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Trajectories of convergence : A comparative outlook on the teachings and meditation practice of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and Master Sheng Yen

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt at a comparative analysis of the teachings and meditation practice of two well-known twentieth-century scholar-monks, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, from the Thai Theravāda Buddhist tradition and Master Sheng Yen, a Chan (Zen) practitioner and upholder of Pure Land Buddhism. Although belonging to two different schools/traditions, their fundamental approach in teaching and practicing bears striking similarity. Inherent to their progressive approach to dhamma exposition is the holistic combination of the two monastic tasks of doctrinal learning (gantha-dhura) and meditation practice (vipassanā-dhura). Having worked painstakingly to establish and explain the correct and essential principles of Buddhism in a language that is marked by clarity and originality in innovative interpretation, both of them proceed to base their understanding of dhamma on meditation practice. For Buddhadāsa the practice is founded on ānāpānasati i.e. focusing the mind on in and out breath which he explains clearly in Mindfulness with Breathing and for Master Sheng Yen, it is ultimately the Chan practice of Silent Illumination the foundation of which he explains in such text as The Method of No-Method. In this paper, we have discussed briefly the related teachings and innovative exegeses of crucial issues of both the masters like the concept of dependent origination, and genuine Chan practice as well as their individualistic method of meditation practice before concluding on their points of convergence – the underlying message in their teachings of non-attachment and realization of the three characteristics of existence.

Introduction

From the ancient time to the present era various factors have contributed towards the proliferation of Buddhist concepts and principles across nations and continents. One prominent factor in all the various traditions of Buddhism is the emergence of radical monastic leaders from time to time whose appearance has spearheaded the creative amalgamation of the two ecclesiastical duties of doctrinal studies and meditation practice. Just as in the ancient and medieval times, the

twentieth century witnessed the revival and rejuvenation of both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna tradition under the aegis of many prominent scholar-meditation-masters, two of whom are the focus of this paper. The exegetical works by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) of the Thai Theravāda Buddhist tradition and Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009) of Pure Land Buddhism have continued to inspire both ordained and lay Buddhists across the globe. The legacies of their numerous dhamma talks that were geared towards awakening and sharpening peoples' understanding of the *tisikkhā* (three-fold training) –*sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration) and *paññā* (wisdom) and their exegetical writings that were based on a thorough understanding of canonical texts have become sources of reference for the neophytes as well as the specialists.

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu took higher ordination in 1926, at the age of twenty. All his life he regarded himself as the servant of Buddha and inscribed his personal dedication in his own words–

I offer this life and body to the Lord Buddha.
I am the slave of the Buddha, the Buddha is my master.
For this reason, I am called "Buddhadāsa."[1]

Having founded the monastery called *Suan Mokkh*, "The Garden of Liberation," in 1932, he undertook the most wide-ranging and influential study of the Pāli scriptures of Theravada Buddhism. These studies were the underpinning for his innovative and bold re-interpretation of many core Buddhist concepts like the doctrine of dependant origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and non-self (*anattā*).

[1] The quotation is from Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, *Tam Roi Phra Arahant* (In the Footsteps of the Arahant), (1986), Sukhapap Jai, Bangkok.

Moreover, he used his expertise in scriptural studies and exegeses to give renewed meaning to contemporary ideologies and thoughts as for instance, socialism came to be gleaned through the lens of Buddhism and the new concept of dhammic socialism emerged. Thus, out of his deep reflection on life and nature developed a commanding body of work that has inspired many to take a fresh look at Buddhism and inter-faith religion. As Santikaro Bhikkhu in his article "Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness" says, "He has been a pioneer in the application of Buddha-Dhamma to the realities of the modern world during the recent decades of rampant modernization and economic growth and has forthrightly criticized the immorality and selfishness of many modern social structures. Further, he has been Thailand's most vocal proponent of open-mindedness toward other religions."[2]

