroneous view that exposes people to all kinds of samsaric danger.<sup>730</sup>

So, in addition to practicing bare attention as discussed above, meditators should also try to see the two distinct elements—materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*), which constitute each and every activity of the six sense-doors—as impermanent, suffering, and no-self. This is how *sampajañña*, the second key quality of dry insight meditation, is developed in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. In other words, in dry *vipassanā* practice, in addition to cultivating the quality of *sati* by paying bare attention to the fleeting phenomena arising and vanishing at the six sense-doors, meditators should also develop the quality of *sampajañña* by noting how these mental and physical activities are subject

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<sup>729</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 6.

<sup>730</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 6–7.

to the three characteristics. Note that this exposition of *sampajañña* is in line with the commentaries, as discussed in Chapter Two.<sup>731</sup>

Mahāsi Sayādaw not only emphasizes the quality of *sampajañña* for practice, but he also identifies it as the discernment factor.<sup>732</sup> This can be seen by the fact that, in his theory, the development of *sampajañña* (clear-comprehension) which is understood as seeing things in terms of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*—impermanence, suffering, and no-self—will subsequently become insight into the three characteristics upon its consummation. Here, it seems Mahāsi Sayādaw equates *sampajañña* with *vipassanā*, a theory promoted in the commentaries.<sup>733</sup> Indeed, as in the commentaries, Mahāsi Sayādaw never separates these two qualities in his treatment. However, as mentioned in Chapter Two, this explanation of *sampajañña* is considerably different from the *suttas*. In the *suttas*, *sampajañña* is simply defined as being aware of what is happening to one's meditation while it is happening, and it is never equated with *vipassanā*.<sup>734</sup>

With regard to the explanation of awakening, Mahāsi Sayādaw, like the commentaries, only emphasizes the insight into the three characteristics. Insight into the four noble truths or dependent co-arising, which are repeatedly underscored in the *suttas*, is almost ignored.<sup>735</sup> The first insight of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā* meditation is *aniccānupassanā-ñāna*. According to Mahāsi Sayādaw, in the course of noting the matter and mind at the six sense-doors, meditators will realize that nothing remains permanent.

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<sup>731</sup> For more detail, see the discussion on the discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries concerning their explanations of *sampajañña* in Chapter Two.

<sup>732</sup> Like Mahāsi Sayādaw, Sayādaw U Silānanda, a student of him, also identifies the quality of *sampajañña* as the discernment factor. See Sayādaw U Silānanda, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, 11.

<sup>733</sup> For more detail, see the discussion on the discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries concerning their explanations the discernment factor in Chapter Two.

<sup>734</sup> See section 2.2.2 in Chapter Two for a discussion on the quality of *sampajañña* in the *suttas*.

<sup>735</sup> See section 2.2.3 in Chapter Two for a discussion on the discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries in their explanations of the three characteristics.

They will notice that things keep arising and vanishing. In *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, he says: “One is therefore convinced that ‘things are not permanent’ because it is noticed that they arise and vanish at every time of noting. This is “insight into impermanence” (*aniccānupassanā-ñāna*).”<sup>736</sup>

The second insight is insight into suffering, or *dukkhānupassanā-ñāna*. It is realized by recognizing that the arising and vanishing are not desirable. Mahāsi Sayādaw also points out another way in which the insight into suffering is also realized: namely, when meditators feel the body as a collection of suffering as they note the uncomfortable sensations that they experience, such as tiredness, feeling hot, pain, and aching.<sup>737</sup>

Another insight is insight into the absence of a self, or *anattānupassanā-ñāna*. This insight is achieved, as Mahāsi Sayādaw explains, by realizing that elements of matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*) occur according to their nature and condition, and not according to the wish of meditators. As a result, meditators are persuaded that “they are elements; they are not governable, they are not a person or living entity.”<sup>738</sup>

Insight into the three characteristics occupies a significant position in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory. It is repeatedly mentioned in his treatises.<sup>739</sup> In his view, meditators can achieve awakening based on this realization: insight into the three characteristics. As he says: “When a Yogi has fully developed the Insights into Impermanence, Suffering, and Absence of A Self, he will realize Nirvana. From time immemorial, Buddhas, Arhats

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<sup>736</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 10.

<sup>737</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 10.

<sup>738</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 10–11.

<sup>739</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 11, 34; Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 23, 39; Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 43.



and Holy Ones realized Nirvana by this mean of *Vipassanā*. It is the high way leading to Nirvana.”<sup>740</sup>

With regard to Mahāsi Sayādaw’s elaboration of the purpose and the attainment of bare insight meditation, there are a number of crucial issues that need to be addressed.

(1) The first issue is his explanation of the third characteristic—*anattā*. In his treatment, Mahāsi Sayādaw seems explain the *anattā* teaching as a no-self teaching, whose purpose is to deny a permanent metaphysical self. This can be seen, for example, in his explanation of the practice of bare attention discussed above, particularly in the case of seeing: according to him, there is no separate entity besides the act of seeing and the eye. “Eye is one thing and seeing is another and there is no separate entity such as ‘I’ or ‘Ego.’”<sup>741</sup> This way of elaborating the doctrine of *anattā* is in line with the commentaries. As discussed in Chapter Two, the commentaries also indicate that, for instance, in the activity of looking, there is no self which doing the looking. It is simply the operation of the physical and mental elements.<sup>742</sup> This, again, is different from the *suttas*. The discussion in Chapter Two shows that the doctrine of *anattā* is explained in the *suttas* simply as a strategy to foster dispassion for the sake of gaining release. And, according to the *suttas*, views such as “there is a self,” or “there is no self” are wrong views that should be put aside.<sup>743</sup>

(2) The second issue concerns Mahāsi Sayādaw’s exposition of the awakening. In Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory, the accomplishment of *vipassanā* practice, i.e., the attainment

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<sup>740</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34.

<sup>741</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 5.

<sup>742</sup> Bodhi and Buddhaghosa, *The Fruits of Reclusheship*, 113–117. See also Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 81, 85–86.

<sup>743</sup> See section 2.2.3 in Chapter Two for a discussion of the discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries in their explanations of the three characteristics.

of awakening, will help meditators realize that there is no self can be found in anything within one's experience. In other words, in gaining awakening, one will see by oneself the separate existence of two elements *rūpa* (materiality) and *nāma* (mentality), and one also clearly sees that there is no any person, nor any living entity, nor any self to be found in these two elements (*rūpa* and *nāma*). It seems Mahāsi Sayādaw equates knowledge of the three characteristics with knowledge that results from awakening. This is in line with the teaching presented in the commentaries. As mentioned in Chapter Two,<sup>744</sup> in *The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta Commentary*, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa also states that when practitioners realize this no-self teaching they are said to have achieved the first level of awakening.<sup>745</sup> This, however, is not in line with the *suttas*. In the *suttas*, knowledge that results from awakening is always described in terms of the four noble truths or in terms of dependent co-arising. The three characteristics presented in the *suttas* simply serve as a tool to complete those truths, but not for the sake of the realization of no self. Indeed, nowhere in the *suttas* is it said that in gaining awakening one comes to the conclusion that there is no self.

(3) Mahāsi Sayādaw treats the three characteristics as a categorical teaching, something that is true and right in all situations. In his treatment, meditators are told to see all activities in their meditation as *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* (impermanence, suffering, and no-self). This is in line with the commentaries. As presented in Chapter Two, the commentaries also considerably emphasize the three characteristics in their

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<sup>744</sup> See section 2.2.3 in Chapter Two for a discussion of the discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries in their explanations of the three characteristics.

<sup>745</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 49–50.

explanation of every single *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>746</sup> Unlike the commentaries, the *suttas* do not treat the three characteristics as a categorical teaching, but rather, they are selectively taught at appropriate occasions only. The teaching may not always be relevant. For example, if one saw the result of either skillful and unskillful actions as impermanence, suffering, and no-self, it would dissuade one from cultivating the factor of right effort: to develop what is skillful and to abandon what is not.<sup>747</sup> In fact, there are times the Buddha condemned monks for applying it inappropriately.<sup>748</sup> In the *suttas*, the four noble truths and the skillful and unskillful conduct<sup>749</sup> are treated as categorical teachings, something that is always true and always relevant and can be applied at any circumstance of the practice.

(4) Furthermore, Mahāsi Sayādaw’s explanation of bare insight meditation seems to suggest that right view should be understood in terms of the three characteristics, and that the purpose of the practice of bare insight meditation is to arrive at this right view—the realization of no-self. This is very different from the *suttas*. The path leading to liberation in the *suttas* does not end with the realization of right view, but with unbinding, total release. In the *suttas*’ description, right view is the first factor of the path leading to liberation, a condition for the rest of the path, and a factor that continues to be developed and refined as one goes along the path. Right view is not defined in terms of the three characteristics, but in terms of the understanding of the four noble truths. The *suttas*’ definition of right view is as follows: “And, what is right view? Knowledge with

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<sup>746</sup> See section 2.2.3 in Chapter Two for a discussion on the discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries in their explanations of the three characteristics.

<sup>747</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Mirror of Insight* (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2020), 9.

<sup>748</sup> For more detail, see section 2.2.3 in Chapter Two for a discussion on the discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries in their explanations of the three characteristics.

<sup>749</sup> AN 2.18

reference to stress, knowledge with reference to the origination of stress, knowledge with reference to the cessation of stress, knowledge with reference to the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: This is called right view.”<sup>750</sup> Because it acts as a navigation course for the path, any kind of practice must fall under this right view—i.e., the four noble truths—in order to be categorized as right practice. And it is worth mentioning again that the purpose of the practice indicated in the *suttas* is to release the mind from all kinds of craving and attachment but not simply for the purpose of leading to right view. Even though right view is described as a crucial tool in this process, at the last stage, when its job has completed, it also needs to be abandoned.<sup>751</sup> Only when right view is finally abandoned, after having done its work, is the mind fully unbound.

#### 4.7.5 Quick Awakening in Bare Insight Meditation

Another significant issue in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is the claim of quick awakening. According to Mahāsi Sayādaw, hundreds of his students have attained awakening as they practice the method of bare insight meditation. In *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, Mahāsi Sayādaw states that, with the assistance of the bare insight meditation approach, meditators are able to attain nibbana in a short time.

They will also learn the practical knowledge of Impermanence, Suffering, and the Absence of A Self by having a direct personal experience of the actual facts, and then realize Nirvana on the full development of these knowledges. It will not take long to achieve the objective, possibly one month, or twenty days, or fifteen days; or on rare occasions even in seven days for a select few with extraordinary Perfection.<sup>752</sup>

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<sup>750</sup> MN 141

<sup>751</sup> MN 22

<sup>752</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34.

One of the reasons Mahāsi Sayādaw explains for the quick awakening attainments is the right teaching approach. This is expounded in the *Fundamentals of Vipassanā*

*Meditation:*

Some modern meditation teachers do not know how to teach to suit the dispositions of their students. They speak to them in ways that do not suit their temperaments. As a result, they become discouraged and go home. However, some teachers know what to say, and their disciples, who thought to stay only a few days, are encouraged to stay and gain insight. It is very important to teach to suit the disposition of the listeners. No wonder, then, that thousands of people gained insight at the end of a discourse by the Buddha.<sup>753</sup>

With the right teaching approach, he claims, meditators are able to achieve awakening in a very short time. It seems that Mahāsi Sayādaw asserts that his dry insight meditation is the right teaching approach that helps meditators achieve at least the first level of awakening. As he says:

Among the audience there may be one or two who have attained perfections like those people in the days of the Buddha, and there will be those whose perfections have matured after many days or months of training. These few can gain insight while listening to the *Dhamma* now. If you cannot get it now, you will get it very soon if you go on working. Those who have never worked before have now learned the right method.<sup>754</sup>

Pertaining to awakening experience, it is significant to learn that, in the *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, Mahāsi Sayādaw reveals his own attainment together with hundreds of students who train under his instructions: “Here in the audience are lots of meditators who have come to this stage of knowledge. I am not speaking from my own experience alone. No, not even from the experience of forty or fifty disciples of mine. There are hundreds of them.”<sup>755</sup> Noble attainments, indeed, seem not to be that

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<sup>753</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 94–95.

<sup>754</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 94–95.

<sup>755</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 67.

uncommon within his training system. As Ingrid Jordt notes, many lay instructors of the Mahāsi system claimed to be or were approved to be stream-winners.<sup>756</sup>

It should be noted that quick awakening attainment had been claimed by other contemporary meditation teachers in Burma as well, such as Sunlun Sayādaw, U Ba Khin or their students.<sup>757</sup> It seems that this was a relatively common phenomenon in Burma during this period. This can be seen in, for instance, a pamphlet published by U Ba Khin's center, the *Personal Experience of Candidates (Buddhists and non-Buddhists)*.<sup>758</sup> The pamphlet introduces "Mr. A," a European businessman who attained *sotapatti* (stream-winner, the first stage of awakening) after training under U Ba Khin for only two days. The pamphlet states that in order to test Mr. A's attainment, U Ba Khin asked him to "go into the fruition state (*phala*) with a vow to rise up just after 5 minutes,"<sup>759</sup> which he performed successfully. Subsequently, Mr. A was tested again for fifteen minutes. But U Ba Khin was not satisfied with Mr. A's performance until Mr. A demonstrated that he could enter "Nibbana" at will. It is because according to U Ba Khin's reading of the *Visuddhimagga*, "the real test as to whether one has become an *Ariya* lies in his ability to go in to the fruition state (*phala*) as he may like."<sup>760</sup> Although such a mental state is similar to *jhāna*, which U B Khin might have been aware of, he assures that "an experienced teacher alone will be able to differentiate between the two."<sup>761</sup>

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<sup>756</sup> Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 18.

<sup>757</sup> Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism," 263.

<sup>758</sup> Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism," 276. As Sharf notes, this pamphlet is reproduced in part in Winston Lee King, *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), 126–132.

<sup>759</sup> King, *Theravāda Meditation*, 130.

<sup>760</sup> King, *Theravāda Meditation*, 131.

<sup>761</sup> King, *Theravāda Meditation*, 132. See also Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism," 262–263.

Similar to U Ba Khin, Mahāsi Sayādaw also describes that the state of *sotapanna* and the insights that have been achieved can be re-attained at will. As he says:

If a *Sotapanna* practices *vipassanā* meditation with a view to getting to the state of *phala*, which he has once acquired, he will reach “*phala-sammapatti*” and remain in that state for a duration of five or ten minutes or half an hour or one hour as he may predetermine. If he is an adept in his practice of “*phala-sammapatti*,” he can easily get himself absorbed in that state for a whole day or a whole night or longer.<sup>762</sup>

From his description of awakening, it is interesting to learn that the awakening state that meditators have achieved is not a permanent state. In his explanation, the awakening state disappeared after a certain period of time and in order to attain it again meditators have to repeat the *vipassanā* meditation practice as usual. The only difference compared to the first time is that meditators can re-attain it with less effort. In addition, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory, if meditators wish to achieve a higher state, they have to develop the previous insights all the way to the most current highest level before they can persist to the next one.

If he or she contemplates the aggregates of attachment in the same way as already mentioned to realize the higher paths and fruitions, insight knowledge will develop from the stage of arising and passing away in the same serial order as before and on full maturity he or she will realize *nibbāna* with the path and fruition of Once-returning (*Sakadāgāmi magga phala*), and will become a Once-returner (*Sakadāgāmi*).<sup>763</sup>

Mahāsi Sayādaw provides such a detailed description of the fruition states of awakening from stream-entry all the way to arahant level in treatises such as *Practical of Insight and Meditation and Its Forty Objects*, or *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*.

His personal experience has become the authoritative word to practitioners in his

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<sup>762</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 47.

<sup>763</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Buddhist Meditation and Its Forty Subjects*, 20. See also *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 47–48.

tradition.<sup>764</sup> For instance, Steve Armstrong, one of the members of the *Vipassanā Metta* Foundation Translation Committee, claims that:

Mahāsi Sayādaw lays out in plain language what a meditator is likely to experience through their practice and how they can come to understand those experiences as falling along a spectrum of unfolding insights known as the progress of insight. This clear articulation of the path of practice and of unfolding insight knowledges sets Mahāsi Sayādaw's teaching apart from those of other modern Buddhist teachers. The venerable Sayādaw's "Practical Instructions" provides a map of uncommon clarity that will confidently guide and encourage anyone willing to make the effort.<sup>765</sup>

Armstrong's unquestioning high praise of Mahāsi Sayādaw's method and teaching style reflect the sentiment of many western teachers, which might be one explanation for how these teachings have been disseminated so widely.

However, such claim of awakening in the *vipassanā* tradition has encountered objections. This can be seen in the observations of Robert H. Sharf, a contemporary Buddhist scholar. In his article, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," Sharf notes the comments of Vimalo Bhikkhu, a Western monk who trained under various teachers in Southeast Asian for several years. Vimalo Bhikkhu takes issue with the legitimacy of quick awakening. According to him:

There are some meditation schools which claim that certain experiences occurring during the course of practice are the attainment of stream-entry [*sotapatti*]. These often are remarkable meditation experiences but are in no way related to the true experience of stream-entry which is nothing other than the seeing of Nibbana. Some schools of *vipassanā* meditation say that a particular experience in which the meditator loses consciousness is the experience of stream-entry. This may have some significance but the genuine experience of stream-entry is something quite different. Considering these various explanations of stream-entry, it really does seem that the genuine experience has become rather rare.... The Buddha said that a *Sotapanna* could not be reborn in the lower realms of existence and would certainly within seven life-times realizes complete liberation. Because of this

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<sup>764</sup> Daniel M. Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha: An Unusually Hardcore Dharma Book* (London: Aeon Books Ltd, 2008), 467.

<sup>765</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, xxv.



people, seeking security, imagine all sorts of insights and unusual experiences to be stream-entry and so delude themselves.<sup>766</sup>

While the criticism of Vimalo Bhikkhu is aimed at *vipassanā* teachers in general for misperceiving certain mental experiences during the course of their meditation with the first level of awakening, other scholars and traditionalist monks have directly objected to Mahāsi Sayādaw's teaching of insight meditation, and disregard its claims of offering quick liberation as untenable.

#### 4.7.6 Objections to the “Mahāsi Method”

In the second half of the last century, while enjoying a soaring popularity both within Burma and overseas, Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* or his teaching of dry insight also received strong objections from both monastics and scholars. Right after it spread to Sri Lanka in the late 1950s, the teaching was attacked in various books and magazines. Among these criticisms are the objections of Sri Lankan traditionalist monks such as Soma Thera, Kassapa Thera, and Kheminda Thera, who “castigated [Mahāsi's Sri Lanka] centers for teaching unorthodox methods that threatened the true *Dhamma* and endangered both the institution of Buddhism and Buddhists themselves.”<sup>767</sup> For instance, in a series of critical essays in his book the *Protection of the Sambuddha Sasana*, Kassapa Thera criticized Mahāsi Sayādaw for using the belly as a focal point for breathing meditation rather than the tip of the nose as instructed in the *Visuddhimagga*. He also blamed practitioners of the Mahāsi method who “do not exhibit the calm,

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<sup>766</sup> Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 262. See also Vimalo Bhikkhu, “Awakening to the Truth” (Mimeograph copy, n.d.), 64.

<sup>767</sup> George D. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation, and Response* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 163.

concentrated, happy look mentioned in the texts.”<sup>768</sup> Kheminda Thera, in addition, called the Mahāsi approach an illegitimate “shortcut” that lacked canonical sanction. In particular, Kheminda Thera argued that *jhāna* must be developed before *vipassanā*.<sup>769</sup> Cousins also shares this view as he refuses to discuss the Mahāsi method, for to him it is an innovation of Mahāsi Sayādaw rather than a derivation of the canonical teaching.<sup>770</sup>

Scholars in Indian Buddhism also note some psychological problems that practitioners of the Mahāsi method suffered as a result of his technique.<sup>771</sup> Traditionalists have pointed out problems caused by Mahāsi Sayādaw’s teaching method such as, “strange physical sensations, swaying, trembling, and even loss of consciousness.” Sangharakshita, in *A Survey of Buddhism*, says that the Mahāsi method could lead to extreme nervous tension and to a schizoid state for which he coined the term “alienated awareness.” Sangharakshita shares that “On my return to England in 1964 I met twelve or fourteen people who were suffering from severe mental disturbance as a direct result of practicing the so called ‘*Vipassanā* Meditation.’ Four or five others had to be confined to mental hospitals.”<sup>772</sup>

Other voices of objection include Richard Francis Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, senior scholars in the field. Gombrich and Obeyesekere, in *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, also strongly criticized Mahāsi Sayādaw’s

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<sup>768</sup> Henry Prellis, *Protection of the Sambuddha-Sasana: A Collection of Articles on Meditation* (Colombo: Oriental Press, 1957), 12. See also Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, 170; and Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 264.

<sup>769</sup> Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 263. With regard to the issue on the development of *jhāna* and *vipassanā*, the discussion in Chapter Two shows that they can be developed in either order or at the same time. See also Chapter Five for more detail.

<sup>770</sup> Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 42.

<sup>771</sup> Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, 170.

<sup>772</sup> Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism: Its Doctrines and Methods Through the Ages* (Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2001), xv. See also Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 264.

teaching for taking meditators to a mental state like possession. In their words, practitioners of the Mahāsi method might “have been learning a technique that, however in fact applied, could if followed to the letter take them into trance states very like possession.”<sup>773</sup>

In addition to those criticisms, Ingrid Jordt, a scholar of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, also reports in her book the *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement* several negative psychological results that meditators of dry insight meditation have, such as misperceiving their spiritual attainments, disheartened despair, and so on. Due to these psychological sicknesses produced during the course of intensive training at the center, many meditators become so overwhelmed that they flee from the centers. As Jordt notes:

Indeed, it is so common for yogis to want to end their practice at this point that the Women’s Welfare Association even has a committee member whose job is to chase after other committee members and promising yogi practitioners who have fled the Yeiktha. They try to encourage these yogis to return to the Yeiktha and their practice so that they can overcome this obstacle.<sup>774</sup>

Among critics of the Mahāsi Sayādaw teaching, Gil Fronsdal, a Buddhist scholar and lay *vipassanā* meditation teacher, provides a brief overview which covers a variety of the problems within this tradition. In his perspective, “Mahāsi deemphasized many common elements of Theravāda Buddhism. Rituals, chanting, devotional and merit-making activities, and doctrinal studies were down-played to the point of being virtually absent from the program of meditation offered at the many meditation centers he founded or inspired.”<sup>775</sup> In addition, he accuses Mahāsi Sayādaw of breaking down the monasticism

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<sup>773</sup> Richard Francis Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 454. See also Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 264.

<sup>774</sup> Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 79.

<sup>775</sup> Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 166.

in Theravāda Buddhism when he teaches *vipassanā* meditation to the laity more than the to the monastics.<sup>776</sup> Criticisms aside, Fronsdal himself—like Jack Kornfield, the well-known lay *vipassanā* meditation teacher and the founder of the Spirit Rock lay meditation center in the United States—is a strong advocate of putting the laity in charge. This can be seen in the way he and other lay Western *vipassanā* meditation teachers in the United States operate their own centers.