Born into a poor farming household near Shanghai in mainland China, Master Sheng Yen entered the monastic life at the early age of thirteen and grew up to witness tremendous socio-cultural and religious changes that gripped the entire nation in the aftermath of the Second World War and the subsequent emergence of the Communist Revolution. During those days when the Chinese nation emerged as a new geo-political entity and Chinese leaders avowed for the new found freedom of the communist ideology, monastic role of monks, nuns and novices came to be relegated to an enclosed space that not only crippled the spiritual aspiration of numerous ordained *sangha* members but also the tradition-bound morale of the common people.[3] Having grown up in this transitional time of a new orthodoxy that gave rise to an anti-religious ambience, Master Sheng Yen decided to escape religious persecution from the People's Republic of China by enlisting in a unit of the Nationalist Army in 1949. This decision was very crucial and it was instrumental in leading him to the safe shores of Taiwan, where a decade later in 1959 he once again took to the monk's robe. From then on the next phase of his spiritual journey began with a six-year solitary retreat in different monasteries in southern Taiwan that was later followed by his pursuit of higher studies in Japan where he successfully completed his master's and doctoral studies.

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[2] Christopher S Queen and Sallie B. King , eds., (1996), *Engaged Buddhism – Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, State University of New York Press, Albany, p.147.

[3] For a fuller account of Master Sheng Yen's life in his own words, see his autobiography in English, *Footprints in the Snow* (2008), Doubleday, New York.

Today he is regarded as a religious scholar, and one of the mainstream teachers of Chinese Chan (Japanese: Zen) Buddhism. His lineage can be traced to both the extant Chan traditions of Linji (Japanese: Rinzai) and Caodong (Japanese: Sōtō). In the former lineage he was the 57th generational descendant and a 3rd generational descendant of Master Hsu Yun, whereas in the latter lineage, he was the 52nd generational descendant of Master Dongshan (807-869), and the direct descendant of Master Dongchu (1908–1977). With a clear vision of reviving Pure Land Buddhism, Master Sheng Yen aimed at merging the monastic duties of meditation practice and scriptural studies. To transform his vision into reality, he supervised numerous retreats all over the world during his lifetime and also founded the Dharma Drum Mountain, a Buddhist organization based in Taiwan that helped establish many Chan meditation centers around the world as well as the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies (CHIBS) and the Dharma Drum Buddhist College, that are emerging as well-recognized centers of Buddhist studies. About his own striving he wrote –

What I am unable to accomplish in this lifetime,
I vow to push forward through countless future lives;
what I am unable to accomplish personally,
I appeal to everyone to undertake together[4].

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's innovative interpretation of core concepts

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's innovative thinking and re-interpretation of many core Buddhist concepts began with his reflective understanding of the word dhamma itself, which according to him, has four meanings: i) Nature itself, ii) The law of nature, iii)

[4] *Master Sheng Yen*, (2010), Sheng Yen Education Foundation, Taiwan.

The duty that must be performed according to that law of nature, and iv) The fruits or benefits that arise from the performance of that duty. He says, "We have not grasped the secret of Dhamma, so we are unable to practice in a way that gets the fullest benefit from life."[5] Only when the four inter-dependent nuances of dhamma are realized, the concept of developing life comes to bear true meaning. Therefore, after having clarified the four meanings of dhamma, Buddhadāsa went on to urge all his monastic and lay followers to keep in mind and consider deeply the concept of 'developing life'. Developing life means "causing life to progress to the highest level beyond all problems and *dukkha*, beyond all meaning and gradations of these two words."[6]

He lays out four aspects of developing life. The first is to prevent things that are pernicious and unwholesome to life from arising. The second is to completely get rid of and destroy any such things that already have arisen in life. The third is to give rise to wholesome things which are useful and beneficial for life. The fourth is to maintain and preserve those things so that they flourish continually. These four aspects of developing life: preventing new dangers, getting rid of old dangers, creating desirable things, and maintaining and increasing the beneficial things are what comprises *sammāvāyāma* or right effort that is a factor of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*). To Buddhadāsa developing life is the duty and spiritual obligation of one and all.

In order to fulfill this duty the cultivation of four very important dhammas or four dhamma tools is indispensable. These four tools of Dhamma are *sati* (reflective awareness or mindfulness), *sampajaññā* (wisdom-in-action or ready comprehension), *paññā* (wisdom) and *samādhi* (concentration). Having these four tools in possession paves the way for development of life at every time and situation.

Buddhadāsa laid great emphasis on the practice of *vipassanā* meditation for cultivating and training the mind so that these four Dhamma tools are enriched enough to develop our lives. What Buddhadāsa aimed through his personal example, supervised retreats, numerous dhamma talks and reflective writings was the cultivation of an interest in his followers, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, in the mental development of these four necessary dhammas. Closely related to Buddhadāsa's concept of developing life is the true understanding of the doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

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[5] Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, (1988), *Mindfulness with breathing*, The Dhamma Study & Practice Group, Bangkok, p. 5.

[6] Ibid.

The doctrine of dependent origination is being interpreted in many different ways and Buddhadāsa's unique interpretation came up in opposition to Buddhaghosa's explanation of the process of dependent arising encompassing three lifetimes.[7] Quite contradictory to the process of three lifetimes, the doctrine of dependent origination according to Buddhadāsa conforms to the "principle of direct and immediate efficacy" (*sanditthika*) that is, it primarily concerns with the world and present life. In an attempt at offering an overhaul re-interpretation of Buddhaghosa's position, Buddhadāsa comes up with a very highly psycho-philosophical exegesis while simultaneously digging deep roots in practical application. Thus, his approach is a combination of conceptual and experiential understanding of the doctrine.

At the philosophical level Buddhadāsa draws our attention to the concept of Middle Path in the doctrine of dependent origination, that is, there is neither the substantiation of the ego (concept of a continuing existence) nor the negation of the ego (nihilism). Its law follows the principle of "this exists therefore that exists, this ceases to be therefore that ceases to be." Hence, teaching the doctrine of dependent origination using the concept of a continuing existence is undermining the law of dependent arising. Buddhadāsa claims that all the states of dependent origination must conform to the "principle of direct and immediate efficacy" to be recognized as the Buddha's teaching.

Dependent arising is a phenomenon that lasts an instant; it is impermanent. Keeping this premise in view, Buddhadāsa argues that physical birth is not what is implied in the doctrine of dependent origination; rather both birth and death should be understood in terms of psychological phenomena within the process of dependent arising in day to day life. Likewise, heaven and hell are mental states more than physical and tangible realms that one may ascend or descend. When the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion arise, right mindfulness gets obfuscated and the ego emerges. This is birth and this happens continuously in the absence of mindfulness. If the volitional action has already generated Feeling or Birth, and the *citta* is afflicted by extreme vexation and anxiety, then a pandemoniac situation is created in that very instant. The doctrine of dependent origination is therefore a kind of cultivation that can truncate the manifestation of suffering by instilling and maintaining awareness in the Six Roots i.e. the six sense organs – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind – when they come in contact with surroundings. Buddhadāsa, who aimed at a practical understanding of the dependent origination emphasized that applying this principle to protect the Six Roots and stop influxes (*asava*) or "flowing" of the *citta* that

[7] Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, (1992), *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, Thammasapa, Bangkok.

perpetrates *samsara* is the real end to the process of dependent arising. And this manner of ending the process of dependent arising is what he stressed as the Right Path (*sammapatipada*) because ultimately no ego can be found operating when the phenomena that last an instant according to the law of dependent arising are correctly perceived.

Master Sheng Yen's re-interpretation of Zen

While situating certain expectations of Chan practice in the West, Master Sheng Yen came up with two distinct responses that marked his middle path approach. To him, the prevalent notion, one much cherished by westerners, that Chan practices devolve within an intuitive domain unilaterally exclusive of conceptual structure is a mistaken thought along with the related understanding that any Chan practice constitutes itself independently of classical Buddhist teaching.[8] In an attempt to contextualize Chan Buddhism in both its essence and practice, Master Sheng Yen gives a new and fresh perspective on the self, the mind, and the nature of human relationships and interactions in the world. He describes Chan from three perspectives: a way of life, a way of dealing with situations and an orientation toward the external world. Once a practitioner has developed an understanding of Chan or perhaps has had a true experience of Chan, wisdom manifests in whatever he or she does. The awareness of a new attitude that is broad, open and non-discriminating arises spontaneously.