## 4.8 Conclusion

This detailed analysis of Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* has considered various significant aspects of his meditation theory. The first issue addressed is that his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is the teaching of dry insight meditation, which is often known as *vipassanā* meditation. Instead of treating *satipaṭṭhāna* strictly in terms of the four frames of reference—body, feelings, mind, and *dhamma*—as the *suttas* do, Mahāsi Sayādaw elaborates it as a practice of noting matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*). In other words, the teaching of dry insight meditation is not the teaching about the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. Rather, it is a practice in which meditators are told to keep noting the successive arising and passing away of the activities at the six sense-doors in order to realize the three characteristics—impermanence, suffering, and no-self—of matter and mind. In the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the insight into the three characteristics occupies a central position. His explanations indicate that all the noting or observing of both matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*) have to aim at this realization. Awakening is said to be achieved through a result of such insight. In Mahāsi Sayādaw’s bare insight meditation, *jhāna* is

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<sup>776</sup> Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 166.

totally ignored because, he believes that developing liberating insight requires nothing more than momentary concentration.<sup>777</sup>

Many of Mahāsi Sayādaw's key teachings in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* can be traced back to the commentaries, particularly the *Visuddhimagga* and *The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta Commentary*, but do not find their origin in the *suttas*. First of all, Mahāsi Sayādaw follows the *Visuddhimagga* and other commentaries in dividing meditation into two separate forms—tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*)—and claims that the latter is both simpler and more advanced than the former. The decoupling of tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) is never made in the *suttas*, which always explain them as two components of a single practice. Due to this understanding, Mahāsi Sayādaw takes the stand of the *Visuddhimagga* and the commentaries in claiming that liberation can be achieved by insight alone without the support of *jhānas*. Although Mahāsi Sayādaw's theory of bare insight meditation is based on the commentaries' teaching, his view of concentration goes past the commentaries. Whereas the commentaries state that mental purification, a necessary condition for awakening to take place, requires at least the degree of access concentration, Mahāsi Sayādaw claims that momentary concentration, the weakest level among the three forms of concentration is sufficient. This is very different from the *suttas*, which state that awakening occurs only in (any of) the *jhānas*. Mahāsi Sayādaw's theory also denies the status of right concentration, which are defined as the four *jhānas* and are part of the noble eightfold path, the formula that the Buddha discovered on his way of pursuing the highest happiness.

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<sup>777</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 46–49.

In addition, whereas the *suttas*’ presentation of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice emphasize the three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—Mahāsi Sayādaw’s dry insight meditation involves the practice of bare attention and clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics. In his treatment, this practice of bare attention is Mahāsi Sayādaw’s interpretation of the factor of *sati* or mindfulness. His interpretation of *sati* or mindfulness, however, considerably diverges from the *suttas*. In the *suttas*, this factor is defined as remembering, recollecting, or sometimes it has an equivalent meaning as the formula for *satipaṭṭhāna* itself. In the *suttas*, only in non-clinging, a highly advanced meditation state at the verge of nibbana, could the factor of *sati* be understood as “bare awareness.” But even there it would have to be qualified as a form of recollection and recognition, which is of course are related to memory. Even then, it is maintained for the sake of recollecting. In this state, the mind has automatically stopped fashioning—meaning that there is no more creation of a sense of “I.” Instead, Mahāsi Sayādaw promotes the development of a non-reactive state through the practice of noting without evaluating.

With regard to *sampajañña*—the second factor that also plays a significant role in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*—Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to follow the commentaries in equating it with *vipassanā*. As he says, this quality involves seeing things in terms of the three characteristics—*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. Because of this interpretation of *sampajañña*, Mahāsi Sayādaw asks meditators to clearly comprehend all the phenomenon in every single act of noting the matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*) as impermanent, suffering, and no-self. This understanding of *sampajañña*, as discussed in Chapter Two, contradicts the *suttas* in two ways: (a) The *suttas* define *sampajañña* simply as being

aware, or being alert to one's own activities, physical or mental, while they are happening. (b) The *suttas* never equate *sampajañña* with *vipassanā*.

Another crucial point is that Mahāsi Sayādaw also follows the commentaries in identifying *sampajañña* as the primary discernment factor in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. In his treatment, liberating insight is said to be achieved once meditators gain insights into the three characteristics. It should be noted that his understating of the third characteristic—*anatta*—is also not in line with the *suttas*. Whereas the *suttas* explain *anattā* simply as not-self, a strategic teaching to develop dispassion, Mahāsi Sayādaw follows the commentaries to interpret it as a metaphysical assertion that there is no permanent self. In addition, Mahāsi Sayādaw's exposition of the three characteristics also contradicts the *suttas* in claiming that knowledge in terms of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* is what constitutes the knowledge of awakening. This point can be traced to the commentaries, in which the knowledge of the three characteristics is treated as categorical teaching and replaces the knowledge of the four noble truths in constituting the awakening, which is not found in the *suttas*. As discussed in Chapter Two, the *suttas* hold the knowledge of the four noble truths to be a categorical teaching that is always true and beneficial, and it is what leads to the knowledge of awakening. The three perceptions of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*, however, are used in selective contexts for the purpose of developing dispassion and disenchantment, which subsequently lead to the realization of the four noble truths. Again, it appears that Mahāsi Sayādaw's interpretation of these points is in line with the commentaries, but not the *suttas*.

Mahāsi Sayādaw's description of awakening is peculiar in that the first three levels of awakening (stream-entry, once-returner, and non-returner) still can be lost even

after meditators have attained them. In his theory, in order to achieve a higher level of awakening, meditators who have already attained a certain level have to start their practice of noting again from the beginning. Only after they have attained their present level again are they able to strike for the higher one. Some scholars have attributed this to the possibility that Mahāsi Sayādaw might have mistaken the *jhāna* states for the awakening levels.

In short, although Mahāsi Sayādaw claims in his treatises that his teaching of dry insight meditation is based on both the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the commentaries, this detailed analysis shows that most of his *satipaṭṭhāna* theories accord only with the commentaries. This, however, is not a surprising result, for the investigation into his training background reveals that Burmese monastic education, for centuries, has placed significant emphasis on the studies of *Abhidhamma* and commentaries. Such education training, as a result, has shaped meditation theory across many generations including that of Mahāsi Sayādaw's teacher as well as his own. The one-dimensional *satipaṭṭhāna* theory that he promoted seems to reflect the demands of the Burmese society during the colonial period. In this context, meditation was sought (1) as a way to protect the domestic culture against the foreign invading culture; and (2) to provide mental care for prisoners and the depressed populace. It was also used as a tool for government reform during the time of prime minister U Nu. What was most needed was a simple meditation method that could be within reach of everybody: one that deemphasized doctrinal studies and traditional rituals. People may wonder about the discrepancies between this simplified *satipaṭṭhāna* theory and the traditional one. The research therefore continues with Chapter Five aimed at tackling this core question.



## Chapter Five: Comparing and Contrasting the Treatments of *Satipaṭṭhāna* Given by Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw

“He who knows one religion knows none.”<sup>778</sup>

### 5.1 Introduction

Comparing and contrasting the respective treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* given by Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw is the central discussion of this dissertation. Comparative religion is a systematic analysis that can help broaden the understanding of a particular matter when it is presented by different institutions. This method of analysis was encouraged by many European scholars throughout the nineteenth century. As Friedrich Max Müller, one of the pioneers in the field, states, “that study, I feel convinced, if carried on in a bold, but scholar-like, careful, and reverent spirit, will remove many doubts and difficulties which are due entirely to the narrowness of our religious horizon.”<sup>779</sup> Indeed, this analysis may not only be applied to the comparative study of different religions but it can also be useful for investigation within the same tradition.<sup>780</sup>

As presented in previous chapters, Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw each have their own distinctive treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Their meditation theories, as illustrated, were shaped not only by their institutional education but also by the training that they received from their primary teachers. In addition to these factors, the social historical context also contributed to the formation of their beliefs about meditation. Taking a closer look at their treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, we learn that both teachers put great effort

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<sup>778</sup> Jacques Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods and Theories of Research. Introduction and Anthology* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 93.

<sup>779</sup> Friedrich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution, with Two Essays on False Analogies, and the Philosophy of Mythology* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2011), ix.

<sup>780</sup> Both Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw are from Theravāda tradition. However, it is essential to note that there are various subsects within this tradition and their practices vary from one another.

into clarifying certain vital meditation concepts. Nevertheless, the meanings of these concepts are—in our current discourse—still regarded as ambiguous or controversial. A comparison of the interpretations of these meditation concepts reveals the considerably divergent viewpoints between them.

This chapter will limit itself to the discussion of the discrepancies between the two treatments. Similarities, of course, can be found in the explanations of the two teachers. However, they are not included here. In order to shed light on the differences in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*, this chapter will compare and contrast their perspectives on a variety of significant concepts treated in their treatments, including mindfulness (*sati*), *sampajañña* (alertness or clear comprehension), concentration, liberating insight (*vipassanā*), the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*, the fruits that arise in the course of meditation, and the method of practice. These concepts play essential roles in their respective meditation teachings and form a central part of their mindfulness theory in particular.

The chapter also attempts to clarify questions, such as what are the major differences in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*? What are the underlying philosophical factors that might have accounted for their different interpretations on *sati* and *sampajañña*? What might have made their opinions on the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā* vary from one and another? And, notwithstanding the fact that they often set up their spiritual goals aiming toward liberation, do their accounts of soteriology portray the same or different concepts? By bringing their teachings into conversation on these particular matters, the chapter seeks to shed light on a number of issues that have been widely misunderstood among practitioners and meditation sympathizers.

Before comparing and contrasting these issues in detail, the discrepancies between the treatments of the two teachers can be summarized as follows: the way they approach *satipaṭṭhāna*, in general, is profoundly different. For Ajaan Lee, it is the treatment of the four frames of reference—body, feeling, mind, and mental qualities—whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw treats it in terms of materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*) that can be perceived at the six sense-doors. In addition to their distinct approach in treating *satipaṭṭhāna*, Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw have several significant differences pertaining to various essential meditation concepts. Some of the concepts are considered controversial issues by modern practitioners and scholars alike. To be more specific, whereas Ajaan Lee emphasizes the three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—in *satipaṭṭhāna* cultivation, Mahāsi Sayādaw advocates the practice of bare attention and clear comprehension. The two meditation teachers also share different viewpoints in their interpretations of *sampajañña*, one of the key factors in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Ajaan Lee interprets *sampajañña* as alertness while Mahāsi Sayādaw explains it as clear comprehension. In addition, among these three qualities—*sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*—Mahāsi Sayādaw follows the commentaries in identifying *sampajañña*, which is defined as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics, as the primary discernment factor. Ajaan Lee, on the other hand, claims that it is the quality of *ātappa* (ardency), defined as focused investigation, that fosters wisdom. With regard to the understanding of concentration, whereas dry insight meditation taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw bypasses *jhāna* development, in Ajaan Lee’s meditation theory, *jhāna* cultivation plays a central role on the way to awakening. Furthermore, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw equates knowledge in terms of the three characteristics to the knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma*,

Ajaan Lee says that it is knowledge in terms of the four noble truths that plays this role. Also, Mahāsi Sayādaw’s exposition of the three characteristics is greatly different from that of Ajaan Lee. Mahāsi Sayādaw explains the three characteristics to arrive at a conclusion that there is no self as a way to deny a permanent metaphysical self, whereas Ajaan Lee presents it as a tool to foster a sense of dispassion toward the five aggregates. And, Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to treat the three characteristics as a categorical teaching, whereas to Ajaan Lee it is the four noble truths that play this role. The goal of the practice also presented differently. Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment aims at the realization of right view, which rendered as the understanding in terms of the three characteristics, Ajaan Lee’s teaching has as its objective the attainment of unbinding.

These discrepancies in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* undoubtedly show their different views on the matter. Of course, there are several factors constituting these discrepancies. However, the most significant one, as presented below and in previous chapters, is their primary foundational sources. Whereas Ajaan Lee’s treatment appears to rely mostly on the *suttas*, Mahāsi Sayādaw’s explanation of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice tends to be based on the commentaries. A “dialogue” between these two renowned meditation teachers, therefore, would be useful for deeper understanding of their distinct meditation theories.

In the following section, each individual issue is tackled with the purpose of highlighting the discrepancies in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*, which otherwise would not be easy to recognize.

## 5.2 Discrepancies between Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw Concerning their Treatments of *Satipaṭṭhāna*

### 5.2.1. Difference Regarding the Approach to *Satipaṭṭhāna* Practice

Examining the treatments of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw reveals that the way these two teachers approach the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is fundamentally different.

Whereas Ajaan Lee explains *satipaṭṭhāna* in terms of the four frames of reference—body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities—as described in the *suttas*, Mahāsi Sayādaw elaborates it as a contemplation of materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*) following the commentaries. This is one of the more surface-level differences between the two.

Although Ajaan Lee, in his treatise, suggests that “the four frames of reference can be reduced to two: physical and mental phenomena, or—another way of putting it—body and mind,”<sup>781</sup> his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* retains the traditional framework, which consists of body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities.<sup>782</sup> In his treatises, these four frames of reference are treated separately with detailed analyses for each frame. In general, the outline of Ajaan Lee’s explanation of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* is similar to that found in the *suttas*.

Unlike Ajaan Lee, Mahāsi Sayādaw, at least in the following regard, does not strictly coincide with the *suttanta*’s description of *satipaṭṭhāna*. His treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* or *vipassanā* meditation is a treatment of materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*).<sup>783</sup> As he says: “The method of developing this Wisdom is to observe matter and mind which are the two sole elements existing in a body with a view to know them in

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<sup>781</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 40.

<sup>782</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 7–39; *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 20–35; and *A Refuge in Awakening* attached in *Frames of Reference*, 51–62.

<sup>783</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 1–34; *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 23–33; *The Progress of Insight*, 3–5.

their true form.”<sup>784</sup> His treatises are mainly devoted to explaining the practice of noting the two elements—*rūpa* and *nāma*—although he repeatedly claims that this *vipassanā* teaching consists of four *satipaṭṭhānas*.<sup>785</sup> This approach of Mahāsi Sayādaw toward *satipaṭṭhāna*, in fact, tends to derive from the commentaries, such as the *Papañcasūdanī*,<sup>786</sup> the *Visuddhimagga*,<sup>787</sup> and its commentaries.<sup>788</sup>

### 5.2.2. Difference in Identifying the Main Factors in *Satipaṭṭhāna* Practice

In their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the two teachers also have different views in identifying the main factors needed for this practice. Throughout his treatment, Ajaan Lee repeatedly emphasized each of the three qualities mentioned in the *suttas*—*sati* (keeping something in mind), *sampajañña* (alertness), and *ātappa* (ardency). According to Ajaan Lee, the purpose of these three qualities in each frame of reference is to help bring *satipaṭṭhāna* practice—via the four frames—to consummation. In *Frames of Reference*, he says: “In order to use these four frames of reference as a means for centering the mind, you must first familiarize yourself with the following three qualities. Otherwise, you can’t say that you’re standing firm on your frame of reference.”<sup>789</sup>

Mahāsi Sayādaw, on the other hand, focuses on the development of only two qualities—*sati* (bare attention) and *sampajañña* (clear comprehension).<sup>790</sup> This can be seen in his treatise *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, in which he states that “The method of Lord Buddha does not, however, require any kind of instruments or outside

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<sup>784</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 3.

<sup>785</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34; *Practical Insight Meditation*, 6.

<sup>786</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 2–3.

<sup>787</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XVIII, 3–37 and XI, 27ff.

<sup>788</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 46–52. The sub-commentaries referred here include the *Visuddhimagga-mahātīkā*, etc.

<sup>789</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Frames of Reference*, 7.

<sup>790</sup> Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 42.

aid.....It makes use of one’s own mind for analytical purpose by fixing bare attention [sati] on the activities of matter and mind...the ceaseless course of arising and passing away of matter and mind will be vividly perceptible [*sampajañña*].”<sup>791</sup>

In addition to the differences in identifying the main factors that play key roles in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, Ajaan Lee’s and Mahāsi Sayādaw’s interpretations of these qualities also diverge significantly. To begin, one of the main factors in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is the quality of *sati*. Mahāsi Sayādaw interprets it as “bare attention,” whereas Ajaan Lee explains it as “remembering” or “the power of keeping something in mind.” These ways of perceiving *sati*, as presented in preceding chapters, have a significant impact on the respective treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Other issues, such as wandering thoughts, *nimitta*, *pīti*, and *sukha*, reflect their comprehension of *sati*. These will be discussed below.

With the interpretation of *sati* as bare attention, Mahāsi Sayādaw instructs practitioners to merely (and only) note all the physical and mental events that arise and pass away at the six sense-doors—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking. To be more specific, in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s teaching, meditators are not instructed to fix their attention on one particular meditation object but rather observe all the successive thoughts or events that pop up during the course of their contemplating, without adding any comment or judgment on top of that in order to realize the true nature of things—impermanence, suffering, and not-self. This theory of *sati* has become a standard definition in his lineage, and has spread widely in Asia and the West. The teaching of *sati*, or mindfulness, as a practice of bare attention or of simply being non-

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<sup>791</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 3.

judgmental has been adopted widely, particularly in contexts and communities where meditation and modern psychotherapy overlap. Meditation teachers and scholars who adopt this interpretation include Bhikkhu Anālayo,<sup>792</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi,<sup>793</sup> Venerable Henepola Gunaratana,<sup>794</sup> Nyanaponika Thera,<sup>795</sup> and Jon Kabat-Zinn,<sup>796</sup> just to name a few. The interpretation of *sati* as bare attention, as shown in Chapter Four, comes from Mahāsi Sayādaw's partial understanding of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In the *Manual of Insight*, he assures that his explanation of *sati* is in line with the *suttas*. In his interpretation, the practice of *sati* as taught in the *suttas* is to only simply discern the mental phenomena as they arise during the course of meditation.<sup>797</sup> According to him, this point is explicitly laid out in the commentaries,<sup>798</sup> where it is claimed that this sort of noting can help one understand phenomena in terms of the three characteristics and thereupon abandon the view of self.<sup>799</sup> However, as argued in Chapter Three, although the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is extensive, it does not provide a complete description of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, but only one part of the formula—what it means to keep something in mind.<sup>800</sup> It seems the partial explanations in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* let Mahāsi Sayādaw get away with a simplistic noting technique.

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<sup>792</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, “The Bāhiya Instruction and Bare Awareness,” 15–16. See also Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 267.

<sup>793</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, “What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (2011): 19–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2011.564813>.

<sup>794</sup> Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 140.

<sup>795</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 30.

<sup>796</sup> Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, 4. See also Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness for Beginners*, 17.

<sup>797</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 143–261. Clear examples can be found in the sections such as contemplation of feeling, contemplation of mind, and contemplation of mental objects.

<sup>798</sup> The commentaries that Mahāsi Sayādaw refers here are the Commentary on the *Mūlapaṇṇāsa* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and *Sumaṅgala-vilāsinī*, Commentary on the *Dīgha Nikāya* (*Dīgha-nikāya-aṭṭhakathā*). See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 195–197.

<sup>799</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 195–197. See also Chapter Four for more detail.

<sup>800</sup> For more detail, see the section Ajaan Lee's Treatment of *Satipaṭṭhāna* in Chapter Three.



Unlike Mahāsi Sayādaw’s interpretation, Ajaan Lee explains *sati*, or mindfulness, as memory or keeping something in mind.<sup>801</sup> In his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, meditators are taught to keep their mind firmly fixed on a selected meditation object and not let it slip away from that object.<sup>802</sup> Meditators are also instructed to heighten their mind by recollecting good things that they have done in the past.<sup>803</sup> This is a teaching that is relatively common in his *Dhamma* talks.<sup>804</sup> The teaching of *sati* or mindfulness as memory also includes the instruction that meditators should remember the knowledge or experience they used to help them enter concentration so that they could return to that concentration in the future. In the same vein, meditators should remember the causes that negatively impacted their virtue or concentration so that they can avoid those if they encounter them again. It appears that Ajaan Lee’s interpretation of *sati* or mindfulness is in line with the *suttas*.<sup>805</sup> The interpretation of *sati* as memory or remembering is shared by scholars and meditation teachers such as Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu and Thomas William Rhys Davids, the founder of the Pāli Text Society. Once again, Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw interpret *sati* in differently in practical context because they base their interpretations on different sources of reference—the *suttas* and the commentaries.

Secondly, Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw also have different views in their interpretation of *sampajañña*, another quality in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Whereas Ajaan Lee interprets *sampajañña* as alertness, Mahāsi Sayādaw refers to it as clear

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<sup>801</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 7–8.

<sup>802</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 8, 10.

<sup>803</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Heightened Mind*, 94–101.

<sup>804</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Teachings of Phra Ajaan Lee 2*.

<sup>805</sup> For more detail, see Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

comprehension.<sup>806</sup> Due to this discrepancy in interpreting the quality of *sampajañña*, their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* lead meditators in two different directions. In Mahāsi Sayādaw’s instruction, meditators are told to comprehend the arising and passing away of matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*) and to cultivate bare attention practice (*sati*) in order to see the three characteristics. This is how *sampajañña* should be developed, a point that he repeatedly emphasizes in his treatment. As Mahāsi Sayādaw equates *sampajañña* with insight, so to him this is also the way to develop insight. This is another point of comparison that will be discussed below.

Ajaan Lee, in contrast, instructs practitioners to be alert to what is happening to their meditation, such that, if they noticed that the mind had wandered off from the meditation object, they should quickly bring it back. His instruction on breath meditation is one example that illustrates his teaching on developing the quality of alertness (*sampajañña*). Ajaan Lee’s meditation instructions include such directions as trying a shorter breath if the longer breath does not feel good, a longer breath if the shorter is not right, and so forth. This means that meditators have to be genuinely alert to the quality of their breath in order to evaluate if it is comfortable or not so that they can make an adjustment accordingly. Here Ajaan Lee equates *sampajañña* with *vicāra*,<sup>807</sup> or evaluation, the second factor in the first *jhāna*. This means that *sampajañña* not only has a quality of being alert to what happening but also the active work of evaluating the meditation for the sake of developing concentration: one has to determine whether one should make an adjustment or maintain the current state of mind. In other words, in his

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<sup>806</sup> Other teachers who also explain *sampajañña* as clear comprehension are Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi. See Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 45–55 and Bhikkhu Bodhi, “What Does Mindfulness Really Mean,” 33–35.

<sup>807</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 54.

theory, alertness (*sampajañña*) and mindfulness (*sati*) perform the functions of the first two factors of the first *jhāna*—directed thought (*vitakka*) and evaluation (*vicāra*). They are the causes leading to the results of concentration: at this stage, namely, rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*). As Ajaan Lee explains in *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*:

When the mind stays with its one object, this is called *ekaggatā*. At the same time, there's mindfulness keeping the breath in mind: This is called *vitakka*. The mind then adjusts and expands the various aspects of the breath throughout the entire body, evaluating them mindfully with complete circumspection: This is called alertness (*sampajañña*) or *vicāra*, which is the factor aware of causes and results. Mindfulness, the cause, is what does the work. Thus, *vitakka* and *vicāra* cooperate in focusing on the same topic. We are then aware of the results as they arise—feelings of fullness, pleasure, and ease (*pīti* and *sukha*) for body and mind.<sup>808</sup>

Another noticeable difference between these two meditation teachers with regard to the main factors of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is what they identify as the primary discernment factor, the factor that plays a key role on the path leading to liberation. Mahāsi Sayādaw follows the commentaries in identifying *sampajañña*—i.e., seeing things in terms of the three characteristics—as the primary discernment factor.<sup>809</sup> And so consequently, insights into impermanence, suffering, and not-self are what count as useful and significant in his theory. It also explains why, in the Mahāsi system, cultivation of *sampajañña*, which aims at the realization of the three characteristics, is considered as the development of insight. In other words, this *sampajañña* is essentially an end in itself: it is developed by means of contemplating in terms of the three characteristics. The three characteristics are both the cause and the result of insight. In

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<sup>808</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 54.

<sup>809</sup> See Chapter Four for more detail. Other meditation teachers and scholars who also identify *sampajañña* as a discernment factor are Nyanaponika Thera, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Bhikkhu Anālayo. See Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 45–55; Bhikkhu Bodhi, “What Does Mindfulness Really Mean,” 33–35; and Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 48–55.

other words, the practice is simply to re-affirm that which meditators are told to pay attention to, without questioning the direction that this is taking them.

Ajaan Lee, on the other hand, follows the *suttas*<sup>810</sup> in identifying *ātappa* as the primary discernment factor. The first function of *ātappa* in Ajaan Lee's treatment is to abandon defilements and foster good mental states. As he says, "...use your powers of focused investigation to burn into those defilements so as to keep them away from the heart at all times. ... The opposites are good mental states...When they arise, maintain them and observe them so that you can come to know the level of your mind."<sup>811</sup> This shows that for Ajaan Lee discernment is fostered primarily in the effort to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones.

In addition to this, Ajaan Lee's treatment also shows another function of *ātappa*. That is to penetrate into a particular meditation object with the purpose of comprehending its true nature. Knowing the true nature of a particular meditation object, in Ajaan Lee's explanation, is to uncover all related aspects of that object. This includes the knowledge of how it comes to exist and how it vanishes, and how the mind arrives at a state of non-arising and non-disbanding.<sup>812</sup> For instance, in the treatment of *cittānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*, Ajaan Lee says: "To be able to gain knowledge, you have to use the power of focused investigation, which is an aspect of discernment, to know how mental states arise and fall: pulling out, taking a stance, and then returning into stillness. You must keep your attention fixed on investigating these things constantly in order to be able to

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<sup>810</sup> Note that as discussed in Chapter Three, Ajaan Lee's explanation of the quality of *ātappa* goes beyond the *suttas*. Whereas the *suttas*' elaboration of *ātappa* only implies the path factors of right view and right resolve, Ajaan Lee develops a theory which rendering this quality as a factor that can foster the development of discernment for the sake of centering the mind in concentration and attaining ultimate release.

<sup>811</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 22.

<sup>812</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 10–13, 18–19, 28–29, 36.

know the arising and falling away of mental states—and you will come to know the nature of the mind that doesn’t arise and doesn’t fall away.”<sup>813</sup> Here, the faculty of discernment in Ajaan Lee’s interpretation possesses two aspects instead of one like Mahāsi Sayādaw. It not only has the ability of knowing fashioned phenomena—the three characteristics—but also able to perceive the non-fashioned: a state beyond the arising and disbanding i.e., non-arising and non-disbanding. Also, although Ajaan Lee seems to use language that appears similar to Mahāsi Sayādaw (arising and falling versus impermanence), his way to induce the development of the discernment factor is more proactive. This is because Ajaan Lee is referring to mental objects as mind-produced objects, and is concerned with how the mind makes them, and how to do this skillfully. The focus of the investigation is a “how” question, and it is seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. Mahāsi Sayādaw is not concerned with the making of mental objects and so the contemplation is satisfied with seeing what merely arises: he assumes that what mental objects are and how they appear are the same. He does not question how to make them more skillful. That is how it is passive. Thereby, compared to Mahāsi Sayādaw’s definition, which explains the faculty of discernment as knowing things in terms of the three characteristics, Ajaan Lee’s explanation seems to provide a broader notion with a more proactive approach.

### **5.2.3. Difference pertaining to the Understanding of Concentration**

Another significant difference in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* is their perspectives on concentration. Mahāsi Sayādaw, as scholars<sup>814</sup> point out, deemphasizes

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<sup>813</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 28–29.

<sup>814</sup> Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 43; Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 255; Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States,” 163–180.

the role of concentration in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. This is significantly different from Ajaan Lee who, strongly endorses the practice of centering the mind. Also, whereas Ajaan Lee presents a clear view of concentration, Mahāsi Sayādaw shows an inconsistency in his explanation of the last factor of the eightfold noble path.

The fact that Mahāsi Sayādaw de-emphasizes the role of *jhāna* or right concentration can be seen in his claim, as discussed in Chapter Four, that his approach—bare insight meditation—does not have to rely on the support of access concentration or of absorption concentration (*jhāna*). In the *Progress of Insight*, for instance, he uses the commentaries to explain this point by stating: “Who has neither produced access concentration nor full concentration, but from the very start applies insight to the five groups of grasping, is called “*suddha-vipassanā-yānika*,”<sup>815</sup> one who has pure insight as his vehicle.”<sup>816</sup> The only form of concentration needed for bare insight meditation is momentary concentration. As he says: “A person who takes the vehicle of insight uses only momentary concentration to bring about the necessary mental purification, and his or her insight practice is then based on that mental purification.”<sup>817</sup> If momentary concentration is the form of concentration required when beginning bare insight meditation, then there is nothing controversial in his instruction. Mahāsi Sayādaw’s statement here, nevertheless, seems to go far beyond that.<sup>818</sup> According to him, momentary concentration can bring about the mental purification, which, according to the

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<sup>815</sup> Also called *sukhavipassanā-yānika*.

<sup>816</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 3. See also *Manual of Insight*, 46–47; and *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 23–33. Note that this notion of bare insight meditation, as Mahāsi Sayādaw argues, is different from the *samathāyānika* which requires meditators to first develop access concentration or absorption concentration prior to insight. This point is well recorded in commentary literature, the source that Mahāsi Sayādaw bases his writings on.

<sup>817</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 46.

<sup>818</sup> Cousins, “*The Origin of Insight Meditation*,” 43.

commentaries, requires the level of access concentration and absorption concentration.<sup>819</sup>

In addition to this is his claim of liberating insight taking place based on the support of just momentary concentration. In other words, meditators who follow the path of bare insight meditation are able to gain awakening at the lowest degree of concentration. In the *Manual of Insight*, he argues:

Based on the statement “Devadatta, who is growing fat, does not eat during the day,” we can infer that Devadatta eats at night. Likewise, we can also infer, based on the statement “Insight knowledge can be aroused without depending on access or absorption concentration,” that insight knowledge must be aroused based on momentary concentration.<sup>820</sup>

To Mahāsi Sayādaw, momentary concentration not only supports the arising of liberating insight of the lowest level but all the way to the highest one, i.e., *arahantship*. As he claims that:

A person who develops **one of the three kinds of concentration** and insight knowledge of the three universal characteristics **can attain arahantship** and solve the problem of attachment... It is clear, following the above sub-commentary [the *Visuddhimagga-mahāṭīkā*], that **those who take the vehicle of insight to enlightenment need not develop access or absorption concentration. Momentary concentration alone is enough for them to bring about the mental purification** required for path knowledge and fruition knowledge.”<sup>821</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Three kinds of concentration are momentary concentration, access concentration, and absorption concentration. Among these three, momentary concentration is the weakest one, whereas absorption concentration (*jhānas*) is the highest one. In this exposition, Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to assert that momentary concentration provides sufficient condition for full awakening to occur. Therefore, in his view, it is not necessary to develop concentration to higher levels such as access concentration or absorption

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<sup>819</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, III 6, XVIII 1.

<sup>820</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 47.

<sup>821</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 49.

concentration<sup>822</sup> even though in some of his treatises he admits that higher concentration levels like the *jhānas* would benefit insight cultivation.<sup>823</sup> Apparently, *jhāna* plays no role in his bare insight meditation theory, which claims that the power of momentary concentration is sufficient to give rise to liberating insight all the way to *arahantship*. This understanding of momentary concentration, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, is based on the *Visuddhimagga-mahāṭṭkā*, the sub-commentary on the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>824</sup>

However, Mahāsi Sayādaw's view on concentration seems to go past the commentaries' teaching. A closer reading of the commentaries shows that he might have misinterpreted the commentaries' exposition on this point. It is because having explained what insight meditation is, the sub-commentary subsequently states that: "When one's insight meditation practice grows strong enough, penetration of the objects [of insight] produces concentration. This is tranquility. Thus, insight comes first and tranquility later.

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<sup>822</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 49.

<sup>823</sup> It seems Mahāsi Sayādaw is aware of the teachings on *jhāna*. However, it is more likely that his explanations on the subject were from textual study rather than from direct experience. In the first few treatises, Mahāsi Sayādaw describes *jhāna* as a practice in tranquility meditation that does not have anything to do with liberating insight whereas bare insight meditation does. For instance, in *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, he says both *rūpa-jhāna* and *arūpa-jhāna* belong to ordinary concentration. They can be achieved by practicing tranquility meditation. And, the attainment of these *jhānas* can take one only to the Brahma world, which is still insecure as one is still in the *samsāra*. Because he separates the practices of tranquility and insight from each other, Mahāsi Sayādaw does not mention the possibility of gaining awakening in any state of the *jhānas*, nor that awakening can be attained in the Brahma world. For the sake of liberation, he advises meditators to work on supramundane concentration, which is defined as the path and fruition concentration (*magga samādhi* and *phala samādhi*). This, he says, can be developed by bare insight meditation. Mahāsi Sayādaw's explanation of concentration in this treatise leads one to conclude that the concentration of tranquility meditation is ordinary concentration whereas concentration of bare insight meditation is supramundane concentration. However, as we examine his explanation of bare insight meditation, the only form of concentration mentioned is, strangely, momentary concentration. This perspective on *jhānas* seems to change at a later time. A shift in his understanding of *jhāna* is evident in *A Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma*, where he mentions *vipassanā jhānas* along with *samatha jhānas* in his explanation of absorption concentration in bare insight meditation. However, this seems to be his own invention to justify his bare insight theory, which was strongly criticized by others at that time. This is the reason I do not include it in the discussion. For more detail see Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 1–2; *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 4–6; and *A Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma*, 71–73.

<sup>824</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 48.



By developing tranquility based on insight, one brings about the noble path.”<sup>825</sup>

Apparently, the point that the sub-commentary wants to make here is that after developing insight, meditators should cultivate tranquility. And, only when both tranquility and insight are developed can the noble path be accomplished. The tranquility that the sub-commentaries refers to, as discussed in Chapter Two, is access concentration but not momentary concentration.<sup>826</sup>

The fact that Mahāsi Sayādaw’s understanding of concentration goes past the commentaries’ teaching can also be seen by his claim that momentary concentration has similar power as access concentration and absorption concentration. The exposition below shows Mahāsi Sayādaw’s attempt in clarifying his understanding of momentary concentration:

But is it not said in the Commentaries that the term “purification of mind” applies only to access concentration and fully absorbed concentration? That is true; but one has to take this statement in the sense that **momentary concentration is included in access concentration**.....But as the latter is able to suppress the hindrances just as access concentration does, and since it is the neighbourhood of the noble-path attainment concentration, therefore that same momentary concentration is spoken of by the name of “access” (or “neighbourhood”)..... Hence it should be understood that **momentary concentration, having the capacity to suppress the hindrances**, has also the right to the name “access” and “purification of mind.” Otherwise purification of mind could not come about in one who has made bare insight his vehicle by employing only insight, without having produced either access concentration or fully absorbed concentration.<sup>827</sup> (Emphasis mine)

In this argument, Mahāsi Sayādaw acknowledges that mental purification or the second *visudhi* is defined in the commentaries in terms of access concentration and absorption

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<sup>825</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 50. As mentioned in his treatise, this is a quote from the *Papañcasūdanī*, a Commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

<sup>826</sup> Vism-mhṭ 9–10. A more detailed discussion on the issue of momentary concentration in the commentaries see Cousins, *The Origin of Insight Meditation*, 43–48.

<sup>827</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 7–8.

concentration. However, he argues that the momentary concentration that he refers to must be included in access concentration. This form of concentration for him also has the capacity to suppress the five hindrances just as the other. Mahāsi Sayādaw's exposition seems to indicate that momentary concentration in his bare insight meditation theory has various degrees. It not only has the strength to suppress the five hindrances as the two other higher forms of concentration, but it also can support the arising of liberating insight from the lowest level of awakening all the way to the *arahantship*.<sup>828</sup>

In one of his *Dhamma* talks, in order to defend his view, Mahāsi Sayādaw even says that the momentary concentration referred to in bare insight meditation actually is access concentration, and that this is in line with the teachings in the commentaries and the sub-commentaries.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, momentary concentration for insight is mentioned as momentary unification of the mind (*khaṇika-cittekaggatā*); in its Sub-commentary it is referred to as concentration lasting for a moment (*khaṇamattatṭhitiko samādhī*). Thus based on the authority of the Commentary and the Sub-commentary, we have employed the term “momentary concentration for insight” to describe the concentration which is, by virtue of identity, access concentration.<sup>829</sup>

This point, however, clearly contradicts with his statements that (1) bare insight meditation needs neither access concentration nor absorption concentration,<sup>830</sup> an explanation that he believes is derived from commentarial literature,<sup>831</sup> and (2) full awakening can be attained with the support from any of the three forms of

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<sup>828</sup> Cousins, “The Origin of Insight Meditation,” 47–48.

<sup>829</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *A Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma*, trans. U Ko Lay, ed. Bhikkhu Pesala, new ed. (Rangoon: Buddha Sāsānānuggaha Organization, 2013), 67–69, Kindle.

<sup>830</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 3; *Manual of Insight*, 46–47.

<sup>831</sup> The commentarial literature Mahāsi Sayādaw refers to includes the *Papañcasūdanī*: Clarifier of Proliferation, a commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the *Visuddhimagga*, and the *Visuddhimagga-mahāṭṭkā*. See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 2–3. See also Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, XVIII, 3.

concentration.<sup>832</sup> In fact, these explanations of Mahāsi Sayādaw reveal his inconsistent view on the last factor of the noble eightfold path. Cousins has pointed out the problem with Mahāsi Sayādaw's view on momentary concentration. In his article, he convincingly argues that momentary concentration described in the commentaries should be understood as the occasionally arising of access concentration, but not a separate level of concentration as Mahāsi Sayādaw claims.<sup>833</sup> It means that meditators have attained *jhāna* prior the occurrence of this sort of concentration. In other words, meditators have not mastered the *jhāna* to the point it becomes a skill yet, i.e., be able to enter *jhāna* at will, their concentration thus repeatedly appears in a state of arising for a moment and then leaving after that.

Ajaan Lee's treatment, in contrast, strongly emphasizes the role of concentration. In *Frames of Reference*, he says, "Concentration is especially important because it forms the basis for discernment and intuitive understanding (*ñāṇa*), which are the crucial factors of the path. You can't do without concentration. If concentration is lacking, you can gain nothing but jumbled thoughts and obsessions, without any sound support."<sup>834</sup> Not only is concentration essential for discernment, but the lack of concentration is also problematic. This statement could easily be read as a counter-argument to the bare insight meditation theory. It characterizes the mind in bare insight meditation as flooded by mental events that keep popping up as the mind, lacking concentration, fails to suppress and slow down. Ajaan Lee again emphasizes the significance of concentration in his statement that this concentration factor is more difficult to develop compared to the other two—virtue and

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<sup>832</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 49.

<sup>833</sup> Cousins, "The Origin of Insight Meditation," 43–48.

<sup>834</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 4.

discernment. In the simile below about bridge-building, he likens the development of concentration to erecting bridge pilings in the middle of a river. In other words, developing concentration is more challenging than developing virtue and discernment, i.e., the two bridge pilings built on the more solid land of the shores:

Virtue, the first part of the path, and discernment, the last, aren't especially difficult. But keeping the mind centered, which is the middle part, takes some effort because it's a matter of forcing the mind into shape. Admittedly, centering the mind, like placing bridge pilings in the middle of a river, is something difficult to do. But once the mind is firmly in place, it can be very useful in developing virtue and discernment.<sup>835</sup>

Yet while concentration is challenging, Ajaan Lee maintains that this challenge is worth it, as concentration thus becomes the foundation for virtue and discernment.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, concentration occupies a central position in Ajaan Lee's meditation teachings. His instructions of either breath meditation—one of his more frequently addressed teaching subjects—or the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, are more often than not presented within the framework of *jhāna* cultivation, where the five factors of *jhāna* are discussed.<sup>836</sup> One of the reasons that Ajaan Lee emphasizes the practice of concentration or *jhāna* is because, in his view, liberating insight takes place only in any of the *jhānas*,<sup>837</sup> but not in the momentary concentration of Mahāsi Sayādaw's theory. This means that meditators have to have mastered at least the early stages of the *jhānas* in order for the awakening moment to occur. This view is in line with the *suttas*. For example, the *Jhāna Sutta* states that the ending of mental fermentations depends on the

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<sup>835</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 6.

<sup>836</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 22; *Frames of Reference*, 23; *A Refuge in Awakening* attached in the *Frames of Reference*, 58–62; *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 31–33.

<sup>837</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Inner Strength*, trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, rev. ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2011), 5.

*jhānic* attainments.<sup>838</sup> Also, concentration is consistently described in the *suttas* as one of the principal factors of the path to liberation. The centrality of concentration is evidenced by its frequent appearance in most of the formulas leading to awakening, such as the noble eightfold path, the five faculties, the five strengths, the four establishing of mindfulness, and the seven factors of awakening. It should be noted that Ajaan Lee's description of the *jhānas* or right concentration,<sup>839</sup> discussed in Chapter Three, falls in line with the *suttas*.<sup>840</sup> Both accounts consistently defines right concentration in terms of the four *jhānas*. The first *jhāna* has five factors: directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation,<sup>841</sup> rapture, and pleasure. The second *jhāna* has three factors: rapture, pleasure, and singleness of preoccupation. The third *jhāna* has two factors: singleness of preoccupation and pleasure. And the fourth *jhāna* has two factors: singleness of preoccupation and equanimity.<sup>842</sup>

In addition, Ajaan Lee's understanding of momentary concentration is also greatly different from that of Mahāsi Sayādaw. To Ajaan Lee, momentary concentration happens when the mind grows still but only for a momentary period and then continues following its preoccupations. The mind, by its very nature, always behaves in this way, and all people, whether they practice concentration or not, are said to possess this level of concentration.<sup>843</sup> Therefore, in Ajaan Lee's view, momentary concentration is an insufficient foundation for discernment. Thus, Ajaan Lee's view is not only different or diverging, but he actually gives a counter-argument to Mahāsi Sayādaw's view.

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<sup>838</sup> AN 9.36

<sup>839</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 27–31.

<sup>840</sup> DN 22; AN 4.41; SN 45.8

<sup>841</sup> The meditation theme that one focuses on. See Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath*, 129.

<sup>842</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these four *jhānas* in practical context, see Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath*, 129–135.

<sup>843</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 53.

In short, regarding the issue of concentration in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee present different views. In his treatment, Ajaan Lee strongly emphasize the cultivation of concentration to the point that it becomes a central point of his meditation teaching. To him, concentration should be developed to its consummation. One of the foremost reasons that developing concentration occupies a central place in his treatment is because concentration (*jhānas*), in his view, serves as the basis for the arising of liberating insight. Ajaan Lee's emphasis of concentration practice is in line with the teaching in the *suttas*. In addition, Ajaan Lee's explanation of concentration also presents an internally consistent view. Similar to the *suttas*, he defines right concentration in terms of the four *jhānas*. His definition of the *jhānas* also shares a sense of similarity with the *suttas*, in which each *jhāna* consists of certain *jhānic* factors. Different from the *jhānas*, momentary concentration for him cannot become a foundation for awakening to take place as this state of mind is able to grow still for a moment and then continues following its preoccupations.

Unlike Ajaan Lee, Mahāsi Sayādaw deemphasizes the practice of *jhānas*. His bare insight meditation method promotes a theory of attaining *nibbāna* without the need of bringing concentration to any level higher than momentary concentration. His theory is allegedly derived from commentarial literature, although he seems to have misread those commentaries. There are grounds to say that Mahāsi Sayādaw goes past the commentaries in his explanation of concentration. This can be seen by (1) his claims of momentary concentration as a sufficient condition for giving rise to liberating insight all the way to arahanship; (2) his argument of momentary concentration as a form of concentration that can bring mental purification and enable to suppress the five

hindrances. In the commentaries, only access concentration or absorption concentration meet the requirements of these two cases, but not momentary concentration—the weakest degree of concentration—as Mahāsi Sayādaw asserts. Mahāsi Sayādaw’s view of concentration also reveals a sense of inconsistency. On the one hand, he divides concentration into three separate categories, momentary concentration, access concentration, and absorption concentration with the claim that bare insight meditation requires only the lowest form of concentration. On the other hand, he attempts to explain that momentary concentration that he referred to actually is access concentration. A closer examination of his explanations of concentration shows that they contradict one another.

#### **5.2.4. Difference Pertaining to the Handling of Wandering Thoughts**

Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw also have different views about how to handle the wandering thoughts that arise in the course of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. In Ajaan Lee’s treatment, a wandering thought should be either dropped or investigated to uncover its truth—its origination and cessation. This is different from Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment, where the instruction is that the wandering thought should be simply noted.

With regard to the treatment for wandering thoughts, Mahāsi Sayādaw says, in *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*:

Though it is directed to the movements of rising and falling the mind will not stay with them but will wander to other places. This wandering mind should not be let alone: it should be noted as ‘wandering, wandering’ as soon as it goes out. On noting repeatedly once or twice when the mind stops wandering, then the exercise of noting ‘rising, falling’ should be continued.<sup>844</sup>

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<sup>844</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 15.

According to his instruction, meditators should not neglect the wandering thought, but rather note it as “wandering, wandering” when the mind wanders. The wandering thought is sometimes noted in a more precise and meticulous manner. “This wandering mind should be noted as ‘going, going’ when it goes out, as ‘arriving, arriving’ when it reaches a place, as ‘planning, reflecting, and so forth’ on each state in the same manner as in the case of contemplation in the sitting posture.”<sup>845</sup> In other words, it might also be appropriate to note one’s relationship to the wandering thought in this way. In his theory, wandering thought is a common phenomenon for the beginner, but it will subside after some time for, as he says, the mind can no longer play truant because it is always caught every time it wanders.<sup>846</sup> Eventually the practice of noting the wandering thoughts has the effect of keeping the mind in check.

This contemplating of wandering thoughts, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, is one of the points that differentiate insight meditation from tranquility meditation. In

*Meditation and Its Forty Objects*, he states:

In the case of tranquility meditation there is no particular need to contemplate the wandering mental states, but they should be cut off and the original object contemplated continuously, while in the case of insight meditation the contemplation should be carried out on these wandering mental states also. After contemplating like this, the contemplation should revert to the original objects of ‘rising, falling.’ This is one of the points on which the procedure for tranquility meditation differs from that for insight meditation as far as dispelling the hindrances is concerned.<sup>847</sup>

In Mahāsi Sayādaw’s perspective, wandering thoughts are handled differently in insight meditation compared to tranquility meditation. This is because, in the case of the latter, wandering thought is instructed to be cut off from interfering with the original meditation

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<sup>845</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 28.

<sup>846</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 32.

<sup>847</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Meditation and Its Forty Objects*, 14.



object instead of being contemplated as in insight meditation. This is one way in which Mahāsi Sayādaw shows the differences between his method and the tranquility's.

Unlike Mahāsi Sayādaw, Ajaan Lee, in his treatment, basically provides two ways to handle wandering thoughts. Firstly, for the purpose of developing and sustaining concentration, meditators are instructed to drop the wandering thought to stay firmly with the meditation object. Secondly, he recommends that these wandering thoughts should be deeply investigated for the sake of realizing their origination and cessation. With regard to the first method, staying with the meditation object, this means that meditators should not let the mind stray after other concepts or preoccupations.<sup>848</sup> For example, if their meditation object is the breath, then as soon as meditators realize that their mind has left the breath to think about something else, they should drop those wandering thoughts and come back to the breath right way. As he says, “Make the mind one, keep it with the object you are thinking of, and don’t let it slip off to anything else.”<sup>849</sup> In Ajaan Lee’s teaching, letting the mind chase after the wandering thoughts is like a homeless person traveling around without having a home to stay. As a result, he/she will encounter all kinds of hardships such as being subject to the sun, the rain, the wind, and the dirt. In another simile, Ajaan Lee points out the danger of the uncentered mind which let its thoughts wander around in all kinds of concepts and preoccupation is like a woman who travels with plenty of jewelry on her body. She is not in a safe condition at all as her wealth might lead to her own death. In Ajaan Lee’s teaching, preoccupations or wandering thoughts are like the enemies who can cause all kinds of damage to us such as

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<sup>848</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 27.

<sup>849</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *A Refuge in Awakening* attached in the *Frames of Reference*, 59. See also Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 35.

making one's virtue deteriorating. Therefore, in order to protect the stillness of the mind, according to him, meditators should stay firmly with their meditation theme.<sup>850</sup> This warning is similar to a teaching in the *suttas*.