Time and again, Master Sheng Yen emphasized that Chan relies on the two pillars of concepts and methods and unless both are firmly in place and working together simultaneously, one's practice will lack a firm foundation. Practice requires three kinds of "putting aside". First putting aside the self, second, putting aside thoughts about goals; and third, putting aside past and future.[9]

Master Sheng Yen divides the method of practice into four stages –

The first stage has to do with suffering. One recognizes that one's problems and the difficulties that befall stem from previous karma. Everything that now exists has its origin in some other place and some other time. In the second stage, one develops the awareness that what one finds good or pleasant is also the result of causes in the past, and does not get caught up in the feelings of gladness for instance, good fortune is not taken as a sign of one's own specialness or greatness. In other words, one does not let such things add to a sense of self. By the third stage, the

[8] Master Sheng Yen, (2001), *Hoofprint of the Ox*, Oxford University Press.

[9] *Master Sheng Yen*, (2010), Dharma Drum Buddhist College, Taiwan, p. 23.

practitioner has come to maintain an attitude of not seeking. At the fourth level of practice one simply does whatever should be done.

Protect the branches to save the roots;
though a small matter it is not trivial
Close the seven orifices,
shut off the six senses.[10]

Here the branches are the minor vexations while the roots are the major ones that may last a lifetime. If one is not careful with the minor vexatious they may develop into major ones. Similar to Buddhadāsa's teachings on maintaining awareness in the Six Roots, Master Sheng Yen draws attention to closing the seven orifices, two eyes, two ears, two nostrils and the mouth, and shutting off the six senses, seeing, hearing, smelling, taste, touch and cognition as a disciplinary way of withdrawal from the attachments to worldly things. Such discipline is indispensable to perceive how the mind of illusion functions and provides a space in which clarity develops.

The Chan practice in its entirety includes the method, the principle and the perspective – all of which are interconnected and should be maintained simultaneously for achieving the utmost benefit. The method of Chan involves focusing from mind-moment to mind-moment without straying from the focus of concentration. The principle of Chan upholds relaxing the body and mind to settle earnestly on the method without weighing and scaling one's progress and failure all along. And finally, the perspective of Chan encompasses impermanence, no-self, no-thought, non-abiding, formlessness and no-attainment.

Chan practice is a pursuit of personal wisdom – internally, it manifests as freedom from anxiety and vexation, a state of mental coolness; externally, it manifests in the way one interacts with the immediate environmental reality. True wisdom that arises from Chan practice is one of non-discrimination and is always in harmony and close union with the surrounding. It is in this external manifestation that one comprehends that the practice is not simply the pursuit of personal spiritual gratification. Master Sheng Yen asserts that if one is only interested in one's own freedom from vexation and one's own benefit, then one is not practicing Chan at all. This is because practicing solely for oneself is only half way progress; one may achieve a high level of concentration, yet nowhere close to genuine Chan which is always turned simultaneously outward and inward. In other words, Chan begins and

[10] Sayings of Wang Ming as quoted by Master Sheng Yen in his dhamma talk *Guarding the One* available on http://www.westernchanfellowship.org/dharmatalks-shengyen.html.

ends at the logical point of changing oneself. Once the mental state has calmed and changed, the natural tendency to help others should blossom in one's heart spontaneously and perennially. This is the arising of the bodhi-mind which not only benefits oneself but also effects positive changes in the world around.