There is a well-known simile in the Canon that depicts this teaching: the story of the quail and the hawk. The *Sakuṇagghi Sutta* tells the story of a quail that is easily caught by a hawk when the quail wanders outside of its natural territory. The hawk, quietly confident in its strength and ability, allows the quail to escape, while the clever quail realizes the error of its ways and retreats to the territory it knows best. The story ends with the hawk shattering its breast as it flies into the clump of earth behind which the quail is hiding.<sup>851</sup> The lesson here is by analogy: the monks are told to wander within their proper range for their own safety.

For this reason, you should not wander into what is not your proper range and is the territory of others. In one who wanders into what is not his proper range and is the territory of others, Māra gains an opening, Māra gains a foothold. And what, for a monk, is not his proper range and is the territory of others? The five strings of sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable by the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. Sounds cognizable by the ear.... Smells cognizable by the nose.... Tastes cognizable by the tongue.... Tactile sensations cognizable by the body—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. These, for a monk, are not his proper range and are the territory of others.<sup>852</sup>

The “improper range” for monks or meditators is the five strings of sensuality, and thoughts of “agreeable, pleasing, charming, enticing” pleasures form the majority of wandering thoughts. The *suttas* state that monks should not wander into these areas, otherwise they will encounter Māra,<sup>853</sup> the embodiment of craving, aversion, and

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<sup>850</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 27.

<sup>851</sup> SN 47.6

<sup>852</sup> SN 47.6

<sup>853</sup> Māra also refers to the demonic deva king, death, and the aggregates of unenlightened beings. See Buswell and Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 530–31.

delusion, an obstacle to liberation. Likewise, Ajaan Lee teaches that meditators should close off their sense doors to keep their mind from slipping out after external thoughts just like closing the windows and the doors to keep dogs, cats, and thieves from entering into the house. Cutting off the external thoughts or closing off all the sense doors, in his teaching, does not mean meditators should stop thinking. It simply means that meditators should direct their attention inside to contemplate on their meditation theme, such as the breath.<sup>854</sup> Ajaan Lee treatment for wandering thought thus also involves factors that give rise to *jhānas* such as directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation.

With regard to the second method for dealing with wandering thoughts, Ajaan Lee recommends that these wandering thoughts be deeply investigated. In other words, during the course of meditation, if a particular thought arises, it should be deeply contemplated. However, it should be noted that Ajaan Lee's approach is considerably different from that of Mahāsi Sayādaw. To Ajaan Lee, contemplating is a practice of “focused investigation” (*ātappa*) as presented in Chapter Three and in the section elucidating the faculty of *ātappa*, above. This is a practice that Ajaan Lee suggests being undertaken in each frame of reference, contemplating the body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities in and of themselves.<sup>855</sup> In this case, contemplation of a particular thought turns out to be a practice of developing discernment. Meditators are not just instructed to pay bare attention to the thought as Mahāsi Sayādaw depicts. Instead, they should investigate it to uncover its truths such as the cause that gives rise to the thought, the food that feeds the thought, and how the thought vanishes. This practice of focused investigation also seems to be another form of *jhāna* development in which *jhāna* factors such as directed

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<sup>854</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 35–36.

<sup>855</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Frames of Reference*, 10, 16, 21, 35.

thought, evaluation, and singleness of mind are operating. In addition to this, Ajaan Lee also suggests using a counterattack approach to counteract particular unskillful thoughts brought about by passion, aversion, and delusion. For example, this is Ajaan Lee's instruction on dealing with passion that arises during the course of one's meditation:

Whenever passion arises in the mind, focus on being mindful of the mind in and of itself. Don't focus on the object of the passion..... you can contemplate the unattractiveness of the body, focusing first on the insides of your own body, seeing them as filthy and disgusting. Your mind will then be able to free itself from the passion in which it is immersed, and to become more blooming and bright.<sup>856</sup>

What Ajaan Lee suggests here is that meditators should not just note the passion-induced state of mind but counteract it with contemplations that oppose and prevent their re-occurrence. Contemplating the foulness of the body, according to him, is one way to free the mind from the entangling thoughts of passion. The key of this method is to use an appropriate *Dhamma* to subdue a particular unskillful thought that arise in the mind. This is also an effective way to lift up the mind from its entanglements.

To sum up, handling wandering thoughts is another topic revealing the differences between Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee. In his treatment, Mahāsi Sayādaw uses the method of bare attention, i.e., simply noting the phenomena, to handle the wandering thoughts. In his view, this is the way of insight meditation which differs from the tranquility. In his exposition, Mahāsi Sayādaw seems not concerned with the issue of how a thought arises in the mind, or what is the most effective way to subdue a particular thought, i.e., thinking of different remedies to conquer different kinds of unskillful thought. Unlike Mahāsi Sayādaw, Ajaan Lee presents a very different theory. To Ajaan Lee, wandering thoughts should be either dropped, counterattacked, or thoroughly

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<sup>856</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *A Refuge in Awakening* attached in the *Frames of Reference*, 59.

investigated to uncover their truth for the sake of centering the mind in concentration and fostering discernment. His treatment appears to be an active approach as Ajaan Lee not only provides different methods to tackle the wandering thoughts, but he also suggests meditators to question the arising, remaining, and vanishing of the wandering thoughts, a core teaching conducing to the development of the understanding of the cause and effect or the four noble truths.

### 5.2.5. Difference Pertaining to the Treatment of *Nimitta*

Mahāsi Sayādaw's and Ajaan Lee's treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* also reveal differences in the way they handle *nimitta*. To preface the expanded definition of *nimitta* below, it should be pointed out that Mahāsi Sayādaw holds a view of abandoning the meditation object to contemplate the *nimitta* when it arises, and Ajaan Lee's instruction tells meditators to treat it as a guest while remaining focused on their meditation object.

*Nimitta*<sup>857</sup> here refers to a sign or vision that arises during the course of one's meditation. It can be a mental image such as a person, a place, light, or an unusual sensation related to the senses like a smell, a taste, or a tactile sensation. *Nimitta* usually appears when the mind begins to settle down. It can include unusual intuitions which sometimes convey false information and sometimes true. According to some meditation

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<sup>857</sup> Many definitions of *nimitta* have been offered. *Nimitta* has been defined as "anything entering into a causal relation, by which its effect is signified, marked or characterized, is a *nimitta*. An object, image or concept which, on being meditated upon, induces *samādhi* (*jhāna*) is a *nimitta*." See Shwe Zan Aung and Rhys Davids, *Point of Controversy* (London: PTS, 1979), 387–388. According to Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, "The word '*nimitta*' in its technical sense is consistently rendered here by the word 'sign,' which corresponds very nearly if not exactly to most uses of it. It is sometimes rendered by 'mark' (which over-emphasizes the concrete), and by 'image' (which is not always intended). The three kinds, that is, the preliminary-work sign, learning sign and counterpart sign, do not appear in the Piṭakas. There the use rather suggests association of ideas as, for example, at M I 180, M I 119, A I 4, etc., than the more definitely visualized 'image' in some instances of the 'counterpart sign' described in the following chapters." See Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path to Purification*, III 116. For further discussion on *nimitta*, see *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 7 (The Government of Sri Lanka, 2003), 177–179.

teachers, potentially true information is especially dangerous, for it may lead meditators to trust whatever arises in their mind, including other false ideas. Additionally, “true information” *nimitta* can lead to a strong sense of conceit because meditators may think of themselves as extraordinary or special. As a result, it pulls meditators away from the path.<sup>858</sup>

In the *suttas*, *nimitta* can be perceived as certain forms of *pīti* (rapture), *sukha* (pleasure), or pure awareness arising as a result of one’s concentration.<sup>859</sup> It seems the *suttas* are more concerned with learning what leads to the arising of the *nimitta* than trying to describe a *nimitta* by means of characteristics or features. However, a number of *suttas* provide explicit descriptions of *nimitta*.<sup>860</sup> One of the examples depicted in the *Kāyagatā-sati Sutta* (Mindfulness Immersed in the Body) is that of a pure and bright awareness permeating the whole body as the meditator enters the fourth *jhāna*. This pure and bright awareness is compared with a man who is sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth does not extend.<sup>861</sup> This can also mean the wakefulness of the awareness. In the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*<sup>862</sup> and commentarial literature,<sup>863</sup> the depictions of *nimitta* are more diverse. The *Visuddhimagga* discusses three kinds of *nimitta* such as preliminary-work sign (*parikamma-nimitta*), learning sign (*uggaha-nimitta*), and counterpart sign (*patibhaga-nimitta*). These *nimittas* are said to arise as a result of the *kasiṇa* cultivation, a

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<sup>858</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath in Mind*, 82.

<sup>859</sup> More detail on this point will be discussed in the following section below.

<sup>860</sup> MN 119; AN 5.28; MN 39; DN 12; DN 11

<sup>861</sup> MN 119

<sup>862</sup> Aung and Davids, *Point of Controversy*, 387–388.

<sup>863</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path to Purification*, IV 31, 34–41; V 4, 8, 11, 14, 15, 17, 19, 23, 26; VIII 213–215; Arahant Upatissa, *The Path of Liberation (Vimuttimaggā)*, trans. Rev. N. R. M. Ehara, Soma Thera, and Kheminda Thera (Colombo: Dr. D. Roland D. Weerasuria, 1961), 158–159.

practice of staring at an external object<sup>864</sup> until the image of that object is imprinted in one's mind.<sup>865</sup> According to Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa, different preliminary-work signs produce different counterpart signs.<sup>866</sup> This counterpart sign is an indication of the attainment of access concentration, which is a necessary preliminary of absorption concentration (*jhāna*).<sup>867</sup> It is vital to note that the *suttas* and the *Visuddhimagga* differ in their way of handling the *nimitta*. For example, when a *nimitta* arise in the course of meditation, the former instructs meditators to remain cultivating the causes that give rise to the *nimitta*,<sup>868</sup> whereas the latter says *nimitta* should be protected as if it were the embryo of a Wheel-turning Monarch.<sup>869</sup> Cultivating the causes that give rise to the *nimitta* in the *suttas* means to establish mindfulness and developing concentration, i.e., to work with the inner factors that foster these qualities such as directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of mind. To guard the embryo of a Wheel-turning Monarch (the *nimitta*), according to the *Visuddhimagga*, is to adjust external factors, such as living place, alms-resort, speech, associating people, food, climate, and the postures so that they are conducive to one's practice.<sup>870</sup>

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<sup>864</sup> Ten *kasīṇa* are: earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light, and limited-space. See Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path to Purification*, IV 21–V 26.

<sup>865</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Winds to Awakening*, 249.

<sup>866</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path to Purification*, V 1–26.

<sup>867</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Winds to Awakening*, 249. As Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu notes, the commentaries' description of *jhāna* has little similarity with the *suttas*. And the breath meditation does not fit in their explanation very well because when meditator's focus on the breath is getting stronger, the breath will become subtler, which then makes it harder to detect the breath. See Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Winds to Awakening*, 249.

<sup>868</sup> For *pīṭi* (rapture), *sukha* (pleasure) or pure awareness in this case to be seen as *nimitta*, then cultivating the causes that give rise to *nimitta* in the *suttas* can be understood as the cultivation of *jhāna* factors such as directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of mind.

<sup>869</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path to Purification*, IV 34.

<sup>870</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path to Purification*, IV 35–41.

In their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*, both Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw provide detailed explanations of what to do when encountering *nimitta*. In one of his treatises, Mahāsi Sayādaw says:

Also many mental images of various shapes will then appear. The shape of a pagoda, a monk, a man, a house, a tree, a park, a heavenly mansion, a cloud, and many other such images will appear. Here, too, while the meditator is still engaged in noticing one of these mental images, another will show itself; while still noticing that, yet another will appear. Following thus the mental images as they arise, he goes on noticing them. But though he is engaged in noticing them, he will perceive only their initial phase [arising], not the final phase [dissolution].<sup>871</sup>

In this passage, Mahāsi Sayādaw shows different sorts of mental images that appear in the course of the practice. It seems, according to him, they arise one after another. His treatment provided here is to follow the *nimitta* or mental images—whatever image or form they might take—when they arise in their meditation and notice them. It means that when contemplating a certain meditation object and a *nimitta* appears, meditators should drop their initial object to focus on the *nimitta*. It is suggested that *nimitta* should be noted until they disappear, as he says, for instance, “when there is brightness, one should notice it as ‘bright,’ until it disappears.”<sup>872</sup> The teaching of dropping the initial meditation object to focus on the *nimitta* when it arises is analogous to the *Visuddhimagga*’s instruction mentioned above. With regard to the observing of the *nimitta*, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, even though meditators are engaged in noticing them, they are only able to perceive the arising, but not the dissolution of the *nimitta*.

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<sup>871</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Progress of Insight*, 12.

<sup>872</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Practical Insight Meditation*, 34.



In Mahāsi Sayādaw’s instruction, contemplating the *nimitta* also helps meditators realize the three characteristics. His following explanation shows *nimitta* is also a subject of *anicca*.

In the case of the variously shaped images that enter the mind’s field, it is only after each single image noticed has vanished, that another new object will come into the mind’s focus. On noticing them attentively twice, thrice or more, he will see well that these mental objects which are being noticed move from one place to another, or they become gradually smaller and less distinct, until at last they disappear entirely. The meditator, however, does not perceive anything that is permanent and lasting, or free from destruction and disappearance.<sup>873</sup>

Here Mahāsi Sayādaw describes the nature of the *nimitta*, which is very inconstant. It comes into existence and then disappears. It should be noted that this explanation of the *nimitta* is not quite in agreement with the previous one. Whereas in the passage above he states that it is impossible to perceive the dissolution of the *nimitta*, in this passage he gives a detailed account showing how it vanishes.

The way Mahāsi Sayādaw handles *nimitta* is similar to the way he treats the phenomena that arises at the six sense-doors. The theory he applied in handling this issue apparently is based on the notion of “bare attention,” an interpretation he uses to render the faculty of *sati*. In addition to the practice of *sati* (bare attention), the development of *sampajañña* (clear comprehension)—perceiving the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*—is also emphasized. This is similar to the teaching in *The Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and the explanation of the commentary on the *Mūlapaṇṇāsa* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* discussed in the section of *sati*. Furthermore, Mahāsi Sayādaw

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<sup>873</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Progress of Insight*, 13–14.

follows the teaching on corruption of insight in the *Visuddhimagga*<sup>874</sup> to warn meditators not to mistake *nimitta* with a noble attainment.<sup>875</sup>

Ajaan Lee, in his words, treats the *nimitta* as a “visiting guest.” In his explanation, the breath is the main base or the home of meditators while *nimitta*, in contrast, are the guests. His account of *nimitta* is as follows:

The “guests” here are the signs (*nimitta*) and vagrant breaths that will tend to pass within the range of the breath you *are* dealing with: the various signs that arise from the breath and may appear as images—bright lights, people, animals, yourself, others; or as sounds—the voices of people, some you recognize and others you don’t. In some cases the signs appear as smells—either fragrant or else foul like a corpse. Sometimes the in-breath can make you feel so full throughout the body that you have no sense of hunger or thirst. Sometimes the breath can send warm, hot, cold, or tingling sensations through the body. Sometimes it can cause things that never occurred to you before to spring suddenly to mind.<sup>876</sup>

In this elaboration, Ajaan Lee shows multi-sensory aspect of *nimitta*, including the image of people, animal, lights; sounds; smells; or all kinds of breath sensation, and more. In his words, they arise from the breath that meditators are paying attention to.

With regard to the issue of how to handle the *nimitta*, Ajaan Lee instructs meditators to first stay firmly with their breath before receiving the guests. This means that meditators should not leave their home and follow the *nimitta*, as Mahāsi Sayādaw instructs, but rather, remain focused on their meditation object—the breath—while examining the appearance of the *nimitta*. In *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, Ajaan Lee gives two approaches for handling the *nimitta*: bring them under control for later use or leave them alone.

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<sup>874</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path to Purification*, XX 105–130.

<sup>875</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Progress of Insight*, 15–19. For more detail see the discussion of *pīti* (rapture) and *sukha* (pleasure) in the next section.

<sup>876</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadhara, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 19. See also *Basic Themes*, 125–126; *The Craft of the Heart*, 85–87.

Before you go receiving guests, you should put your breath and mind into good order, making them stable and secure. In receiving these guests, you first have to bring them under your control. If you can't control them, don't have anything to do with them. They might lead you astray. But if you can put them through their paces, they can be of use to you later on.<sup>877</sup>

To bring the *nimitta* under control, according to Ajaan Lee, means to be able to change them at will—"making them small, large, sending them far away, bringing them up close, making them appear and disappear, sending them outside, bringing them in."<sup>878</sup> One of the reasons Ajaan Lee emphasizes this practice is because in his theory various supernatural powers will arise once meditators have mastered the control of *nimitta*. As he says:

Once you've mastered these signs, they'll give rise to heightened sensory powers: the ability to see without opening your eyes; the ability to hear far-distant sounds or smell far-distant aromas; the ability to taste the various elements that exist in the air and can be of use to the body in overcoming feelings of hunger and desire; the ability to give rise to certain feelings at will—to feel cool when you want to feel cool, hot when you want to feel hot, warm when you want to feel warm, strong when you need strength—because the various elements in the world that can be physically useful to you will come and appear in your body. The mind, too, will be heightened, and will have the power to develop the eye of intuition (*ñāṇa-cakkhu*): the ability to remember previous lives, the ability to know where living beings are reborn after they die, and the ability to cleanse the heart of the fermentations of defilement. If you have your wits about you, you can receive these guests and put them to work in your home.<sup>879</sup>

The skill of controlling the *nimitta* can eventually be put to use for the purpose of making the body feel less discomfort, for knowing past lives, and for developing the practice so that it leads in the direction of less disturbance by the defilements. But before those skills are perfected, meditators are reminded not to get carried away by being pleased, upset or resistant to the emergence of these visiting guests. Instead, they should stay neutral and

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<sup>877</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 19–20.

<sup>878</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 20. See also *Basic Themes*, 126 and *The Craft of the Heart*, 86–87.

<sup>879</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 20.

carefully examine the visiting guests to discover their truth. The understanding of these visiting guests then depends on the knowledge and training experience of each individual. This means that only if meditators are skillful and circumspect, are they able to distinguish all aspects of these visiting guests—which, Ajaan Lee reminds us, actually arise because they are an aspect of the breath. Meditators should be careful to not settle for false understanding by uncritically believing everything that the signs seem to present.

If you come across them in your practice, examine them thoroughly. Don't be pleased by what appears. Don't get upset or try to deny what appears. Keep your mind on an even keel. Stay neutral. Be circumspect. Consider carefully whatever appears, to see whether it's trustworthy or not. Otherwise, it might lead you to mistaken assumptions. Good and evil, right and wrong, high and low: All depend on whether your heart is shrewd or dull, and on how resourceful you are. If you're dull-witted, even high things can become low, and good things evil.<sup>880</sup>

In other words, a meditator's interpretation of the *nimitta* is determined by his/her shrewdness, cleverness, and tendencies to be wary and vigilant around these arisen objects of perception. According to Ajaan Lee, if—and only if—meditators are skillful in controlling the *nimitta* in this way, then they are encouraged to receive visiting guests. Otherwise, it is better to just leave them alone and just remain focused on the meditation object. In this case, if meditators do not want to see the distractions of mental images emerging in their meditation, Ajaan Lee suggests that they can take a couple of deep breaths and the mental images will disappear.

Ajaan Lee's instruction for handling the *nimitta* during the course of one's meditation also shows his stress on the development of the qualities of mindfulness and alertness. Cultivating the faculty of *sati* in this case means remembering to continue

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<sup>880</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 20.

concentrating on the initial meditation object—the breath—and to remember the teaching of how to approach the emergence of the *nimitta*. The quality of *sati* works side by side with the quality of alertness. In addition to remembering what should be done and what should not, meditators also have to be highly alert to the fabrication of the visiting guests. Meditators should cultivate these qualities in a skillful way to make sure that the way they handle the *nimitta* would be conducive to the development of concentration and discernment. As a result, handling *nimitta*, in his theory, becomes a way to train the mind<sup>881</sup> and to gain knowledge of the four noble truths.<sup>882</sup>

In short, with regard to the issue of handling the *nimitta*, Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee provide very different treatments. The first discrepancy between the two teachers is the way of receiving the *nimitta* as it arises. Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw tells meditators to drop their initial meditation object to follow the *nimitta* once they arise, Ajaan Lee instructs meditators to treat them as visiting guests while remaining concentrated on their meditation object—the breath.

Another discrepancy is in the way they handle the *nimitta* once it has arisen. Mahāsi Sayādaw's solution appears to be relatively simple. His solution for the *nimitta* is simply noting them and comprehending their three characteristics, a treatment that he applies in treating the mental and physical phenomena arising at the six sense-doors. This approach is fairly passive because Mahāsi Sayādaw is not investigating the *nimitta* for the sake of making them more skillful nor try to contemplate them in terms of the four noble truths. Ajaan Lee's treatment for the *nimitta*, on the other hand, is more active as he tries to master the *nimitta* by engaging with them. Mastering the *nimitta*, according to him, can

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<sup>881</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 20.

<sup>882</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 21.

give rise to various supernatural powers and also “can act as a means for the arising of liberating insight.”<sup>883</sup> This is one of the reasons Ajaan Lee encourages meditators to learn to control the *nimitta*. Also because, like perceptions (of breath, or in general), manipulating them lets one see how they are put together.

One of the important points in their explanation of *nimitta* is the warning of not misperceiving them. Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw instructs meditators should rightly understand them to avoid the arising of the corrupted insights, Ajaan Lee suggests leaving them alone if one does not have knowledge to handle them. This recommendation to be cautious, given by both teachers, should serve to inform meditation practitioners in case their practice is unsupervised.<sup>884</sup> The discussion on *nimitta* of Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw also can be a reference for practitioners, such as Bhikkhu Sona,<sup>885</sup> who have doubt in the existence of the *nimitta*.

#### **5.2.6. Difference Pertaining to the Treatment of *Pīti* and *Sukha***

Rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*) are two distinctive results of meditation practice. They are signs that mark the development of one’s meditation. In the Canon, *pīti* and *sukha* are often mentioned in the teaching of right concentration. For instance, the five factors of the first *jhāna* includes directed thought (*vitakka*), evaluation (*vicāra*), rapture (*pīti*), pleasure (*sukha*), and singleness of mind (*ekaggatā*). The significance of these two factors can be seen as they continue to appear in other levels of concentration.

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<sup>883</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Basic Themes*, 126.

<sup>884</sup> The potential dangers of *nimitta* can also be seen in the case of Mae Chee Kaew whose meditation is said to have all kinds of images appearing since her young age. Ajaan Mun even prohibits her from continuing to practice meditation without the supervision of an experienced teacher when he leaves her village. See Bhikkhu Dick Sīlaratano, *Mae Chee Kaew*, 41–57.

<sup>885</sup> Bhikkhu Sona, “The Mystery of the Breath *Nimitta* or The Case of The Missing Simile,” Arrowriver.ca, April 2020, <https://www.arrowriver.ca/dhamma/nimitta.html>.

Rapture (*pīti*) does not disappear until the third *jhāna*, whereas pleasure (*sukha*) is dropped only as one enters the fourth *jhāna*. *Pīti* and *sukha* are considered the food of the meditator. This is a term used to describe meditators who find peace and happiness in their meditation that allows them to meditate for days without food but remain healthy and bright. In their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*, both Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee provide instructions for handling rapture and pleasure in the course of one's meditation. However, their treatment for these two *jhāna* factors are very different from each other.