Meditation practice of Buddhadāsa

Of all the different systems and techniques of mental development or *vipassanā*, Buddhadāsa finds *ānāpānasati-bhāvanā*, the cultivation of mindfulness with breathing in and out the best. According to him, "The correct and complete meaning of *ānāpānasati-bhāvanā* is to take one truth or reality of nature and then observe, investigate, and scrutinize it within the mind with every inhalation and every exhalation. Thus, mindfulness with breathing allows us to contemplate any important natural truth while breathing in and breathing out"[11].

In the course of all his lectures on *ānāpānasati* Buddhadāsa makes it clear that the system of *ānāpānasati* is universal and non-sectarian and hence no one can exercise monopoly over it: "This system is not the Burmese or Chinese or Sri Lankan style that some people are clinging to these days. Likewise, it is not the system of 'achan this,' 'master that,' 'guru this,' or 'teacher that' as others are so caught up in nowadays. Nor is it the style of Suan Mokhh or any other wat. Instead, this system is simply the correct way as recommended by the Buddha".[12]

Regarding *ānāpānasati* as the heart of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the heart of all four foundations of mindfulness[13] Buddhadāsa expounds in detail in four tetrads all the sixteen stages of the Ānāpānasati Sutta and asserts that if the technique is to be complete, it must have all the 16 steps. Within the framework of the four tetrads there are the four suitable things or objects of contemplation – *kāya* (body), *vedanā* (feeling), *citta* (mind) and dhamma for gradual progression along the spiritual path. The 16 Steps are divided into four tetrads which correspond to these four fundamental objects of study.

Kāyānupassanā

Kāya tetrad or *kāyānupassanā* is contemplation of the body. In it, the first thing one must study and understand is the breath – the different kinds of breath, their various qualities and characteristics, and the influence they assert. The first two steps

[11] Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, (1988), *Mindfulness with breathing*, The Dhamma Study & Practice Group: Bangkok, p. 7.

[12] Ibid, p.114.

[13] Ibid, p.115.

of the first tetrad include contemplating the long breath and then the short breath and paying close attention to how they feel and all the different aspects of these two kinds of breath. At step three the meditator goes deeper and investigates the breath more profoundly than before in order to observe and understand clearly the presence of the two different kinds of bodies – the flesh-body and the breath-body – within the normal physical body. Step four of this first tetrad is calming the breath – this makes the body as well as mind calm. When the breath-body is adjusted well, it gives rise to a good, healthy, and calm flesh-body. Since the mastery of flesh body is not within one's direct control, Buddhadāsa advocates its indirect control through the breath. The breath is the life force (*pāna*) and understanding it in detail is significant to proceed to the fourth stage of this first tetrad i.e. calming the breath so that tranquility arises and *citta* gets ready to perform its further duties.

Vedanānupassanā

The second tetrad comprises of the contemplation of feeling (*vedanānupassanā*). As is so common for the untrained mind to slavishly cling to different feelings, especially happy feelings or *sukha-vedanā*, it is essential to contemplate on the fleeting nature of such feelings in order to still one's mind and avoid being foolishly entrapped by such emotional states time and again. Just as understanding the breath is essential to calm the flesh body and the mind, understanding of *vedanā* is indispensable to keep them under control since they are "conditioners of the mind (*citta-sankhāra*)". Buddhadāsa argues that "once we regulate the feelings, we will be able to keep our life on the correct path" and thus not be slaves to materialism. Therefore, it is rather a significant issue to master the feelings.

Cittānupassanā

The third tetrad is *cittānupassanā* (contemplation of mind). The main objective of this is to know the mind and every kind of thought that arises in order to purify, concentrate and activate the *citta.* The preliminary steps of understanding and controlling the body/breath and feelings set the foundational base to investigate the mind and all arising thoughts in a clear and reflective manner. A clear, controlled and focused mind is needed to understand the ultimate truths of the dhamma which are not easily comprehended when the mind is untrained, disturbed and distracted. Therefore, Buddhadāsa says, "We make it the *citta* which is fit and ready to do the highest duties. It must be prepared for its remaining duties, especially, the final conquest of *dukkha."*[14]

[14] *Mindfulness with breathing,* p. 121.