In *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, Mahāsi Sayādaw mentions the appearance of pleasure that arises in advanced concentration. “[Meditators] will develop such a pure state of Concentration as has never been known before in the course of their life and thus enjoy many innocent pleasures as a result of advanced Concentration.”<sup>886</sup>

The arising of rapture and pleasure is described in more detail in *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, which states:

At this stage noting tends to be easy. Illuminations, joys, and tranquilities appear. Going through experiences unthought of before, one is thrilled with joy and happiness... One has now come to the knowledge of rising and passing away. Everything is fine at this stage. Noting is easy and effortless. It is good to note, and brilliant lights appear. Rapture seizes him and causes a sort of goose-flesh in him. Both body and mind are at ease and he feels very comfortable. The objects to be noted seem to drop on one's mindfulness of their own accord. Mindfulness on its own part seems to drop on the object of its own accord. Everything is there already noted. One never fails or forgets to note. On every noting the awareness is very clear. If you attend to something and reflect on it, it proves to be a plain and simple matter. If you take up impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self, about which you have heard before, they turn out to be plainly discernible things.<sup>887</sup>

In this treatise, Mahāsi Sayādaw describes a stage at which noting becomes pleasurable and the strain of effort disappears, and that is accompanied by a “knowledge of arising

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<sup>886</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34.

<sup>887</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 79–80.

and passing away.” A similar description of the emerging of rapture and pleasure also can be found in other treatises. They are depicted in *Mahāsi Abroad, Lectures by the*

*Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw of Burma* as:

Of the good deeds of insight, one is the knowledge of arising and passing away (*udayabbaya-ñāṇa*), by which one realises the very rapid arising and passing away of things. When this knowledge comes, one finds bright light all around. One’s whole body feels weightless and one experiences extreme happiness, never before experienced. The mind is in rapture. One finds that illnesses and pains that were so difficult to bear before have now disappeared altogether.<sup>888</sup>

It is important to note that, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, rapture and pleasure arise as a result of insight. The insight he refers to is the knowledge of arising and passing away. This is in line with the teaching recorded in the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>889</sup> However, in his theory, rapture and pleasure even begin to arise in the stage of purification of mind, much earlier than the stage of “the knowledge of arising and passing away.” At the level of “purification by overcoming doubt,” they are just getting stronger.<sup>890</sup>

With regard to Mahāsi Sayādaw’s exposition of rapture and pleasure, one significant point that needs to be made is his view of seeing them as simply probable obstacles for the development of one’s meditation. In the *Progress of Insight*, he says:

Having felt such rapture and happiness accompanied by the “brilliant light” and enjoying the very act of perfect noticing, which is ably functioning with ease and rapidity, the meditator now believes: “Surely I must have attained to the supramundane path and fruition! Now I must have finished the task of meditation. This is mistaking what is not the path for the path, and it is a corruption of insight which usually takes place in the manner just described. But even if the meditator does not take the “brilliant light” and the other corruptions as an indication of the path and fruition, still he feels delight in them. This is likewise a corruption of insight.”<sup>891</sup>

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<sup>888</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Mahāsi Abroad: Lectures by the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw of Burma*, trans. U Nyi Nyi and U Tha Noe, ed. Bhikkhu Pesana, new ed. (Rangoon, Burma: Buddha Sāsānānuggaha Organisation, 1979), 13–14, Kindle. See also the *Progress of Insight*, 15–19.

<sup>889</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XX 105–130.

<sup>890</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Progress of Insight*, 16–17.

<sup>891</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Progress of Insight*, 19.



This view can be traced back to the *Visuddhimagga*. In this commentary, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa categorizes rapture and pleasure along with other factors such as imperfections or corrupted insight.<sup>892</sup> It is explained in the *Visuddhimagga* that:

And as in the case of illumination, so too in the case of the other imperfections that may arise, the meditator thinks thus: “Such knowledge... such rapturous happiness...tranquillity...bliss...resolution...exertion...assurance...equanimity... attachment never arose in me before. I have surely reached the path, reached fruition.” Thus he takes what is not the path to be the path and what is not fruition to be fruition. When he takes what is not the path to be the path and what is not fruition to be fruition, the course of his insight is interrupted. He drops his basic meditation subject and sits just enjoying the attachment.<sup>893</sup>

Mahāsi Sayādaw’s protocol for rapture and pleasure is—similar to the treatment of the six sense-doors, the rising and falling, the wandering thought, and the *nimitta*—simply to note them as “rapture” or “pleasure” until they disappear. As he says, “If happiness or joy arises in the mind, just note ‘happy’ or ‘joyful.’ Such happy moods will come to you in torrents when you gain the knowledge of arising and passing away (*udayabbaya-ñāṇa*). You will also experience great joy or rapture (*pīti*). This too, you must note as ‘rapture, rapture.’”<sup>894</sup> This practice of noting (bare attention), which is understood as the way to develop *sati*, should be cultivated together with another quality—*sampajañña*—clear-comprehension (seeing the three characteristics). This means that while noting the *pīti* and *sukha*, meditators should try to perceive the rapture and pleasure that they experience as impermanent, suffering, and no-self. This practice, as a consequence, would lead to the realization of insights into the three characteristics, a point that is repeatedly emphasized in *The Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.<sup>895</sup> Examining Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment

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<sup>892</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XX 105–130.

<sup>893</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XX 123.

<sup>894</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Mahāsi Abroad*, 27.

<sup>895</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 16–151.

of rapture and pleasure also shows that he does not emphasize the development of these two factors. For example, the word pleasure (*sukha*) appears only one time in *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*. In other treatises, except for a brief mention of the arising of rapture and pleasure and the way to handle them (simply note them until they disappear), Mahāsi Sayādaw seems not concerned with the work of maintaining, developing, or making use of these two factors.

Ajaan Lee's explanations of rapture and pleasure are considerably different from Mahāsi Sayādaw's. The first difference is that, according to Ajaan Lee, rapture and pleasure do not arise as a result of insight, as Mahāsi Sayādaw and the commentaries explain, but as the result of *jhāna* cultivation. For instance, in his elaboration of the first *jhāna*, Ajaan Lee divides the five factors of *jhāna* into causes and results. Directed thought (*vitakka*), evaluation (*vicāra*), and singleness of mind (*ekaggatārammaṇa*) are the causes. Rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*) are the results. As he explains in the *Keeping the Breath in Mind*:

Directed thought, singleness of preoccupation, and evaluation act as the causes. When the causes are fully ripe, results will appear—(d) rapture (*pīti*), a compelling sense of fullness and refreshment for body and mind, going straight to the heart, independent of all else; (e) pleasure (*sukha*), physical ease arising from the body's being still and unperturbed (*kāya-passaddhi*); mental contentment arising from the mind's being at ease on its own, undistracted, unperturbed, serene, and exultant (*citta-passaddhi*).<sup>896</sup>

It is worth reiterating the point that the results can come only if the causes are pursued to a sufficient degree. And so, while the results may contribute to a feeling of lightness and effortlessness perhaps, they come about only as a result of active effort put toward directed thought and evaluation. But in neither this, nor the following passage, is there a

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<sup>896</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 28.

claim—as Mahāsi Sayādaw would have made—that *pīti* and *sukha* arise as a result of insight. Thinking about an object and analyzing it are, again, identified as the causes, not the effects, of concentration practice: they are not “insight.”

Ajaan Lee’s explanation on this point is in line with the *suttas*. In the *suttas*, rapture and pleasure often appear as a result of concentration cultivation, i.e., *jhāna* practice. This point is well expounded, for instance, in the *Samādhi Sutta*.

And what is the development of concentration that, when developed and pursued, leads to a pleasant abiding in the here and now? There is the case where a monk—quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful qualities—enters and remains in the first *jhāna*: rapture and pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts and evaluations, he enters and remains in the second *jhāna*: rapture and pleasure born of composure, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation—internal assurance.<sup>897</sup>

Both Ajaan Lee and the *suttas* are using the same terminologies, and also referring to the same cause-and-effect. Both explain that there is a specific process and sequence to *jhāna* cultivation that requires knowing how to navigate and modulate one’s effort according to the types of result. In both expositions, rapture and pleasure arise as a result of an active work of shaping the mind in concentration. This is different from Mahāsi Sayādaw’s approach which simply requires not more than an act of passively noting the arising and passing away of these two factors.

The second difference between Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw has to do with their attitude toward rapture and pleasure. Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw considers rapture and pleasure simply obstacles of meditation, Ajaan Lee states that these two factors can act as an indispensable and inseparable part of the development of concentration, so long

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<sup>897</sup> AN 4. 41. See also DN 22; AN 9. 36; MN 111

as meditators do not cling to them.<sup>898</sup> His account of the five factors of the first *jhāna* explains the connection between mindfulness and concentration: mindfulness requires the cooperation of directed thought (*vitakka*), evaluation (*vicāra*), and singleness of mind (*ekaggatārammaṇa*), which, when cultivated, will lead to rapture and pleasure. These, in turn, are seen as essential phenomena indicating the emergence of concentration. The rapture and pleasure that come from the *jhāna* cultivation, according to Ajaan Lee, have a function of suppressing or eliminating the hindrances. As he says in *A Refuge in Awakening*:

When mindfulness and alertness are fully aware in your mind, the mind feels saturated and full with an unadulterated sense of rapture and joy at all times. As for the pleasure and ease that come from the first *jhāna*, they give you a sense of freedom with no worries or concerns for anyone or anything—like a person who has attained enough wealth that he no longer has any worries or concerns about his livelihood, and can relax in peace.<sup>899</sup>

This is one of the reasons Ajaan Lee enthusiastically encourages meditators to develop rapture and pleasure. “When you attain the pleasure and ease that come from the first *jhāna*, you are freed from the hindrances of indecision and restlessness and anxiety. So you should work at developing these factors in your mind until it can stay steadily in *jhāna*.”<sup>900</sup> This view is in line with the teaching of seven factors for awakening<sup>901</sup> in the Canon which says that rapture should be developed as one of seven factors leading to awakening. In this formula, rapture is placed right after persistence and before calm and concentration.

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<sup>898</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Craft of the Heart*, 84–85.

<sup>899</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *A Refuge in Awakening* attached in *Frames of Reference*, 59.

<sup>900</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *A Refuge in Awakening* attached in *Frames of Reference*, 60.

<sup>901</sup> The seven factors for awakening are: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. See SN 46.6, 46.52–54, 52.2; AN 10.95.

Ajaan Lee not only encourages meditators to develop *pīti* and *sukha*, he also provides a detailed explanation for how they should be cultivated. More often than not, Ajaan Lee explains the development of rapture and pleasure under the umbrella of *jhāna*. At the beginning, meditators are instructed to work with the meditation object—the breath—by using directed thought, evaluation, and trying to remain focused on that particular object. This practice will then lead to the arising of rapture and pleasure. The distinctive point in his teaching is that when rapture and pleasure arise, meditators should spread it throughout the body.<sup>902</sup> This teaching can be traced back to the *Kāyagatā-sati Sutta*, which instructs meditators to permeate, pervade, suffuse, and fill their body with the rapture and pleasure after giving rise to them by using directed thought and evaluation while the mind withdraws from sensuality.<sup>903</sup> Meditators are also taught to develop and maintain the rapture and pleasure. The quality of rapture and pleasure, in Ajaan Lee’s theory, reveals the level of one’s concentration. For instance, the levels of rapture and pleasure are stronger and more stable in the second *jhāna* than in the first.<sup>904</sup>

Unlike Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatment, which instructs meditators to drop their initial meditation object to focus on the rapture and pleasure when they arise, in Ajaan Lee’s instruction meditators are told to continue focusing on their meditation object while developing *pīti* and *sukha*. His description of the first *jhāna* is an example to explain this point.

The first *jhāna* has five factors. (a) Directed thought (*vitakka*): Think of the breath until you can keep it in mind without getting distracted. (b) Singleness of preoccupation (*ekaggatārammaṇa*): Keep the mind with the breath. Don’t let it stray after other concepts or preoccupations. Watch over your thoughts so that they deal only with the breath to the point where the breath becomes comfortable.

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<sup>902</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 22.

<sup>903</sup> MN 119

<sup>904</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 27–29.

(The mind becomes one, at rest with the breath.) (c) Evaluation (*vicāra*): Gain a sense of how to let this comfortable breath sensation spread and connect with the other breath sensations in the body. Let these breath sensations spread until they're interconnected all over the body. Once the body has been soothed by the breath, feelings of pain will grow calm. The body will be filled with good breath energy. (The mind is focused exclusively on issues connected with the breath.)<sup>905</sup>

Ajaan Lee's instruction of remaining focused on the meditation object—the breath—while developing rapture and pleasure is in accord with the teaching in the *Ānāpānāsati Sutta*. This can be seen in the *sutta* passage below, which instructs meditators to remain focused on the breath even when the rapture and pleasure arise.

He trains himself, "I will breathe in sensitive to rapture." He trains himself, "I will breathe out sensitive to rapture." He trains himself, "I will breathe in sensitive to pleasure." He trains himself, "I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure." He trains himself, "I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication." He trains himself, "I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication." He trains himself, "I will breathe in calming mental fabrication." He trains himself, "I will breathe out calming mental fabrication." On that occasion the monk remains focused on feelings in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. I tell you, monks, that this—careful attention to in-and-out breaths—is classed as a feeling among feelings, which is why the monk on that occasion remains focused on feelings in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.<sup>906</sup>

The training work here for the meditator is to learn to become sensitive to rapture and pleasure, and then later, other elements. It should be kept in mind that here the *sutta* does not explain how to develop one's meditation from a state of having rapture toward a state possessing pleasure. This missing piece, however, can be found in Ajaan Lee's treatment, a point that has already been mentioned in Chapter Three.

In short, Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw reveal a number of discrepancies in their way of treating *pīti* and *sukha*. The significant discrepancies are: (1) Whereas Ajaan Lee explains that *pīti* and *sukha* arise when the causal factors of *jhāna*—such as directed

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<sup>905</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 27.

<sup>906</sup> MN 118

thought, evaluation, and singleness of mind—are cultivated, Mahāsi Sayādaw claims that they are a result of insight. (2) Whereas Ajaan Lee tends to see them as food that can be used to feed the concentration practice as long as no sense of clinging is involved, Mahāsi Sayādaw often explains them as obstacles for insight training. (3) In his treatment, Ajaan Lee strongly encourages meditators to develop these two factors, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw does not emphasize them that much. (4) With regard to the issue of handling *pīti* and *sukha*, in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory, meditators should drop their initial meditation subject to focus on *pīti* and *sukha*, Ajaan Lee teaches that one should remain focused on developing the causal factors leading to these two qualities, and that they cannot be developed without those causes. (5) Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw keeps using the noting method—bare attention technique—as explained in the above sections to deal with *pīti* and *sukha*, Ajaan Lee provides a detailed explanation indicating how they should be developed, an instruction mentioned but not explained in the *suttas*.

It seems the theories that each teacher utilizes to explain his teaching are based on the different sources they reference. Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw appears to depend on the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Ajaan Lee uses the instructions given in the *suttas* such as the *Samādhi Sutta*.

#### **5.2.7. Difference in Explaining the Relationship Between *Jhāna* and *Vipassanā*.**

Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee also have different ways of treating the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā* in their treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. To Mahāsi Sayādaw, they are two separate practices, whereas Ajaan Lee asserts that *jhāna* and *vipassanā* are two qualities that work hand in hand to support one another. This discrepancy also leads to another discrepancy discussed in the section on concentration:

Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw states that the attainment of awakening does not have to be based on *jhāna*, Ajaan Lee claims that it has to occur in one of the states of *jhāna*.

In Mahāsi Sayādaw’s treatises, *jhāna* and *vipassanā* are often presented as two separate forms of meditation, tranquility and insight, respectively.<sup>907</sup> As discussed in Chapter Four, Mahāsi Sayādaw follows the commentaries such as the *Visuddhimagga* to provide a long list of meditation subjects<sup>908</sup> that, he claims, belong only to tranquility meditation. According to him, tranquility practice consumes a great deal of time and it leads only to the achievement of *jhāna*, which takes meditators to the *Brahmā* world but not to awakening. That is why whoever wants to attain awakening has to practice insight subsequently after developing *jhāna*. This is his definition of *samatha-yānika*—the vehicle of tranquility. This vehicle is considerably different from *suddhavipassanā-yānika* or bare insight meditation, the other form of practice that Mahāsi Sayādaw strongly promotes.

Bare insight meditation, in his words, mainly focuses on the development of insight—roughly defined as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics. The reason bare insight meditation is superior to tranquility meditation is because it alone can take meditators to full awakening. This form of meditation, as he explains, can forgo *jhāna* cultivation. In other words, meditators who take up the practice of bare insight meditation can directly work on developing discernment and skip the practice of *jhāna*. This is the theory of mindfulness-develops-discernment that Mahāsi Sayādaw advocates. It appears

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<sup>907</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Progress of Insight*, 2–5; *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 4–33; *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 1–3; *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 9–10.

<sup>908</sup> Ten *kaṣiṇa* devices, ten foul objects, ten recollections, and thirty-two parts of the body, and other subjects.



that in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, there is no connection between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*. That is why it is named bare insight meditation.

In this treatment, only insight cultivation is emphasized. Meditators are told to focus only on the realization of impermanence, suffering, and no-self. They should try to see the manifestation of these three characteristics in the matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*) that they observe. Even though Mahāsi Sayādaw states that the realization could not happen without the development of concentration, he seems not to acknowledge the existence of *jhāna* in this process. This is because, as he explains, even full awakening can be attained by merely momentary concentration, the lowest level of *samādhi*. Throughout his treatment, there is not a single passage explaining the cultivation of *jhāna*. Thus, Mahāsi Sayādaw's *suddhavipassanā-yanika* is a vehicle without *jhāna*, a teaching advocated by most Burmese meditation lineages.<sup>909</sup>

Ajaan Lee, in contrast, does not make a clear separation between the practice of *jhāna* and *vipassanā*. To him, they are actually two sides of the same coin. For instance, in one of his *Dhamma* talks, he says:

Some people say that tranquility and insight are two separate things, but actually they're one and the same. Tranquility gives rise to insight. Insight gives rise to purity. And so purity comes from this plain old stillness of mind. What can we do to reach purity? For the mind to become pure we have to train it. If you were to say it's easy, it's easy. If you were to say it's hard, it's hard. If you're true in what you do, you'll get results easily. If you aren't, the results will be hard. Tranquility is like a lit candle. If it's well protected from the wind, the flame will stand straight and give off a bright light. You'll be able to see anything clearly. If the candle tips over, the flame will go out and you'll have to grope around with your hands. You may mistake a cat for a dog, or a dog for a cat, because you can't see clearly.<sup>910</sup>

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<sup>909</sup> Ledi Sayādaw, another renowned Burmese teacher whom many claim in their meditation lineage, also strongly promoted bare insight meditation practice and forgoing *jhāna*. See Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 44.

<sup>910</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *The Heightened Mind*, 58.

In his treatment, tranquility and insight are presented as two qualities working side by side in a sense that without one, the other cannot fully develop. This theory can be seen, for instance, in the development of *jhāna*, a central theme in Ajaan Lee's teaching. As mentioned above, in the first *jhāna*, he divides five factors of *jhāna* practice into cause and result. The causes that lead to the achievement of the first *jhāna* are directed thought (*vitakka*), evaluation (*vicāra*), and singleness of preoccupation.<sup>911</sup> Of these *jhāna* factors, directed thought and singleness of preoccupation, according to him, fall under the heading of concentration whereas evaluation falls under the heading of discernment.<sup>912</sup> Apparently, the faculty of discernment, which refers to the factor of evaluation (*vicāra*), plays a key role in *jhāna* cultivation. For example, in Ajaan Lee's descriptions of breath meditation, it is this factor that spreads the still breath to different parts of the body, and also allows all breath sensations in the body to connect to one another.<sup>913</sup> Similarly, it is with the assistance of this faculty—discernment—that meditators, having attained the first *jhāna*, are able to abandon the factors that are causing stress to develop their concentration to a higher level, the second *jhāna*, and all the way to the fourth *jhāna*.<sup>914</sup>

Likewise, the quality of tranquility in the mind also assists in the development of insight. How the development of concentration fosters the development of insight can be explained this way: One has to be still to see things clearly, but if one is running, all one sees is a blur. As Ajaan Lee says:

The *Dhamma* is something constant and true. The reason we don't see the truth is because we're always on the move. If we're riding in a car, we can't clearly see the things that pass nearby us on the road, such as how big the stones on the ground are, their color or shape. We look at trees and mountains, and they all

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<sup>911</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *What is the Triple Gem*, 44.

<sup>912</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 52.

<sup>913</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 27–28.

<sup>914</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammaddharo, *What is the Triple Gem*, 44; *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 28.

seem to be on the move. If we've been in a car since birth, without stopping to get out and walk around on our own, we're sure to think that cars run, trees run, and mountains run. What we see isn't in line with the truth. The running is in us, in the car, not in the mountains and trees.<sup>915</sup>

When the mind is well centered, he explains, it will form a foundation for the development of discernment<sup>916</sup> that helps meditators see what is inconstant and what is not, what is stress and what is not, what is not-self and what is self.<sup>917</sup> Another point to illustrate this connected relationship is that, as mention above, in Ajaan Lee's theory, liberating insight arises only in one of the four *jhānas*.<sup>918</sup> In short, in Ajaan Lee's treatment, tranquility and insight appear to be two wings of the bird, two parts of the same whole. They help to fulfill each other, and their combined accomplishment takes meditators to final release.

Not only do Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw have different views on the understanding of *jhāna* and *vipassanā*, modern meditation teachers and scholars also present various perspectives on this issue. Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and Sri Lankan monk Bhante Walpola Rāhula, for example, say the form *jhānas* and formless *jhānas* existed before the Buddha, and are not conducive to awakening.<sup>919</sup> This assumption is based on an account saying that the Buddha practiced this sort of meditation with his earlier teachers Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, but was dissatisfied because it could not lead him to awakening. Thich Nhat Hanh even denies the existence of *jhāna* in Buddhist meditation as he claims, with a novel hypothesis, that they

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<sup>915</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *The Skills of Release*, 26.

<sup>916</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 4; *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 6.

<sup>917</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Basic Themes*, 35.

<sup>918</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Inner Strength*, 5.

<sup>919</sup> Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 68.

were inserted into the Canon much later.<sup>920</sup> It appears both Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and Bhante Walpola Rāhula acknowledge only *vipassanā* practice. Sri Lankan Buddhist Scholar David J. Kalupahana, in contrast, asserts that the Buddha achieved awakening by just reverting to the teachings of his teachers, but in a less vigorous way.<sup>921</sup> This means, Buddhist meditation teaching is fundamentally the same as Brahmanic.<sup>922</sup>

Others assert that these two qualities cannot be developed in tandem. This means meditators cannot develop insight while cultivating *jhāna* and vice versa. This can be seen, for example, in Ajaan Brahmavamsa's explanation.

Because of the perfect one-pointedness and fixed attention, one loses the faculty of perspective within *jhāna*. Comprehension relies on comparison—relating this to that, here to there, now with then. In *jhāna*, all that is perceived is an unmoving, enveloping, nondual bliss that allows no space for the arising of perspective... When perspective is removed, so is comprehension. Thus, in *jhāna* not only is there no sense of time but also there is no comprehension of what is going on. At the time, one will not even know which *jhāna* one is in.<sup>923</sup>

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<sup>920</sup> Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh says: “There are also states of concentration that encourage the practitioner to escape from the complexities of suffering and existence, rather than face them directly in order to transform them. These can be called “wrong concentration.” The Four Form *Jhānas* and the Four Formless *Jhānas* are states of meditational concentration which the Buddha practiced with teachers such as Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, and he rejected them as not leading to liberation from suffering. These states of concentration probably found their way back into the sutras around two hundred years after the Buddha passed into *mahāparinirvāna*. The results of these concentrations are to hide reality from the practitioner, so we can assume that they should not be considered Right Concentration. To dwell in these concentrations for a duration of time for the sake of healing may be one thing, but to escape in them for a long time isn't what the Buddha recommended.” See Thich Nhat Hanh and Annabel Laity, *Transformation and Healing: The Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1990), 44. The same argument is also presented in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Breathe, You Are Alive: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*, rev. ed (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1996) 144–47. Strangely, when explaining *pīti* and *sukha*, Thich Nhat Hanh quotes the similes that are used to describe the *jhānas* to elaborate the development of these two qualities. See Thich Nhat Hanh and Laity, *Transformation and Healing*, 66–67. See also Bhikkhu Sujato, *A History of Mindfulness*, 140–141.