Dhammānupassanā

The fourth tetrad is *dhammānupassanā* (contemplation of Dhamma). After getting to know the different states of mind, the final step is to contemplate the truth of dhamma – *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), *anattā* (non-self) and the law of causation. The truth of dhamma is the truth of nature and only upon understanding it one can 'let go' all attachment and attain the deep insight and perfect peacefulness that are unshakeable.

From the four distinct levels of mindfulness practice as taught by Buddhadāsa it is clear that each preceding level is a preparatory stage for the next and the cumulative effect of the final stage is of the greatest benefit to the practitioner in the sense that it widens his or hers mental horizon and leads to spiritual maturity with the conceptual and experiential understanding of the dhammic truths in their entirety.

Master Sheng Yen's Method of No-Method

Silent Illumination is another name for *samatha-vipassanā*, the meditative practice of stilling the mind and developing insight into its true nature.[15] According Master Sheng Yen, in Silent Illumination, which is a practice in Chan Buddhism with its emphasis on sudden approach to realization, *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation are practiced simultaneously. The practice begins with relaxing the body and relaxing the mind. Both the relaxation of the body and the relaxation of attitude, approach and mood together form the foundation for the success of Silent Illumination. Physical relaxation is brought with a focus on the entire body starting from the head then proceeding downward to the abdomen and below. While in a seated position one develops simple awareness of the sitting body in its entirety. This preliminary awareness is itself regarded as the first entry into the practice of Silent Illumination. Master Sheng Yen urges his pupils to stay with the totality of the 'just-sitting' awareness without getting caught up in any particulars. So there is no focus on practicing mindfulness of breath in the Silent Illumination practice. According to him, breath is certainly a sensation, but it is merely a part of one's total body sensation. In Silent Illumination one is practicing being aware of the whole body just sitting there with all its different sensations as a totality. Integration of this awareness of totality can be extended to ordinary activities and he suggests "Plunge your whole life into what you are doing at that very moment and live that way."[16] The ultimate aim is to

[15] Master Sheng Yen, (2008), *The Method of No-Method*, Shambala Publications, Boston, p.3.
[16] Ibid. p.6.

avoid discursive, wandering, or deluded thoughts with all of one's being – environment, body, and mind – in perfect harmony and union.

Key points in practicing the method

The foundations of Silent Illumination practice lay on total-body awareness – to be relaxed and to sit with full awareness, continuously maintaining a relaxed body and mind. There is no focus on any particular body parts even when there is any physical sensation, pain or temporary discomfort since the focus is always on total-body awareness. Underlying one's awareness of the body if there is also an understanding of impermanence, one can gain insight into sensations as they arise, abide and fall away of their own accord. The ultimate aim of Silent Illumination is viewing things through the prism of impermanence. Seeing the transient nature one begins to understand emptiness. Therefore, in Silent Illumination there is the idea of emptiness and the experience of emptiness simultaneously.

Stages of Silent Illumination

In the true sense there is no distinct and separate stage, but Master Sheng Yen uses the term "stages" simply as points of reference for instruction and as expedient means to convey the various depths of experience in the practice. He formulated Silent Illumination into the following three stages –

Initial stage

In the very first stage awareness of the whole body sitting, i.e., awareness of the total body rather than its separate parts is developed. The awareness eventually leads to union of body and mind. The body is no longer a burden, and its sensation fades away, leaving a crisp, clear, and open mind.

Intermediary stage

In the second stage when one gets deeper into the practice, the body, mind, and environment become one. At this stage the mind is very clear and open and there is no wandering thoughts stirred up, hence no attachment. The particulars one experiences normally now exist as the total environment. At this second stage, there is the perfect union of the internal and the external and as such while experiencing the immediacy of the environment, one is not influenced by it – it is all there but absorbed in stillness. There is neither any inner thought nor any conditioning by external things. One perceives everything in the immediacy of the present. This is the silent aspect.