<sup>921</sup> David J. Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 24.

<sup>922</sup> More discussion on the issue whether the *jhānas* are the Buddha's unique teaching or whether they derived from Brahmanism can be seen, for example, in Keren Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation: The Four Jhānas as the Actualization of Insight* (New York: Routledge, 2017) and Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (London: Routledge, 2007). Here I focus on the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā* recorded in the Pāli *suttas* and the commentaries.

<sup>923</sup> Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2006), 153.

Ajaan Brahmavamso's understanding of *jhāna* is of the perfect one-pointedness and fixed attention which has no space for the arising of perspective or comprehension. To him, when in *jhāna* meditators have no sense of time and also do not know what is happening. In other words, it is impossible to develop insight when one is in *jhāna*.

This view is in line with the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>924</sup> In the *Visuddhimagga*, *jhāna* is defined as “concentration on a fixed object so intense that awareness of no other experience can arise, resulting in one-pointed focus...awareness of changing phenomena is lost as the mind is fixed or absorbed into its meditation object and mental activity becomes still.”<sup>925</sup> In other words, this understanding of *jhāna* depends on the definition of one-pointedness (*ekaggata*) as narrowing the scope of one's attention to such a degree that any other movements of the mind are blocked. Traditions inspired by this commentary, as a consequence, insist that no insight can happen in *jhānas*. Meditators, thus, have to withdraw to either “momentary concentration” or “access concentration” in order to carry out insight practice.<sup>926</sup>

This is profoundly different from the *suttas*' exposition. In the *suttas*, meditators are depicted clearly knowing what is happening while in a state of *jhāna*. They even are able to perceive a further escape from that particular mental state. As the *Anupada Sutta*, for instance, states:

There was the case where Sāriputta—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—entered and remained in the first *jhāna*: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. Whatever qualities there are in the first *jhāna*—directed thought, evaluation, rapture, pleasure, singleness of mind, contact, feeling, perception, intention, consciousness, desire, decision, persistence, mindfulness, equanimity, and

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<sup>924</sup> Buddhaghosa and Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, III 5–6. See also Shankman, *The Experience of Samādhi*, 56.

<sup>925</sup> Shankman, *The Experience of Samādhi*, 55.

<sup>926</sup> Shankman, *The Experience of Samādhi*, 56.

attention—he ferreted them out one after another. Known to him they arose, known to him they remained, known to him they subsided. He discerned, “So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into play. Having been, they vanish.” He remained unattracted and unrepelled with regard to those qualities, independent, detached, released, dissociated, with an awareness rid of barriers. He discerned that “There is a further escape,” and pursuing it there really was for him.<sup>927</sup>

Unlike the views mentioned above, this *sutta* shows that while in *jhāna* Sāriputta was able to use discernment to such a degree that he could distinguish all of the aspects of the *jhānas* and break them down even further into their component parts before ferreting them out one after another in order to find the smallest instance of stress caused by the fabricated mind and escape that.

In the *suttas*, *jhāna* and *vipassanā* are taught in many discourses across the Canon. The four form *jhānas* are defined as right concentration. The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* depicts *jhānas* as “fruits of the contemplative life, visible here and now,” in other words, an actual karmic result of practice that manifest in the present life as a skill and attainment.<sup>928</sup> In the last discourse, the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha is said to move through the *jhānas* one after another from the first state to the last, and then in reverse order. Then he proceeds again from to the first *jhāna* up to the fourth *jhāna* before reaching final awakening, *parinibbāna*.<sup>929</sup> In addition, the *suttas* also state that only when meditators are in the formless attainments *jhānas* are they said to attain sensory-free awareness. Awakening is also said to be achievable in any of these states.<sup>930</sup> Therefore, the belief that these two kinds of *jhāna*—form and formless—are not the Buddha’s teaching appears unreasonable and unconvincing.

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<sup>927</sup> MN 111

<sup>928</sup> DN 2

<sup>929</sup> DN 16

<sup>930</sup> MN 52; AN 9.36

As for the misconceived idea that the Buddha just reverted to the Brahmanic teaching, scholars have demonstrated that *jhāna* is the Buddha's innovation and that it was a major contribution to the meditation teaching in India at the time. Keren Arbel, for example, has convincingly argued that *jhāna* is a unique teaching of the Buddha. She states that the term *jhāna* could have been borrowed, as in the case of the term *kamma*, but she argues that the Pāli Canon presented a systematic meditation structure that no tradition prior to the Buddha time possessed.<sup>931</sup>

In the *suttas*, *jhāna* and *vipassanā* are rarely presented as two separate practices. The view that is consistently stated in the *suttas* is, essentially, this, “There’s no *jhāna* for one with no discernment, no discernment for one with no *jhāna*. But one with both *jhāna* and discernment: he’s on the verge of Unbinding.”<sup>932</sup> Not only do *jhāna* and *vipassanā* need each other to be effective, both are required to make the final awakening possible. It can be said that these two qualities are like the two wings of a bird. If lacking either the left wing or the right, the bird is unable to take off from the land of the *samsāra*. The *suttas* also do not make any comparison between *jhāna* and *vipassanā* to conclude that *vipassanā* is superior to *jhāna* or vice versa. Instead, they say that these are the two qualities can be developed in either order or at the same time, and in order to attain full awakening they must both be brought to consummation.<sup>933</sup> Therefore, according to the *suttas*, if meditators find themselves with less proficient in either quality, they should go

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<sup>931</sup> Keren Arbel, “Buddhist or Not? Thinking Anew the Role of the *Jhānas* in the Path of Awakening,” Dhammawheel.com, April 2008, <https://www.dhammawheel.com/download/file.php?id=1342>. See also Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation*, 23–45.

<sup>932</sup> Dhṛp 372; DN 4

<sup>933</sup> AN 4.170; MN 6

and consult those who are more advanced on the path to learn how to correct their deficiency.<sup>934</sup>

This shows that Ajaan Lee’s teaching on *jhāna* and *vipassanā* appears to be in line with the *suttas*, especially one of the patterns recorded in the *Yuganaddha Sutta*, which says, “Then there is the case where a monk has developed tranquility in tandem with insight. As he develops tranquility in tandem with insight, the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it and pursuing it—his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.”<sup>935</sup> It is the quality of mutual supportiveness of tranquility and insight that moves the meditator forward on the path. Mahāsi Sayādaw’s perspective, on the other hand, tends to be in accord with the commentarial literature, where the notion of dry insight is recorded. To him, full awakening can be achieved with insight alone, a theory that downplays the development of *jhāna* as it requires only momentary concentration—the lowest degree of concentration.

### 5.2.8. Difference in Explaining the Knowledge of the Regularity of the *Dhamma*

Another essential difference between the two teachers’ views can be found in their explanations of knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma*, i.e., knowledge leading to liberation, which also occupies a significant position in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The way they define knowledge leading up to liberation also is profoundly different from one another.

Liberation or the attainment of awakening is essential in Buddhism for it marks the moment an ordinary person has become a noble one. In the Canon, an awakened

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<sup>934</sup> AN 4.94

<sup>935</sup> AN 4.170



person is often described as having opened the *Dhamma*-eye or having entered the stream that leads to ultimate release (*nibbāna*). Whoever achieves the lowest level of awakening—stream-entry—is said to be free from three lower destinations, such as hell, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the animal realm.<sup>936</sup> He or she will not be born in the human or heavenly realms for more than seven more lifetimes.<sup>937</sup> In the modern days, a number of meditation teachers and practitioners have publicly claimed their achievements.<sup>938</sup> Among them, some even provide a formula to identify this spiritual attainment.<sup>939</sup> However, different meditation schools define the attainment of stream-entry in very different terms. This, as a consequence, gives rise to the question of whose certification of stream-entry is valid and whose is not.<sup>940</sup> As discussed in previous chapters, both Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee in the course of explaining *satipaṭṭhāna* practice define the issue of awakening.

As discussed in Chapter Four, according to Mahāsi Sayādaw, knowledge in terms of the three characteristics—*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*—is the knowledge that leads to awakening. In *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, he says: “When a Yogi has fully developed the Insights into Impermanence, Suffering, and Absence of A Self, he will realize Nirvana. From time immemorial, Buddhas, Arhats and Holy Ones realized Nirvana by this mean of *Vipassanā*. It is the high way leading to Nirvana.”<sup>941</sup> This means that according to Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory, when meditators are able to directly see by

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<sup>936</sup> SN 25.1–10

<sup>937</sup> AN 3.89

<sup>938</sup> Ajaan Mahā Boowa Ñānasampanno, *Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera*, 145–164; *Arahattamagga Arahattaphala*, 69–83; *Venerable Ajaan Khao Anālayo*, 88–89. See also Bhikkhu Dick Sīlaratano, *Mae Chee Kaew*, 199–229; King, *Theravāda Meditation*, 130; Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 263; Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Fundamentals of Vipassanā Meditation*, 67, 94–95.

<sup>939</sup> Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 67–83; King, *Theravāda Meditation*, 126–132.

<sup>940</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Into the Stream*, 39.

<sup>941</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 34.

themselves the impermanence, suffering, and no-self of the physical and mental events in the course of their noting by themselves, they are said to have gained awakening. This point is repeatedly made in his treatment.<sup>942</sup> His theory of awakening seems to indicate that in gaining awakening, one comes to a conclusion that there is no self.

Perhaps, due to such understanding, Mahāsi Sayādaw significantly emphasizes the three characteristics in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The practice begins with right view which according to him is the understanding of materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*) in terms of impermanence, suffering, and no-self. And, in the course of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice—paying bare attention to the physical and mental events happening to them—meditators are told to try to develop clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) in terms of these three characteristics. This sort of practice should be maintained until direct insight into the three characteristics is gained. His presentation of the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* seems to suggest that the goal of the practice is to arrive at the understanding of right view, i.e., the realization of the three characteristics. It should be pointed out that his explanation of the third characteristic—*anattā*—is not the not-self strategy that is taught in the *suttas* for the sake of inducing dispassion toward the five aggregates, but rather, the aim is to arrive at a metaphysical assertion that there is no

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<sup>942</sup> Similar statements are made in his treatises such as: “On having fully acquired these insights into impermanence, suffering, and not-self, the maturity of knowledge of the path (*magga-ñāṇa*) and knowledge of fruition (*phala-ñāṇa*) takes place and realisation of *nibbāna* is won. By winning the realisation of *nibbāna* in the first stage, one is freed from the round of rebirth in the realms of miserable existence.” See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation*, 11; or “Both those who take the vehicle of tranquility to enlightenment and those who take the vehicle of insight to enlightenment must achieve path knowledge and fruition knowledge through the gateway to liberation, that is, by developing insight into the three universal characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. Only a person who develops one of the three kinds of concentration and insight knowledge of the three universal characteristics can attain arahantship and solve the problem of attachment.” See Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Manual of Insight*, 48–49. Note that Mahāsi Sayādaw, like the commentaries, states that this teaching is also applied for the vehicle of tranquility. For more detail see section 2.2.3 Discrepancy in Explaining the Doctrine of *Anāṭta* in Chapter Two. See also Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 51.

permanent self. In addition, Mahāsi Sayādaw’s presentation of the *satipaṭṭhāna* also seems to treat the teaching of the three characteristics as a categorical teaching, which would be something that is always true and beneficial. As argued in Chapter Four,<sup>943</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory on the three characteristics is in line with the commentaries.<sup>944</sup> These views found in the commentarial teachings are also shared by contemporary scholar monks such as Bhikkhu Anālayo.<sup>945</sup>

Unlike Mahāsi Sayādaw, Ajaan Lee claims that knowledge leading to awakening comes from the completion of the four noble truths. This means that, in his theory, only when meditators, through their own efforts, have completed the tasks of the four noble truths: comprehending suffering, abandoning the causes of suffering, realizing the cessation of suffering, and developing the way leading to the ending of suffering—which is totally different from believing it by faith or memorizing it through scripture learning—they have had at least a first taste of awakening. Here is Ajaan Lee’s explanation of a high-level contemplation of the stresses within concentration itself, in

*Keeping the Breath in Mind:*

When right concentration arises in the mind, it has a shadow. When you can catch sight of the shadow appearing, that’s *vipassanā*: liberating insight.....To put it in terms of cause and effect, you see the four noble truths. You see stress, and it really is stressful. You see the cause of stress arising, and that it’s really causing stress. These are noble truths: absolutely, undeniably, indisputably true. You see that stress has a cause. Once the cause arises, there has to be stress. As for the way to the disbanding of stress, you see that the path you’re following will, without a doubt, lead to unbinding. Whether or not you go all the way, what you see is correct. This is right view. And as for the disbanding of stress, you see that there really is such a thing. You see that as long as you’re on the path, stress does in

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<sup>943</sup> For more detail, see section 4.7.4 *Sampajañña* and Liberating Insight in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s Teaching of *Vipassanā* Meditation in Chapter Four.

<sup>944</sup> See the discussion on the discrepancies between the *suttas* and the commentaries regarding the teaching of *anattā* in Chapter Two.

<sup>945</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 103–107.

fact fall away. When you come to realize the truth of these things in your heart, that's *vipassanā-ñāṇa*.<sup>946</sup>

This understanding of the knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma is presented consistently in Ajaan Lee's teachings. According to him, it is also applied to the vehicle of insight. As he says, "Release through discernment begins by pondering various events and aspects of the world until the mind slowly comes to rest and, once it's still, gives rise intuitively to liberating insight (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*): clear and true understanding in terms of the four noble truths (*ariya-sacca*)."<sup>947</sup> It appears that Ajaan Lee's explanation of knowledge leading up to awakening is in line with the *suttas*. As discussed in Chapter Two,<sup>948</sup> in the *suttas*, a stream enterer is depicted as have opened the Dhamma eye as a result of gaining direct insight into the four noble truths.<sup>949</sup>

In his treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*, Ajaan Lee seems to follow the *suttas* to treat the four noble truths as a categorical teaching. In the section on "focused investigation," which appears in each frame of reference, Ajaan Lee encourages meditators to investigate a particular phenomenon that arises in the course of their meditation until they see its cause and its cessation.<sup>950</sup> This teaching falls into the frame of the four noble truths in which the cause of suffering should be comprehended and the cessation of suffering should be realized. This is different from Mahāsi Sayādaw who follows the commentaries to replace the four noble truths by the three characteristics.

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<sup>946</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 54–55.

<sup>947</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 5.

<sup>948</sup> For more detail see section 2.2.3 Discrepancy in Explaining the Doctrine of *Anāṭṭa* in Chapter Two. See also the discussion on Stream-entry in the section "*Cittānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna*: Being Mindful of the Mind as a Frame of Reference" in Chapter Three.

<sup>949</sup> MN 2; MN 22; SN 55.24

<sup>950</sup> See also the discussion on "Focused Investigation" in "Ajaan Lee's Treatment of *Satipaṭṭhāna*" in Chapter Three.

In addition, Ajaan Lee’s teaching on the three characteristics is also very different from Mahāsi Sayādaw. For Ajaan Lee, comprehending phenomena according to the three characteristics simply gives rise to a sense of dismay and detachment. This, subsequently, will make the mind steady, still, and well established in concentration. For instance, in contemplation of body in the *Frames of Reference*, Ajaan Lee instructs meditators to thoroughly investigate their own bodies to see the aging, illness, and death of the body, as well as try to utterly understand the true nature of the body—as subject to aging, illness, and death, or inconstancy, suffering, and not-self. Comprehending the three characteristics of the body, as he explains, can give rise to a sense of *samvega* and also free meditators from attachment toward the body.<sup>951</sup>

Examining his treatises also shows that Ajaan Lee approaches the teaching of the three characteristics from another direction. When discussing the insight that arises at an advanced stage of mindfulness practice, Ajaan Lee instructs meditators to develop their discernment to see that things are not only impermanent, but also permanent; not only suffering, but also pleasant; not only not-self, but also self. To explain this, he states: “Your lower lip has never turned into your upper lip. Your arm has never turned into your leg. The elements always stay the same. Solidity has always been solidity and hasn’t turned into anything else. So there is that constant aspect to things.”<sup>952</sup> In this teaching, Ajaan Lee simply points out an aspect that could challenge the teaching of the three characteristics.

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<sup>951</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 13–14.

<sup>952</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Meditation* 8, 177.

Ajaan Lee's unique insight regarding the understanding of the three characteristics is also revealed in *Keeping the Breath in Mind*. In this treatise, he says that:

By and large, we tend to be interested only in discernment and release. At the drop of a hat, we want to start right in with the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self—and when this is the case, we'll never get anywhere. Before the Buddha taught that things are inconstant, he had worked at knowing them until they revealed their constancy. Before teaching that things are stressful, he had turned that stress into pleasure and ease. And before teaching that things are not-self, he had turned what is not-self into a self, and so was able to see what is constant and true, lying hidden in what is inconstant, stressful, and not-self. He then gathered all of these qualities into one. He gathered all that is inconstant, stressful, and not-self into one and the same thing: fabrications (*saṅkhāra*) viewed in terms of the world—a single class, equal everywhere throughout the world. As for what's constant, pleasant, and self, this was another class: fabrications viewed in terms of the *Dhamma*. And then he let go of both classes, without getting caught up on “constant” or “inconstant,” “stress” or “ease,” “self” or “not-self.” This is why we can say he attained release, purity, and *nibbāna*, for he had no need to latch onto fabrications—whether of the world or of the *Dhamma*—in any way at all.<sup>953</sup>

In this passage, Ajaan Lee instructs meditators to notice what in their meditation is constant, pleasant, and self—first—so as to learn by comparison with what might be inconstant, stressful, and not-self. Subsequently, he instructs meditators to see fabrications viewed in terms of the *Dhamma* (constant, pleasant, and self) and fabrications in terms of the world (inconstant, stressful, and not-self). However, in order to attain release, according to him, one has to let go of both—fabrications in terms of *Dhamma* and fabrications in terms of the world—at the end of the path. It should be noted that this explanation seems to be Ajaan Lee's implicit criticism of the teaching of dry insight meditation. As he says, if meditators are only interested in knowing one side of fabrications in terms of the world—what inconstant, stressful, and not self—without

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<sup>953</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 25–26.

exploring the fabrication in terms of the *Dhamma*—what constant, pleasant, and self—their practice would not go anywhere. In other words, it seems Ajaan Lee makes a claim that the practice of meditators would not progress if they solely focus on the cultivation of the three characteristics without establishing any knowledge or skill of the *jhāna* which often explained in terms of constant, pleasant, and under one’s control in his exposition.

A similar explanation of the practice of insight is described in Ajaan Lee’s *What is the Triple Gem*. It should be noted that, in his explanation, the understanding of the three characteristics eventually leads to the realization of the four noble truths.

The practice of insight means seeing clearly and truly into the nature of all fabrications (*saṅkhāra*), e.g., seeing that they are inconstant, stressful, and not-self; gaining discernment that sees distinctly in terms of the four noble truths; seeing fabrications from both sides, i.e., the side that is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and the side that is constant, pleasant, and self; giving rise to the purity of knowledge and vision termed *gotarabhū-ñāṇa*, escaping from the assumption that things are either constant or inconstant; knowing both the side that arises and disbands, as well as the side that doesn’t arise and doesn’t disband, without making assumptions about or being attached to either side. Theories, views, and conceits disappear. The mind doesn’t fasten onto anything at all: past, present, or future. This is termed *asesa-virāga-nirodha*, utter disbanding and dispassion. This is the way of insight.

Insight, analyzed in detail in terms of the *Dhamma* in line with the conventions of the sages of the past, means knowledge of the four noble truths.<sup>954</sup>

If we use his instruction of breath meditation to demonstrate this teaching, then meditators should first apply the two factors of *jhāna*—directed thought and evaluation—to make the ordinary breath grow still, at ease, and to give rise to a sense of pleasure throughout the body. And, when the mind is well centered, i.e., the breath is at ease, then meditators can use their penetrating discernment to see both sides—impermanence and permanence, suffering and pleasure, not-self and self—in order to not latch on to either

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<sup>954</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *What is the Triple Gem*, 48.

side and to attain release. This is greatly different from Mahāsi Sayādaw’s teaching, which aims at only one side—the *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*—in order to arrive at a metaphysical claim that there is no permanent self.

With regard to Ajaan Lee’s treatment of the three characteristics, it should be noted that even though it does not follow anything explicitly said in the *suttas*, at least it is not at odds with the *suttas*. The *suttas* nowhere state that there is anything *nicca*, *sukha*, and *attā*, to counterbalance what is *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. However, Ajaan Lee’s assertion can be understood in ways that do accord with the *suttas*.

First, in his discussion of the three characteristics in “Method 2” of *Keeping the Breath in Mind* just mentioned above, it seems that he was talking about concentration as *nicca*, *sukha*, and under one’s control. In that sense, he was simply stating in an idiosyncratic way, a point repeatedly made in the *suttas*: that even the pleasure and steadiness of concentration is fabricated, and so that has to be abandoned. He was also making an implicit criticism of *vipassanā* methods, saying, in effect, that you have to fight against the three characteristics by developing *jhāna* if you really want to know how far they are true.

In *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, Ajaan Lee’s discussion of the three characteristics and their opposites is making another point. First, here is what he has to say:

The eye of the mind ... isn’t attached to views—for there’s yet another, separate sort of reality that has no “this” or “that.” In other words, it doesn’t have the view or conceit that “I am.” It lets go of the assumptions that, “That’s the self,” “That’s not-self,” “That’s constant,” “That’s inconstant,” “That arises,” “That doesn’t arise.” It can let go of these things completely. That’s the *Dhamma*, and yet it doesn’t hold onto the *Dhamma*, which is why we say that the *Dhamma* is not-self. It also doesn’t hold on to the view that says, “not-self.” It lets go of views, causes,



and effects, and isn't attached to anything at all dealing with wordings or meanings, conventions or practices.<sup>955</sup>

In this case, by talking about the “source of reality” that is the *Dhamma*, he seems to be saying—without speaking on the level of a person doing this or that—that you should not hold on even to the insights are meant to lead to liberation. His point seems to be that if you claim to arrive at the truth of the three characteristics, and that defines your idea of awakening, you are still holding on to the three characteristics as constant truths. But they are actually perceptions, which means that they are fabrications, so they have to be abandoned as well. To get to the unfabricated goal, you have to abandon the fabrications of insight. At the point where one is ready to do this, the holding onto of views, causes, and effects is not occurring, and so it no longer makes sense to speak of an individual doing this or not. This is why he uses the impersonal language—“it” or “the eye of the mind”—as a reference point for the not-holding-on.

Ajaan Lee makes the same point, in an informal but not imprecise fashion, in another passage, in his talk, “Beyond Right and Wrong,” in *Inner Strength*:

If we can get our practice on the noble path, though, we'll enter *nibbāna*. Virtue will disband, concentration will disband, discernment will disband. In other words, we won't dwell on our knowledge or discernment. If we're intelligent enough to know, we simply know, without taking intelligence as being an essential part of ourselves ... This is where we can relax. They can say “inconstant,” but it's just what they say. They can say “stress,” but it's just what they say. They can say “not-self,” but it's just what they say. Whatever they say, that's the way it is. It's true for them, and they're completely right—but completely wrong. As for us, **only if we can get ourselves beyond right and wrong will we be doing fine**. Roads are built for people to walk on, but dogs and cats can walk on them as well. Sane people and crazy people will use the roads. They didn't build the roads for crazy people, but crazy people have every right to use them. As for the precepts, even fools and idiots can observe them. The same with concentration: Crazy or sane, they can come and sit. And discernment: We all have the right to come and talk our heads off, but it's simply a question of being right or wrong.

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<sup>955</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammabharo, *The Path to Peace and Freedom for the Mind*, 65–66.