Tertiary stage

In the third stage develops the illumination aspect which is the clear awareness of things as they are. This stage is marked by perfect stillness, motionlessness yet clear comprehension of the multitude of things surrounding. This unperturbed and still mental state in Silent Illumination practice is likened to a mirror that is utterly still while images and shadows appear freely before it. At this stage, the principles that guide one's practice are similar to the fourth tetrad is *dhammānupassanā* (contemplation of Dhamma) as taught by Buddhadāsa, i.e. the contemplation of impermanence, emptiness and no-self.

In one of his dhamma talks, Master Sheng Yen while referring to the pristine practice of Chan in China as reflected is the poem "Calming the Mind" by the sixth century Chan monk, Wang Ming, compared the practice of stilling the mind with the act of catching a feather with a fan. The metaphor implies patience and persistence in practice. His advice to the retreatants was that when practicing one should not be afraid of a distracting thought, as for instance, when the body has a problem one need not get concerned with it; likewise, when the mind is worrying one should simply put the worry down without further vexation. In his own words, "Keep the mind on the method – waiting for the feather to sink onto the fan".[17] But having succeeded in stilling the mind and if one experiences the very good situation of not being burdened by any distractions and wandering thoughts, Master Sheng Yen cautions – "Whatever you do never congratulate yourself! Away goes the feather at once! So don't be happy! Do not think how successful you are. Just observe the situation without movement towards or away. If the mind moves, wandering thought begins."[18]

Through the Zen saying – "Water dripping ceaselessly will fill the four seas. Specks of dust not wiped away will become the five mountains" – Master Sheng Yen exhorts his disciples not to bypass and disregard any single wandering thought without at first impinging it on the vigilant awareness of mindful reckoning. This is because as the saying implies even a tiny bit of wandering thought is not irrelevant in the sense that it is enough to distract the mind. Accumulated together the tiny wandering thoughts can transform into one gigantic wandering thought – a monster. The untrained mind is a storehouse of wandering thoughts, a perpetual victim in itself of the habitual infliction of thoughts and feelings arising endlessly. Master Sheng Yen puts it graphically – "Indeed it is Karma itself, we are this habit; entangled and

[17] *Guarding the One* Talk given by Master Sheng Yen on the first two evenings of the Chan retreat in April 1989 available online http://www.westernchanfellowship.org/dharmatalks-shengyen.html.

[18] *Guarding the One* Talk given by Master Sheng Yen.

constrained within it. And of this we are unaware. When we focus in practice it becomes quite easy to see the truth of this. We can see the scattered thought, the endless cycling of our limited and caging ideas, judgments and prejudices. The more clearly we see such things the better the chance of our success."[19]

Trajectories of convergence

At the outset the method of mindfulness with breathing of Buddhadāsa and the method of Silent Illumination of Master Sheng Yen may appear to be oppositional, for the former's method is based on strident emphasis on particularity and the latter's on totality. Buddhadāsa emphasizes on the breath and its varied inherent nature in all its unique particularity, whereas Master Sheng Yen urges his followers not to focus on the breath but the totality of awareness of the entire body in its seated position. Buddhadāsa teaches the method of counting the breath, while Master Sheng Yen directly stipulates his students to abstain from the same. When we analyze the uniqueness of each method, we see only divergences and no commonality at all. But if we go beyond the surface level and reflect on the aim, objective and content of the two Venerables' teachings, then trajectories of convergences gradually become crystal clear in their manifested realities. In other words, the process of awareness and mindfulness development of both Buddhadāsa and Sheng Yen are unique and distinct from each other, but the guiding maxims and the principle of ultimate realization bear striking similarity, especially in the underlying emphatic message of realization of *anicca* (impermanence) and *anattā* (non-self/non-substantiality).

Theravāda Buddhism in its pure form and Pure Land Buddhism in its pristine form appear to be conterminous in the sense that all dualism of self and selfhood is ultimately deconstructed. Quite unlike many new trendy interpretations of Buddhism within the Thai Theravāda context as offered by, for instance, the Santi Asoke and the Dhammakaya movements that have deviated extensively from the genuine doctrinal teachings through festishization of *arahantship*, in the case of the former, and *nibbāna* as *atta*, in the case of the latter, Buddhadāsa and Master Sheng Yen have adhered to the original teachings of the Buddha with a style of practice that aims at affecting and transforming the mind-heart on the inside of life through upholding the original message of the Buddha of seeing, knowing and recognizing everything, including the self and the dhamma within the matrix of *tilakkhaṇa – anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*.

[19] Ibid.

Time and again Buddhadāsa emphasizes that the heart of the Buddha's teaching is "*sabbe dhammā nalaṁ abhinivesaya*" that is the realization that nothing whatsoever should be grasped at and clung to as "me" or "mine". This realization that gives rise to what he calls in Thai *cit waang* (mind free of self-idea) brings an end to all suffering. In other words, the whole essence of the Buddha's teaching he sums up as freedom from suffering through non-attachment. Hence non-grasping and non-clinging, the absence of any idea of self or of anything belonging to an abiding entity/self, which Buddhadāsa associates with the concept of *suññatā*, is according to him the most important teaching and is the core and essence of Buddhism. The Path and Fruit of Nibbāna consist in knowing this emptiness and in successively gaining the fruits of emptiness right up to the very culmination. And this can be attained through the persistent practice of seeing a thing as it is in itself without projecting subjective feelings on it and this 'true seeing' can be mastered through moment to moment mindfulness and insightful realization of *tilakkhaṇa* both at the conceptual and experiential level. He says, "When seeing, just to see; when hearing, just to hear. Achieving this, we become stable people. We have stability, unshakeability, and equilibrium. Although objects of every kind make contact with us in every way and by every sensory route, self does not arise."[20]

Master Sheng Yen's teachings run parallel to Buddhadāsa's for he drives the point clear to his pupils of not suffusing any practice by an attitude of comparison. The habit of dualistic thinking has enslaved the human mind perennially. Therefore, understanding the illusory nature of experience one should not get disturbed by whatever arises – "Maybe something is good looking, maybe something sounds bad. That's all. We train ourselves so that the mind does not give rise to likes or dislikes, triggered by the environment. Whatever we have experienced is simply so; there's no need to get worked up about it"[21].

Pay no heed to forms;
Do not listen to sound
listening to sounds you become deaf,
You become blind observing forms.[22]

Just as Buddhadāsa guides his pupil to guard off every wandering thought before it turns to *vedanā* (feeling) and subsequently *taṇhā* (craving) by instantly

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[20] Buddhadāsa, (1988), *Buddha-Dhamma for students*, trans. Roderick S. Bucknell, Dhamma Study and Practice Group, Bangkok, p.9.

[21] *Guarding the One* Talk given by Master Sheng Yen.

[22] Sayings of Wang Ming as quoted by Master Sheng Yen in his dhamma talk *Guarding the One*.

recognizing it at the very preliminary or rudimentary level of dependent co-arising, Master Sheng Yen too emphasizes on the cultivation of the art of repeatedly recognizing the state of mind and bringing it back to focus by putting into real life practice of the essence of the Heart Sutra: Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form. In the Silent Illumination practice one investigates the mind, cutting off the senses the meditator perceives mind without the intrusion of wandering thought.

It is very essential for all Buddhists to differentiate myopic and erroneous interpretation of doctrinal principles from the genuine practices which combine *samatha* with *vipassanā* for both conceptual and experiential realization of the dhamma. It is not only for personal enrichment but also for achieving an in-depth understanding of Buddhism with an aim at applying the understanding to daily practice that the relevance of the teachings of genuine masters of the stature of Buddhadāsa and Master Sheng Yen be recognized by Buddhists irrespective of sectarian affiliation. The transformative value of rigorous practice and teachings of both Buddhadāsa and Master Sheng Yen aim at whole-hearted contemplation, examination and analysis of the mind (*citta*) in order to recognize the defilements of *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred) and *moha* (delusion) in varied and subtle levels so as to foster spiritual growth that ultimately leads to liberation and end of all kinds of suffering.