None of the valuables of the mundane world give any real pleasure. They're nothing but stress. They're good as far as the world is concerned, but *nibbāna* doesn't have any need for them. **Right views and wrong views are an affair of the world. *Nibbāna* doesn't have any right views or wrong views.** For this reason, whatever is a wrong view, we should abandon. Whatever is a right view, we should develop—until the day it can fall from our grasp. That's when we can be at our ease.<sup>956</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Ajaan Lee's explanation of *nibbāna* here emphasizes the act of letting go. In order to achieve ultimate liberation, one has to abandon all the conducive factors on the path such as virtue, concentration, and discernment. Right view or the insight into the three characteristics also need to be abandoned at this time.

Now, this way of speaking cannot be found in the *suttas*, but it is in accord with the passages that indicate that you have to let go even of the insights that lead to awakening. For instance, there is the simile of the raft in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* that:

And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over, would think, "How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands and feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?" In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft. In the same way, monks, I have taught the *Dhamma* compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Understanding the *Dhamma* as taught compared to a raft, you should let go even of *Dhammas*, to say nothing of non-*Dhammas*.<sup>957</sup>

In this *sutta*, the Buddha compares his teaching with the raft which should be used to safely cross to the other shore of the river but not for the purpose of holding onto.

Likewise, the Buddha taught his disciples that they should let go of the *Dhamma* once they have achieved awakening just as the man let go of the raft after crossing over the river.

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<sup>956</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Inner Strength*, 61.

<sup>957</sup> MN 22

Other evidence indicating the abandoning of insight that lead to awakening can also be found in the *Sota Sutta*<sup>958</sup> and the *Arahanta Sutta*.<sup>959</sup> These *sutta* passages state that arahants—and even stream-enterers—have seen the five faculties<sup>960</sup> in terms of their origination, disappearance, allure, drawbacks, and the escape from them.<sup>961</sup> In other words, they know how to let go even the insight that lead them to awakening.

More explicitly, there is the passage in the *Diṭṭhi Sutta*, where Anāthapiṇḍika the householder—who is a streamwinner—discusses how he has seen the escape even from right view. This is what he says:

Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. Having seen this well with right discernment as it actually is present, I also discern the higher escape from it as it actually is present.<sup>962</sup>

In this *sutta* passage, Anāthapiṇḍika first shows his understanding of the three characteristics. Then he reveals a higher escape than the insight of the three characteristics. This means that there is something even higher and better than the understanding of the three characteristics that one should pursue.

And, there is another passage in the *Jhāna Sutta*:

Suppose that an archer or archer's apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to **fire accurate shots in rapid succession**, and to **pierce great masses**. In the same way, there is the case where a monk... enters and remains in the first *jhāna*: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. **He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self.** He turns his mind away from

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<sup>958</sup> SN 48.3

<sup>959</sup> SN 48.4

<sup>960</sup> The five faculties are conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

<sup>961</sup> Note that the Commentary to the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, however, does not discuss these *suttas* at all.

<sup>962</sup> AN 10.93

those phenomena, and having done so, **inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: “This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications;** the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Unbinding.”

**Staying right there, he reaches the ending** of the mental fermentations. Or, **if not, then—through this very *Dhamma*-passion, this very *Dhamma*-delight,** and from the total wasting away of the first five of the fetters—he is due to be reborn (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.<sup>963</sup> (Emphasis mine)

In this passage, the *sutta* first indicates the attainment of full awakening that taken place after one has mastered the first *jhāna*. The monk who practicing the *jhāna* here is compared with a well-trained archer who is able to shoot long distance, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession and to pierce great masses. This means that he is able to attain or remain in the *jhāna* at will. Having seen the *as jhāna* as composed of the five aggregates and having seen the five aggregates in terms of impermanent, stressful, not-self, etc., he then turns his mind toward unbinding. There he either attains ultimate liberation as he reaches the ending of the mental fermentations or non-returner as he gets pulled via *Dhamma* delight if there is still clinging to the dispassion. It should be noted that although the *sutta* does not define “this *Dhamma*-passion” and “this *Dhamma*-delight,” it could mean either (1) the perception with which the monk inclines his mind to the deathless or (2) the experience of the deathless itself. Either way, there would be something constant in that *Dhamma* that acts as an object of passion and delight, and the meditator has to abandon that, too, to gain full awakening. So Ajaan Lee’s discussion of *nicca*, *sukha*, and *attā* could be understood to apply to this specific issue. A meditator who holds to the perception that the three characteristics cover everything would not be able to get past this point in the practice. And such person would not even think of

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<sup>963</sup> AN 9.36

seeking the escape from discernment, which means that, in terms of the *Sota Sutta*,<sup>964</sup> such a person would not even make it to stream-entry.

In short, the discrepancy between Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee regarding the issue of knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma* can be said to be due to the different sources on which they base their interpretations. Whereas the former tends to follow the view of the commentaries, the latter explains his teaching in line with the *suttas*. To be more specific, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw describes knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma* as the knowledge in terms of the three characteristics, Ajaan Lee explains it as knowledge in terms of the four noble truths. In addition, Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee also show other discrepancies related to the teachings of the four noble truths and the three characteristics including (1) whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw treats the three characteristics as categorical teaching, Ajaan Lee claims that it is the four noble truths that is the categorical teaching; (2) whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw explains the three characteristics as a way to arrive at a conclusion that there is no self to deny a permanent metaphysical self, Ajaan Lee uses it to foster a sense of dispassion and disenchantment toward the five aggregates; (3) Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to indicate that the purpose of the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is to arrive at right view which in his explanation is the realization of no-self, Ajaan Lee describes the goal of the practice as the attainment of unbinding where ones have to let go of both sides—*nicca*, *sukha* and *attā* on the one hand as well as *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* on the other.

With regard to the four noble truths and the three characteristics, as discussed in Chapter Two, there is a discrepancy between the *suttas* and the commentaries. In the

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<sup>964</sup> SN 48.3

*suttas*, the teaching on the four noble truths is a categorical teaching which is always true and beneficial, but the three characteristics are not even listed by themselves as a teaching on their own, much less a categorical teaching. The teaching on the three characteristics, on the other hand, is used only selectively. It needs to be applied in the right contexts, but not all. To be more specific, it can be applied to develop dispassion for something that is unskillful or standing in the way of release but not in the context of *kamma*. For example, in one context (the context of gaining release), meditators are instructed to see the five aggregates as *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* if any of these five aggregates block their way of liberation. However, in another context (the context of *kamma*), meditators are taught to be responsible for their actions so that they are aware of the fact that what they are doing will shape their experience.<sup>965</sup> Other examples of the where the three characteristics is mis-applied include the *Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta*<sup>966</sup> and *Mahā Kamma-vibhaṅga Sutta*.<sup>967</sup> In the *suttas*, the teaching on three characteristics is placed within the frame of the four noble truths and *kamma*—cause and effect. It never stands alone by itself for the purpose of negating a permanent self as some claim.<sup>968</sup> According to the *suttas*, views such as there is a self, and there is no self, etc., are wrong views, which should be put aside.<sup>969</sup>

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<sup>965</sup> “You are the owner of your actions, heir to your actions, born of your actions, and related to your actions. Whatever you do, for good or for evil, to that you will fall heir.” See AN 5.57.

<sup>966</sup> MN 109

<sup>967</sup> MN 136

<sup>968</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 207. See also David J. Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 1975), 116; Ashin Thittila trans. *The Book of Analysis (vibhaṅga): The Second Book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (London: PTS, 1969), xxii; O.H. De A. Wijesekera, *Buddhist and Vedic Studies: A Miscellany* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 262; Walpola Rāhula, *What The Buddha Taught*, rev. ed. (London: G. Fraser, 1978), 23–26; Prebish and Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, 54–57.

<sup>969</sup> MN 2; SN 44.10. See Chapter Two for more detailed discussion on this point.

However, in the commentaries, the three characteristics replaces the four noble truths to become a categorical teaching. The practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* in the commentaries is directed in such a way that leads to the realization of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. It is emphasized in each frame of reference that the contemplation of body, feelings, mind, and *dhamma* are carried out for the sake of gaining the knowledge of the three characteristics.<sup>970</sup> It should be noted that the commentaries' explanation of the three characteristics ironically leads to a conclusion that there is no metaphysical self, a teaching in the *suttas* that is considered to be both wrong view and inappropriate attention.<sup>971</sup>

#### 5.2.9 Difference in Explanation of the Fruits that Arise in the Course of the Practice

With regard to the fruits of the practice that meditators are encouraged to strive for and set as their goal, both Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw mention the four levels of Awakening—stream-entry, once-returner, non-returner, and arahant. However, their descriptions of the development leading to the noble fruits contain discrepancies.

Before discussing their differences on the matter, it should be noted that, in the *suttas*, these noble achievements are only occasionally mentioned.<sup>972</sup> Stream-enterers have destroyed the first three fetters: self-identity views, uncertainty, and grasping at precepts and practices. Once-returners have eliminated these three fetters and have weakened two others: craving for sensual pleasure and ill will. Non-returners have destroyed these first five fetters, whereas arahants have completely uprooted all ten

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<sup>970</sup> Soma and Buddhaghosa, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 16–151.

<sup>971</sup> For more detail, see Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “Not-self Is a Value Judgment” in *Meditation* 8; “Three Perceptions” in *Meditation* 4; “The Three Characteristics” in *The Buddha’s Teachings*; “The Not-self Strategy” in *Noble and True*; “The Limits of Description, Not-self Revisited”; “The Logic of Not-self” and his *Dhamma* talks on Self and Not-self.

<sup>972</sup> AN 10.13

fetters: the five lower fetters and the five higher fetters consisting of passion for form, passion for what is formless, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance.<sup>973</sup>

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* even reports the possibility of attaining noble fruits within a certain time frame. The period of time needed for the realization of liberation, as stated in these *suttas*, varies from one week to seven years. However, one should not take this as a concrete definition, but it is better understood as both an encouragement and admonition, an invitation to reflect on one's practice to see if it skillful or not, so that one can make appropriate adjustments. Pertaining to the issue of how fast or how slow can one achieve awakening, different cases in the *Sutta Piṭaka* report different time scales. Some achieved noble attainment the first time they listened to the Buddha's teaching. The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the first sermon delivered by the Buddha, records the noble attainment of Ven. Kondaṇṇa who attained the *Dhamma*-eye at the end of the discourse.<sup>974</sup> Another example is the case of Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth in *Bāhiya Sutta*, who attained *arahantship* soon after listening to a brief teaching from the Buddha.<sup>975</sup> In other cases, it takes much longer time. This can be seen in the case of, for instance, Ven. Mālunkyaputta and Ven. Ānanda, the Buddha's close attendant. The former did not achieve *arahantship* until the last stage of his life<sup>976</sup> and the latter was not an arahant until just before the gathering of the first Buddhist council.<sup>977</sup>

Besides this, the *suttas* do not provide any instruction saying that meditators have to start their practice from a particular stage of insight in order to achieve a particular

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<sup>973</sup> MN 118; MN 22

<sup>974</sup> SN 56.11

<sup>975</sup> Ud 1.10

<sup>976</sup> SN 35.95

<sup>977</sup> Cv. 11



level of awakening. The *suttas* also do not record any case saying that meditators can remain in their attainment of noble fruit for a period of time before losing it. With regard to the gain and loss in one's meditation, in addition to the noble awakening achievements mentioned above, the *suttas* only provide reports telling of Devadatta losing non-noble supernatural powers because of his evil actions (the effects of *kamma*) or a monk losing *pīti* and *sukha* of concentration while he was severely ill.<sup>978</sup>

In his explanation of the awakening discussed in Chapter Four, Mahāsi Sayādaw seems to hold a perspective that the fruits of noble attainments are not permanent. In *The Practical Insight Meditation* and the *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, noble fruits are said to last just a moment for those who did not make a determination in advance for its duration, but would remain longer if meditators previously planned to stay in that state for a certain period of time.<sup>979</sup>

When this knowledge matures, the cessation of formations, nirvana, is reached with the resultant “knowledge of fruition.” This knowledge last just a moment to one who has not previously made a resolve on its duration; but it may sometimes last a little longer. But in the case of those who had made a prior resolve on its duration, the “knowledge of fruition” lasts longer, say the whole day or night, or as long as the time resolved, as stated in the Commentaries. Likewise, in these days, in the case of those immersed in concentration and insight, fruition lasts an hour, two hours, three hours, and so on. Fruition knowledge comes to an end only when the meditator wishes to terminate it.<sup>980</sup>

This appears to be a relatively common understanding that is widespread in Burmese *vipassanā* meditation circles. U Ba Khin, the lay teacher of S.N. Goenka, for example, also promoted this idea. To him, an accomplished meditator could remain in *nibbāna* not

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<sup>978</sup> I own this citation. Due to some reasons I am unable remember that discourse.

<sup>979</sup> With regard to this issue, as mentioned in Chapter Four, it seems Mahāsi Sayādaw might have mistaken *jhāna* attainment with noble awakening.

<sup>980</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *The Practical Insight Meditation*, 46. See also *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 46–47.

only at a determined time, but could also enter it at will.<sup>981</sup> Whereas U Ba Khin explicitly says that this perspective is in accord with the *Visuddhimagga*, Mahāsi Sayādaw claims his point is recorded in the commentaries. This can be said to be evidence revealing the influence of commentarial literature on the interpretation of *satipaṭṭhāna* teaching in Burma.

Ajaan Lee, on the other hand, does not share this view. In his treatises, he does not make any comment regarding volition or timing, only that achieving a certain noble fruit will help meditators abandon corresponding fetters. According to his teaching, these four noble fruits would not be lost once meditators achieved them. If there is any alteration in these awakening levels, it would be because the meditator attained a higher level through their practice. In this case, it means they have passed beyond their previous level. For example, a stream-enterer, through his or her practice, may have attained the level of once-returner, or may have been a once-returner who has become a non-returner. When meditators achieve a higher level of awakening, they will have the knowledge of the new level of attainment in addition to the knowledge of the previous state. The knowledge has been attained before would not be lost. It is always there.<sup>982</sup>

In addition, if meditators want to develop their present awakening level to a higher state, according to Ajaan Lee, they can base their practice on that present awakening level and continuously cultivate their meditation with an intention to heading toward a higher state that they have planned.<sup>983</sup> This point is well explained in his description of the development of each level of awakening. His theory of cultivation of a

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<sup>981</sup> King, *Theravāda Meditation*, 131–32. See also Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 262–263.

<sup>982</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *The Craft of the Heart*, 118–132.

<sup>983</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammapharo, *The Craft of the Heart*, 118–132.

higher level of awakening is similar to his explanation of the development of *jhānas*. The second *jhāna* is built on the foundation of the first *jhāna*. This means that when a meditator is in the first *jhāna*, through the power of evaluation he or she is able to see the factors that disturb the stillness of the mind and drop them for a better mind state, and is also able to see the way that his or her meditation can be further developed.

This is very different from Mahāsi Sayādaw's teaching which, in contrast, claims that meditators have to start over again from the lower level, rather than from the current attainment, in order to progress to a higher level. To be more specific, if a once-returner wants to attain the state of non-returner, he or she has to go back to the level of rising and falling again to develop insight beginning from there, rather than from the current state of attainment—the state of once-returner.<sup>984</sup>

Moreover, Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee also give different explanations of the progress of awakening. In his treatises such as *The Progress of Insight* and *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, Mahāsi Sayādaw follows the commentarial literature such as the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* to provide a detailed description of the progress of meditation practice. It includes accounts of elements such as purification of conduct, purification of mind, purification of view, purification by overcoming doubt, purification by knowledge and vision of what is path and not-path, purification by knowledge and vision of the course of practice, and purification by knowledge and vision.<sup>985</sup>

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<sup>984</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Buddhist Meditation and Its Forty Subjects*, 20. See also *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 47–48.

<sup>985</sup> Mahāsi Sayādaw, *Purpose of Practicing Kammaṭṭhāna Meditation*, 47–48. See also *The Progress of Insight*.

Unlike Mahāsi Sayādaw, Ajaan Lee’s treatment depicts how *satipaṭṭhāna* practice leads to different levels of concentration (*jhāna*). It is significant to note that his description of concentration includes the development of discernment right from the beginning stage. This explains that liberating insight, in his theory, can arise in any of the *jhāna* states. Again, as discussed above, this explains the fact that in his treatment, concentration and discernment are developed at the same time within the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, a teaching that is thoroughly consistent with the *suttas*.

In short, there are two significant discrepancies between Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee with regard to the issues related to the fruits developed in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice: (1) Mahāsi Sayādaw states that noble attainments prior to *arahantship* such as stream-entry, once returner, and non-returner can be lost, and in order to achieve a higher level meditators have to start again from the lowest one, whereas Ajaan Lee says that they would not be lost and meditators can continue to develop higher awakening states based on the one that they just attained without going back to any particular stage of their meditation; (2) Mahāsi Sayādaw depicts the development of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation in terms of the progress of insight recorded in the commentaries such as the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, whereas Ajaan Lee’s explanation stays close to the description in the *suttas* that mindfulness cultivation will lead to rapture, pleasure, singleness of mind, the *jhānas*, intuitive insight, and *nibbāna*.<sup>986</sup>

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<sup>986</sup> Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, *Frames of Reference*, 23–32.

### 5.3 Conclusion

The analyses in previous chapters have shown the distinctions between Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw with respect to their ways to approaching the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* reflect their training environments, formal education, and visions of spiritual achievements. To make things clearer, this chapter has been a further step in exploring the differences in their interpretations of the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path—right mindfulness or *satipaṭṭhāna*. It compared and contrasted significant teachings and theories that play central roles in each treatment. The findings of this comparison work showed several differences between Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* that may not easy to recognize if one approaches the issue from only one side.

First of all, one of the most prominent discrepancies between their treatments is the way they define *satipaṭṭhāna*. In Ajaan Lee's treatment, *satipaṭṭhāna* is defined with respect to the four frames of reference—body, feeling, mind, and mental qualities. In the *suttas*, the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is often presented in this manner. In Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment, *satipaṭṭhāna*, on the other hand, is expounded as a practice of contemplating of the matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*). This sort of treatment can be traced back to the commentaries such as the *Visuddhimagga*. Thus, the general difference between Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw with regard to the treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* is that while the former follows the accounts in the *suttas*, the latter takes up the commentarial perspective.

In explaining *satipaṭṭhāna*, Ajaan Lee emphasizes the three qualities that to him should be developed together for *satipaṭṭhāna* perform properly. In his theory,

mindfulness (*sati*), alertness (*sampajañña*), and ardency (*ātappa*) play a central role in the practice. In each frame of reference, he re-explains the application of these three qualities. It can be said that these three qualities act as the framework in his *satipaṭṭhāna* cultivation. The cultivation of these three qualities also makes the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* in Ajaan Lee's treatment considerably proactive. These three qualities not only serve as a means to develop skillful mental states and abandon unskillful ones, but also are utilized to analyze mental experience in terms of the four noble truths for the sake of concentration, discernment, and release. This is the way the three qualities are described in the *suttas*. Unlike Ajaan Lee, Mahāsi Sayādaw in his explanation of *satipaṭṭhāna* discusses only the practice of bare attention, which is his interpretation of the quality of *sati*. The practice of bare attention is seen through the act of simply observing the arising and passing of phenomena of the matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*) without any reaction or judgment. This makes his method very passive compared to Ajaan Lee's as Mahāsi Sayādaw does not show his concern in how to make mental object more skillful but is simply satisfied with the noting of their arising and falling for he probably assumes that what mental objects are and how they arise are the same. Mahāsi Sayādaw's theory of bare attention can be found nowhere in the Pāli Canon.

Second, their interpretations of the quality of *sampajañña* also fundamentally differ from each other. Ajaan Lee explains *sampajañña* as being alert, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw interprets it as clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics. As a result, their teaching of *satipaṭṭhāna* is directed in two different ways. In the practice, Ajaan Lee instructs meditators to be alert to whatever happens in their meditation as well as any daily activities that they get involved in. This teaching is in line with the *suttas*.

Mahāsi Sayādaw, on the other hand, teaches meditators to comprehend the impermanence, suffering, and no-self of matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nāma*), a teaching that is well recorded in the commentaries such as the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In addition, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw identifies *sampajañña* as the factor of discernment, Ajaan Lee claims that *ātappa* is the quality through which wisdom gets developed.

Moreover, in his treatment, which is presented as dry insight meditation, Mahāsi Sayādaw deemphasizes the role of right concentration or *jhāna* as he follows the commentaries to claim that awakening can be achieved through the vehicle of dry *vipassanā*. In his theory, the development of *jhānas* plays no necessary role on the path to awakening. To him, the only form of concentration required in dry insight meditation is momentary concentration. Although Mahāsi Sayādaw follows the commentaries to advocate the notion of dry insight meditation, his explanation of concentration goes past the commentaries. Whereas the commentaries state that mental purification and awakening require the power of either access concentration or absorption concentration, Mahāsi Sayādaw says merely momentary concentration is sufficient. This, however, significantly contrasts with the central role that *jhāna* occupies in Ajaan Lee's theory. To Ajaan Lee, awakening takes place only in any of the *jhāna* states, a point that well recorded in several *suttas*. In Ajaan Lee's teaching, developing concentration is considered more challenging work compared to virtue and discernment. And, his account of *jhāna* is in accord with the description in the *suttas*.

Other issues related to concentration practice that also reveal the discrepancy between Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee is their treatment of wandering thoughts,

*nimitta*, and *pīti* and *sukha*. Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw simply maintains the only method that he applies throughout the practice, that is, to note them without reacting until they disappear, Ajaan Lee provides multiple tools to deal with each phenomenon. A wandering thought can be handled by immediately dropping it, or watching it, or thoroughly investigating it to uncover how it comes to exist, how it remains, and how it vanishes. Unlike Mahāsi Sayādaw, who instructs meditators to drop their initial meditation object to focus on the *nimitta*, a teaching that can be found in the *Visuddhimagga*, Ajaan Lee treats the *nimitta* as guests. This means that, to him, meditators should stay firmly grounded with their meditation object while receiving the *nimitta*. According to him, *nimitta* should be ignored by meditators with no knowledge and skill, whereas skillful meditators can play around with *nimitta* as a way to develop supernatural power as well as to bring on the ending of effluents. Ajaan Lee also provides a detailed treatment for *pīti* and *sukha* which are considered as food for concentration. Meditators are instructed to give rise to these two *jhāna* factors, spread them throughout the body, unify them, and maintain them.

Furthermore, Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw also show different perspectives regarding the knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma*. To Mahāsi Sayādaw, knowledge in terms of the three characteristics—impermanence, suffering, and not-self—is the knowledge leading up to awakening. In his dry insight meditation, understanding the three characteristics becomes an underlying factor that followers of the “Mahāsi Method” aim at in every single act of noting the materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*). This view is found in the *Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Ajaan Lee, on the other hand, explains that awakening can be achieved by the direct realization that one has



completed the duties of the four noble truths, or via the direct realization of cause and effect within the framework of the dependent co-arising. This teaching, as discussed in Chapter Two, is in line with the *suttas*. In his treatment, in addition to the emphasis on *jhāna* cultivation, in each frame of reference Ajaan Lee encourages meditators to do a “focused investigation” to see the cause and effect of each phenomena. This is a practice that can foster the development of the discernment factor.

Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee also have different opinions on the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*. In Mahāsi Sayādaw’s explanation, they are developed separately from each other. The practice of *vipassanā* meditation, as scholars have noted, deemphasizes *jhāna* practice due to the belief that awakening can be achieved without the support of *jhāna*. This means that in Mahāsi Sayādaw’s theory these two qualities are not interdependent with one another. Ajaan Lee, on the other hand, presents *jhāna* and *vipassanā* as an inseparable practice. To him, *jhāna* cannot be attained without *vipassanā* and vice versa. This view is in accordance with the *suttas*, which maintain that the relationship of *jhāna* and *vipassanā* is as connected as two hands washing each other. Without one, the other cannot be clean.

Last but not least, their treatments also reveal discrepancies related to the development of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Mahāsi Sayādaw mainly follows the commentaries such as the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, and other sub-commentaries to describe the development of the practice in terms of the stages of insight set out in these scriptures. Ajaan Lee’s description, however, is more in line with the *suttas*, which explain *satipaṭṭhāna* cultivation in terms of *jhāna* factors that lead to *pīti*, *sukha*, different states of *jhāna*, and awakening achieved within the framework of *jhāna*. Note that their

understandings of awakening also differ greatly from one another. For Mahāsi Sayādaw, awakening means verifying the truth that all phenomena are impermanent and suffering, and there is no lasting self. In other words, the purpose of the practice is to arrive at right view. For Ajaan Lee, awakening comes from fulfilling the duties of the four noble truths and letting go not only of what is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, but also of what is constant, pleasant, and self. In other words, one must let go even of right view in order to gain awakening, a teaching that is in line with the teachings of the *suttas*.

Generally speaking, the main significant discrepancies between Mahāsi Sayādaw's and Ajaan Lee's views is that they relied on different primary foundational sources to develop their distinct meditation theories. It can be summarized that whereas Ajaan Lee's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna* largely accords with the *suttas*, most of Mahāsi Sayādaw's teachings in his dry insight meditation tend to be based on the commentaries such as the *Visuddhimagga*, *The Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and other sub-commentaries.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

The Blessed One said, “There is the case where a monk says this: ‘Face-to-face with the Blessed One have I heard this, face-to-face have I received this: This is the *Dhamma*, this is the *Vinaya*, this is the Teacher’s instruction.’ His statement is neither to be approved nor scorned. Without approval or scorn, take careful note of his words and make them stand against the *suttas* and tally them against the *Vinaya*. If, on making them stand against the *suttas* and tallying them against the *Vinaya*, you find that they don’t stand with the *suttas* or tally with the *Vinaya*, you may conclude: ‘This is not the word of the Blessed One; this monk has misunderstood it’—and you should reject it. But if, on making them stand against the *suttas* and tallying them against the *Vinaya*, you find that they stand with the *suttas* and tally with the *Vinaya*, you may conclude: ‘This is the word of the Blessed One; this monk has understood it rightly.’”<sup>987</sup>

Having completed the investigation, now it is time to review the project as a whole. Before presenting final thoughts and recommendations for future research, let’s first review briefly the Buddha’s teaching on *satipaṭṭhāna* to see how crucial this factor is in the path to awakening. In many of the training formulas that aim at the kind of release described by the Buddha, *satipaṭṭhāna* is explained as a practice of “remaining focused on the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, and mental qualities (*dhammas*) in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world.”<sup>988</sup> In the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*, the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is described as a protection and a true refuge. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, it is depicted as a direct path leading to awakening. *Satipaṭṭhāna* occupies a central place in Buddhist meditation because its instruction gathers many of the key teachings that form the noble path. To practice *satipaṭṭhāna* properly, meditators have to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. They must be ardent (*ātappa*), alert (*sampajañña*), and mindful (*sati*) when contemplating the four topics of *satipaṭṭhāna*. This practice entails recollections (*sati*) of lessons in the past, understanding the task of the present, as well as remembering to pursue the goal. At the same time, it also requires

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<sup>987</sup> DN 16

<sup>988</sup> MN 10

meditators to be alert to what they are doing in their practice and to employ their own ingenuity in response to particular situations. Indeed, the Pāli *suttas* recount that, through memory and bold ingenuity, the unawakened *bodhisattva* (the Buddha-to-be) was able to make significant advances in his meditation practice. As the *suttas* state, when the ascetic Gotama was still struggling in finding the right path of practice for the sake of true happiness, the recollection of his own attainment of the first *jhāna* under the rose-apple tree as a young prince helped him arrive at the pivotal moment, when he realized that this, in fact, was the path to awakening, and that he could and would pursue it fully.<sup>989</sup> According to the Pāli *suttas*, the Buddha attained awakening shortly thereafter.

Although *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation is a key teaching in the Pāli Canon, it is, as illustrated in Chapter Two, presented differently in the *suttas* and in the commentaries. The discrepancies between the accounts of *satipaṭṭhāna* in the *suttas* and the commentaries account for some of the main differences in how mindfulness is taught in the modern era. These discrepancies can be seen very clearly by comparing the treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* given by Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw, both of whom greatly influenced modern Buddhist movements in the last century. Mahāsi Sayādaw's technique became well known and spread worldwide after receiving immense support from U Nu, the first prime minister of Burma. Ajaan Lee, on the other hand, attracted a smaller but still devoted group of practitioners due to his mastery of concentration, his commitment to upholding ascetic practices (*dhutaṅgas*), and his skill in giving *Dhamma* talks that systematized the essential teachings of the Thai Forest Tradition. Even though these two renowned teachers are from the same branch of Buddhism—Theravāda—this

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<sup>989</sup> MN 36

comparative study has shown that their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* are profoundly different from one another. The investigation also revealed that their different foundational sources are the main reason for why their core teachings diverge. Ajaan Lee's teaching is largely in line with the Pāli *suttas*, whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw's theory is deeply rooted in the postcanonical commentaries.

I arrived at this conclusion through a detailed study investigating the differences in the respective treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* given by Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw. In order to unfold the issue, I first examined the variations in their foundational sources—the *suttas* and the commentaries. The investigation in Chapter Two showed that the expositions of *satipaṭṭhāna* described in these two sources contain the following discrepancies: (1) discrepancy in framing the key factors of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice (the three qualities—*sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa* versus the three characteristics—*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*); (2) discrepancy in explaining the quality of *sampajañña* (being aware of what is happening in one's meditation versus clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics) and discrepancy in identifying the discernment factor (*ātappa* vs. *sampajañña*); (3) discrepancy in explaining the doctrine of *anattā* (developing dispassion toward the five aggregates versus denying a permanent metaphysical self); and (4) discrepancy in explaining the way to practice *satipaṭṭhāna* (concentration in tandem with insight versus bare insight). The discrepancies discovered here served as the platform for discussing the differences between the treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* developed by these two teachers. The study in this chapter (Chapter Two) also revealed that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* does not provide all the detailed exposition necessary for the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. This can be seen by the fact that although the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*

emphasizes the three qualities—*sati* (mindfulness), *sampajañña* (alertness), and *ātappa* (ardency)—in each frame of reference (*satipaṭṭhāna*), it does not explain what it means by being ardent, alert, and mindful. The meanings of these qualities come to light only when we look for their explanations described in other *suttas*.

The argument that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* seems to provide only the outline for the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* gained support through our analysis of Ajaan Lee's more detailed treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The analysis in Chapter Three showed that Ajaan Lee fills in details for what is indicated only as a bare framework in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in order give these concepts a more practicable and accessible meaning. His language allows the meditator to see how these elements actually function in the practice of meditation. While the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* considers only one part of the *satipaṭṭhāna* formula—what it means to keep something in mind—it does not attempt to explain the rest of the formula. This is precisely what Ajaan Lee does attempt to do. One of the clearest examples is his treatment of the three qualities.

In each *satipaṭṭhāna* (frame of reference) Ajaan Lee emphasized the functions of the three qualities—*sati*, *sampajañña*, and *ātappa*—with detailed articulation to show how meditators should apply them in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Here, his addition is largely in line with the exposition of other *suttas*, which describe these three qualities as discussed in Chapter Two. However, the uniqueness of Ajaan Lee lies particularly in his elaboration of the quality of *ātappa*. He not only identifies it as the discernment factor, as the *suttas* do, but his exposition of this quality even goes beyond what presented in the *suttas*. In the *suttas*, the definition of *ātappa* merely implies the principles of right view and right resolve. However, in Ajaan Lee's theory, *ātappa* is rendered as the power of

“focused investigation,” which he describes in great detail to show how it fosters the development of both concentration and discernment, and also acts as a means by which meditators are able to achieve ultimate liberation.

The investigation also revealed Ajaan Lee’s unique contributions to the interpretation of the connection between mindfulness and concentration (*jhāna*), which he presents as two different aspects of a single practice. The practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is the cause, while right concentration (*jhāna*) is its result. In Ajaan Lee’s treatment, the practice of each frame of reference (*satipaṭṭhāna*) is described as a way that leads to concentration or *jhāna*. The central theme in his meditation teaching is that the practice of mindfulness can foster the development of both concentration and discernment.

Overall, the findings showed that when it comes to interpreting the fundamental soteriological functions of *satipaṭṭhāna* as well as the fruitions of this practice, Ajaan Lee seems to operate more within the semantic as well as the operational confines of the *suttas* with notable exceptions as outlined in the main body of my dissertation. Although Ajaan Lee’s presentation of the four topics of *satipaṭṭhāna* contains some minor variations compared to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the underlying teachings in his treatment are consistent with the *suttas*. In order to explore some additional factors that might account for his *satipaṭṭhāna* interpretation, the chapter also examined Ajaan Lee’s wilderness meditation training under Ajaan Mun, as well as the general development of Buddhist thought in early-and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Thailand, during the time of his formal monastic education. The sources reviewed in this section showed these two factors had great impacts in shaping Ajaan Lee’s thoughts on meditation. Ajaan Mun’s strong influence and presence as a teacher certainly shaped Ajaan Lee’s views. Ajaan Mun was

regarded for the promotion of the *dhutaṅga* practices, such as eating one meal a day, wearing rag robes, staying in the cemetery, etc., and he was also known for his warrior-training lessons for forest dwelling, such as the power of observance, circumspection, and discernment. And the second factor that also made an impression on Ajaan Lee's meditation theory is the critical attitude toward Buddhist scripture advocated by the reform sect, the Dhammayutika. The *Dhamma* textbooks and the teachings of this tradition especially show the skeptical attitude toward the authority of the commentarial literature.

In Chapter Four, I analyzed Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The investigation revealed that Mahāsi Sayādaw takes a foundational commentarial text to formulate his teachings on *satipaṭṭhānas*, which henceforth became known as “*vipassanā* meditation.” In his treatment, Mahāsi Sayādaw strongly promotes the theory of bare insight meditation. His explanation suggests that full awakening can be achieved not with the development of right concentration (*jhāna*), but rather by insight alone, with the support of mere momentary concentration (*khaṇikasamādhī*). This notion of bare insight, as discussed in Chapter Two, can be traced back to the commentaries such as the *Visuddhimagga* but it does not appear in the *suttas*. Mahāsi Sayādaw's explanation of momentary concentration, however, lies outside of the explanation in texts: he argues that momentary concentration has a power equivalent to the more advanced states of access concentration and absorption concentration with respect to stilling the five hindrances, and can bring about the mental purification. The chapter also revealed an inconsistency in his explanation of concentration.



Like the commentaries, Mahāsi Sayādaw also equates *sampajañña* with *vipassanā* as he renders this quality—*sampajañña/vipassanā*—as clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics: *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anattā* (no-self). This quality thus is identified as the primary discernment factor in his treatment of *satipaṭṭhānas*. The investigation also showed that Mahāsi Sayādaw’s instruction on the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* places great emphasis on the development of insight into these three characteristics. Like the commentaries, Mahāsi Sayādaw equates the knowledge of the three characteristics with the knowledge of awakening. Awakening, in his account, is reported as the realization of no-self. The purpose of the teachings on the three characteristics is therefore to deny a permanent metaphysical self, a view that is enthusiastically advocated in the commentaries.

A closer reading of his treatment, however, showed numerous points of divergence between his teachings and the *suttas*. Firstly, *sampajañña* is explained in the *suttas* simply as being aware of what one is doing in one’s meditation, but not as clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics. And the *suttas* never equate *sampajañña* with *vipassanā*. Secondly, the three characteristics are taught in the *suttas* for the purpose of developing dispassion toward the five aggregates but not for the sake of denying the existence of a permanent metaphysical self. Thirdly, knowledge that leading up to awakening or knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma* is described in the *suttas* in terms of the knowledge of having completed the duties of the four noble truths or the knowledge in terms of dependent co-arising, but not the knowledge of no-self. The investigation also revealed Mahāsi Sayādaw’s misinterpretation of the *suttas* in relation to the explanation of the quality of *sati*. Whereas *sati* is expounded in the *suttas*

as memory or recollection, Mahāsi Sayādaw interprets it as bare attention. As a consequence, the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* in his instruction becomes a practice of bare attention.

In addition, the study also examined the factors that might have shaped Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation theory. It showed that the commentarial tradition, which has a long history of placing a significant emphasis on the analyses in the *Abhidhamma* and the commentaries, had shaped the view of Mahāsi Sayādaw. Another significant element of his formative years was his training under his meditation teacher, Mingun Sayādaw, who was one of the pioneers of the mass lay meditation movement in Burma during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The analyses in Chapter Three and Chapter Four showed that the main difference in the explanations of *satipaṭṭhāna* between these two renowned teachers comes from their foundational sources: whereas Ajaan Lee's teaching is largely in line with the *suttas*, Mahāsi Sayādaw's theory is deeply rooted in the commentaries. In order to present their differences in greater detail, in Chapter Five, I compared and contrasted their views on a number of essential aspects of their explanations of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The findings showed several differences between their treatments including:

1. Difference pertaining to the approach to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Ajaan Lee explained *satipaṭṭhāna* in terms of the four frames of reference (body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities), whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw elaborated it as a practice of paying bare attention to the materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*) perceived at the six sense-doors (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking).

2. Difference in identifying the main factors in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Ajaan Lee emphasized the three qualities—*sati* (mindfulness), *sampajañña* (alertness), and *ātappa* (ardency). Mahāsi Sayādaw, on the other hand, promoted the practice of bare attention, which is his interpretation of *sati*, and the clear comprehension in terms of the three characteristics, which is his explanation of the quality of *sampajañña*. In addition, whereas Ajaan Lee identified *ātappa* (ardency) as the primary discernment factor, Mahāsi Sayādaw deemed *sampajañña* (alertness) as the quality that plays this role.
3. Difference pertaining to the view on concentration. Ajaan Lee enthusiastically emphasized the practice of centering the mind, as he claimed that awakening occurs only in any of the *jhānas*, a view indicated by the *suttas*. Mahāsi Sayādaw, on the other hand, downplayed the role of concentration as he said liberation in the bare insight vehicle needs only the support of momentary concentration, which is the lowest level in *samādhi* practice.
4. Difference pertaining to the methods of handling wandering thoughts. Whereas Ajaan Lee explained that a wandering thought should be either dropped or thoroughly investigated to uncover its truth—its origination and its cessation—Mahāsi Sayādaw told meditators to simply note the wandering thought until it disappears.
5. Difference pertaining to the treatment of *nimitta*. According to Ajaan Lee, if a *nimitta* arose in the course of one's meditation, one should remain focused on one's meditation object and treat that *nimitta* as a visiting guest. Mahāsi

Sayādaw, in contrast, instructed that meditators should abandon their meditation object to contemplate the *nimitta* instead.

6. Difference pertaining to the treatment of rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*).

According to Ajaan Lee, rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*) arise as a result of *jhāna* cultivation. To Mahāsi Sayādaw, they are a result of the attainment of insight. Once they arose, Mahāsi Sayādaw instructed meditators to drop their present meditation object to focus on rapture and pleasure and simply to note “rapture” or “pleasure” until they disappeared. Ajaan Lee, on the other hand, said that meditators should keep cultivating the causal factors that lead to these two qualities but not to focus on these two qualities themselves, as Mahāsi Sayādaw taught. Ajaan Lee’s detailed instruction on how to develop rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*) is a supplement to the *suttas*’ description, which mention what they are but not how to cultivate them. Mahāsi Sayādaw’s teaching is in line with the commentaries.

7. Difference in explaining the relationship between *jhāna* and *vipassanā*. Ajaan

Lee, in his treatment, described *jhāna* and *vipassanā* as two qualities that work hand-in-hand to support one another. Mahāsi Sayādaw, on the other hand, presented them as two separate practices.

8. Difference in explaining the knowledge of the regularity of the *Dhamma*.

Whereas Ajaan Lee described the knowledge leading up to awakening in terms of the four noble truths and the knowledge in terms of dependent co-arising, Mahāsi Sayādaw claimed that it is the realization of no self.

9. Difference in their indications of the fruits that arise in the course of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. According to Mahāsi Sayādaw, noble attainments prior to *arahantship* such as stream-entry, once returner, and non-returner can be lost after they have been attained. And, in order to achieve a higher level than the present attainment, meditators have to start their practice again from the beginning. Ajaan Lee, however, seems not to have supported this view.

In addition to these differences, the chapter also explored Ajaan Lee's unique treatment of the three characteristics in comparison with that of Mahāsi Sayādaw. Whereas the latter simply follows the commentaries' perspective to explain this doctrine as a way to deny the existence of a permanent metaphysical self, the former challenges this teaching by introducing the opposing concepts of *nicca*, *sukha*, and *attā*. These characteristics—steadiness, pleasure, and control—can be seen in concentration practice as one masters *jhāna*, as a way to counterbalance *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. Ajaan Lee's uniqueness here lies in the way he encourages meditators to develop *jhāna* to fight against the three characteristics in order to discover their truths. It also includes his special insight which suggests meditators to abandon both of these two opposing sets of perceptions—steadiness, pleasure, and having attention under one's control vs. impermanence, suffering, and no-self—in order to gain ultimate release. Although this teaching of Ajaan Lee cannot be found in the *suttas*, it is in accordance with the explanation indicated in the *suttas* that even insights that lead to awakening also need to be let go for the mind to unbind.

These findings shed new light on the study of early Buddhist meditation practices, especially *satipaṭṭhāna*, and the significant influence that these seminal texts have on

how mindfulness is taught in the present day. This compare-and-contrast analysis illustrated that this subject is worthy of greater attention. The study revealed that divergent interpretations of one concept can create profoundly different approaches to *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation practice. Whereas Mahāsi Sayādaw's treatment revealed his adaptation of the commentarial teaching, Ajaan Lee showed his deep knowledge of the *Sutta Piṭaka*. In addition, the differences in their treatments of *satipaṭṭhāna* also revealed a strong connection between their training background and their soteriological vision. The conclusion also showed areas where Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw go beyond their respective foundational texts: Ajaan Lee, in his treatments of *ātappa* and *anattā*, and Mahāsi Sayādaw, in his explanation of momentary concentration as sufficient for awakening. This, however, does not negate our thesis that the most fundamental differences between Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw stem from their reliance on different authoritative texts: the *suttas* for Ajaan Lee and the commentaries for Mahāsi Sayādaw.

The findings in Chapter Three might make scholars such as Bhikkhu Bodhi reconsider his view that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is the text that contains the fullest instructions on the system of meditation.<sup>990</sup> It also argues against the conclusion that forest monks neglect scriptural learning, or the view that Buddhist modernization deemphasizes traditional practices, as David L. McMahan argues. The findings in Chapter Two and Chapter Four might cause *vipassanā* meditators and meditation sympathizers who take commentarial literature such as the *Visuddhimagga* as authoritative meditation teaching<sup>991</sup> to reconsider their view. In addition, the findings in

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<sup>990</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, message to *The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta Commentary*, by Soma Thera, Accesstoinight.org, 1998, <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/soma/wayof.html>.

<sup>991</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, introduction to *The Path of Purification*, by Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa (Kandy, Sri Lanka, 2010), xxx. See also Sodo Mori, *A Study of the Pāli Commentaries-Theravādic Aspects of the*

this dissertation strengthen the view that some teachings in later literature is not quite in line with early *suttas* but rather reflects the personal opinions of the commentators who produced them. These chapters point out the drawbacks of interpreting the faculty of *sati* as bare attention: perhaps this is why “mindfulness” has been interpreted in such unfitting contexts as mindful sex,<sup>992</sup> which is completely against the underlying teachings clearly stated in the *suttas*<sup>993</sup> that one needs to remember to put aside sensory craving with reference to the world. The findings of this project also demonstrated that Rupert Gethin’s view is only partially accurate, because his statement—“After Buddhaghosa, the Theravadin tradition works primarily with a system of seven ‘purifications’ (*visuddhi*) alongside a series of eight (or sometimes ten) knowledges”<sup>994</sup>—can be applied only to some Theravādin cases such as Mahāsi Sayādaw but not Ajaan Lee, whose teaching is based on the *suttas* but not the commentaries.

The investigation has accomplished its goal, identifying findings that support the statement made at the beginning of the project that the primary reference sources are the key factor constituting the discrepancy between teachings of these two teachers. Nevertheless, there is still further work to be done to enrich the project. Suggestions for potential further research include the following:

- 1) As mentioned in the body chapters, the institutions or meditation centers developed by Ajaan Lee and Mahāsi Sayādaw are still operating up to present

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*Aṭṭhakathās* (Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin, 1984), 94–100. Toshiichi Endo, “Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* Challenged?,” *Journal of Buddhist Studies* 9, (2012): 31.

<sup>992</sup> Claudia Blake, *The Joy of Mindful Sex: Be in the Moment and Enrich Your Lovemaking* (Brighton, United Kingdom: Ivy Press, 2010). See also Donna Dare, *Mindfulness Sex: Better Sex to Nurture Love and to Reach Sexual Health in the Couple, How to Build a Relationship with Awareness, Mindful Loving and Sex, Sexual Magic and Magnetism Power of Love* (N.p.: Independently Published, 2019).

<sup>993</sup> As mentioned above, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* indicates that to practice *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation one needs to remember to put aside the sensory craving with reference to the world.

<sup>994</sup> Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 188.

days within their own countries as well as overseas. It would be good if, in addition to the analysis of texts, the practice aspects of their traditions were also compared and contrasted. This could be approached through field research, which would allow issues related to their meditation theories to be observed from the practice angle. Site observations and interviews undoubtedly would contribute to broaden understanding of the topics discussed in this project.

- 2) In addition, both Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajaan Lee had long and substantial teaching careers, and both left behind a variety of meditation treatises and *Dhamma* talks in which they covered many other topics apart from *satipaṭṭhāna*. Therefore, comparing and contrasting their views on aspects such as the duties of the *Saṅgha*, or the Buddhist perspective on the relief of suffering, etc., might also be potential topics. This study would provide an opportunity to deepen our understanding of their teachings.
- 3) The Thai Forest Tradition and Burmese *vipassanā* movement were revival traditions of the early twentieth century that were strongly focused on meditation training. Comparing and contrasting the underlying philosophies, institutional structure, training theories, and other supporting factors that might have contributed to their accomplishments is also another worthwhile study. Although some aspects of the respective traditions have been examined in this dissertation, a more thorough comparison study would bring additional points of difference to light.



- 4) Through this project we learned that the *suttas* and the commentaries have different ways of elaborating *sampajañña*, liberating insight, the practice of *jhāna*, and so forth. This revealed the fact that there are differences between the *suttas* and the commentaries. It may make one wonder if there are any other differences between the *suttas* and the commentaries and whether they have any impact on one's meditation training. Thus, a detailed study to investigate other discrepancies between the *suttas* and the commentaries is also necessary.
- 5) Another important topic is the examination of the differences in accounts of *satipaṭṭhāna* between the Pāli and other commentaries such as the *Sarvāstivāda*, which preserved in Classical Chinese. This investigation would cast a wider lens on the development of the commentarial literature. At the same time, it could also provide more evidence to show to what extent the *satipaṭṭhāna* teachings of the *suttas* were preserved in the commentaries of other traditions.
- 6) Furthermore, *samatha* and *vipassanā*, two key elements in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, are also emphasized in other Buddhist traditions. Master Zhiyi, the founder of the Tiantai school in China, was well known for developing two systems of meditation based on these two qualities. So, a study of the differences among Ajaan Lee, Mahāsi Sayādaw, and Master Zhiyi regarding this issue would also be an interesting research topic. This study would help meditators across traditions broaden their perspective on the relationship between these two qualities.

7) *Satipaṭṭhāna* has been taught in a practical context in other living Buddhist traditions including Chan/Zen schools, Pure Land, and Vajrayana. Examining the fundamental differences between these schools and Theravāda is also a worthy research topic.

Further research into these suggested areas, I believe, would supplement the study of this project in a way that would provide a more complete picture of the history of Buddhist practice over the ages throughout Asia and the West.

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