

A Living Tradition

U Buddharakkhita (Steve Armstrong)

In 1989, after living in Burma for three and a half years, two Burmese women, sisters whom I had previously met, came to see me. After offering *dana*, they suggested or requested that I meet their Sayadaw before I left Burma. In Burma, the land of Buddhism, it is very common that lay people wish others to meet their teacher, usually an elderly monk. Being one of the very few foreigners in Burma, especially for so long, many Burmese knew me or knew of my being at the meditation center, and not infrequently I would receive unknown, unexpected visitors wishing to offer monks requisites: food, robes, medicines, etc. After numerous requests to meet others' teachers, I was not surprised or much interested in the latest invitation; but there was a sincerity, sensitivity, and quiet simplicity in their non-urgent, non-boastful invitation - something akin to a matter of fact statement that it would be for my benefit so I cautiously agreed.

The Meditation Center

We were driven through the crowded, noisy, decrepit, dusty suburbs of Rangoon and came to stop at a railroad track crossed only by a narrow, dirt footpath; it led to a dark stand of tall trees in the near distance. We got out into the searing tropical sun and walked cross the tracks to the old entrance sign on the side of the forest foot path – “Shwe Oo Min Tawya” – “Gold Cave Hermitage”. Before passing the sign, the sisters removed their sandals and lowered their tone of voice out of respect for the sanctity of the monastery. As soon as we entered the shade of the forest there was a palpable, cool peacefulness that can only be imagined as having existed a hundred years earlier, before cars, TVs, and other modern conveniences. I felt like we were entering a primeval fairy's forest glen. Easily imagining benevolent unseen beings nearby, we walked along the well-trodden dirt path past a small, weathered but tidy, meditator's kuti (cabin). We turned right at the end of the large, dark, wooden meditation hall with a porch running the full length, and the view opened to where we could see a small grove of trees with well swept ground beneath, and six to eight small, single story, single occupant, simply constructed wooden cabins. There were a variety of colorful monk's robes hanging on lines, but no one was in sight. We walked past the meditation hall and the large, darkly silent dining room, then followed a short roofed walkway to the steps of a medium sized, unpretentious single roomed, wooden dwelling with opened window

shutters. I was quietly told to enter without knocking, as is the custom in monasteries, and I quietly pushed open the screen door, and stepped into the cool, still, dim, spaciousness of the Sayadaw's single room.

The Sayadaw

As we entered, the Sayadaw unhurriedly rose from a chaise lounge lawn chair and carefully sat down on his sitting cloth on the floor in front of a book cabinet at one end of the room. The few devotees who were there paid their respects to the Sayadaw and left, and the sisters entered behind me. I adjusted my robes to pay respect to the elder, and my internal chatter spontaneously stopped as I observed the tranquil bearing and steady, clear demeanor of the thin, elderly Sayadaw, who remained alert without straining, present without curiosity. I felt a deep surge of respect, awe and faith as I mindfully lowered myself to the floor, spread my sitting cloth and carefully bowed three times. As I knelt respectfully, the sisters spoke briefly in Burmese to the Sayadaw. Since I had practiced meditation intensively for most of my stay in Burma, I did not learn Burmese, so I was not stirred to reflect on the content of their conversation, but I heard them mention my name. Then the younger sister sitting behind me said I could speak openly with the Sayadaw.

I briefly related my Dhamma history in Burma of intensive insight and tranquility meditation practice and acknowledged that I would soon be leaving Burma, possibly returning to the States within a year and sought his advice regarding next steps. He sat erect and unmoving with downcast eyes, quietly attentive while my comments were translated for him. When perspiration collected on my glasses and I began to wipe them with my robe, he signaled a junior attendant monk to offer me a handkerchief, and indicated in such a way that I felt instructed, not reprimanded, that monk's robes should not be used for cleaning purposes. Through the translator, Sayadaw asked me a few questions about details I had inadvertently omitted. Then he spoke slowly and carefully. His response was clear, simple, and to the point: the benefit of the Buddha's teaching is found in one's own practice; studying texts could come later, and teaching should follow only when one had their own experiential understanding of the *Dhamma*. During a few more brief questions, I began to feel a deep resonance with what he was saying, as if he were speaking from my innermost being of knowing what path I have chosen to walk. The simplicity, sincerity and clarity of his

comments caused my heart to quiver and open in sensitive recognition of spiritual kinship.

As we left his plain, small, but spacious-feeling cabin, we stepped out into the tranquil shade of the forest. The monastery was a small grove of high canopy jungle trees surrounded by a more dense wall of high trees, with an impenetrable barrier of bushes beneath. It could all be seen from where I was standing. Still, no one was visible, though I was told that there were about a dozen monks in residence there. We slowly ambled about the grounds, and the sisters told me about the Sayadaw whom I had just met. It seems many years ago he had been a very successful yogi of one meditation master, and was selected to also become a meditation teacher and chief preceptor in his teacher's *yeiktha* (meditation center). After a few years when his teacher was becoming popular, with more people coming to meditate and the *yeiktha* growing in size and organizational complexity, he was not interested in remaining in that position and asked permission from his teacher to leave. It was not allowed. So he continued on in his teaching position and at a later date asked again. Again his request was refused. After a few more years, still not inclined to remain there any longer, he requested permission again, and this time his by then famous master agreed to his leaving. He had been there ten years. Leaving central Rangoon he went to the jungle, beyond the outskirts and established a small forest monastery/meditation center, the Gold Cave Hermitage, where he could continue his own practice.

Being a yogi of some skill and a trained teacher, others were drawn to his teaching, and when devotees offered to build more buildings and make other improvements at his monastery so more yogis could come, he refused their offers, instead only allowing functional, wooden buildings to be built for a dining room, meditation hall, and a few simple dwellings for the few monks and a dormitory for about fifteen to twenty elderly female yoginis who comprised the entire staff and organization of his *yeiktha*. The sisters pointed out a small single meditator's cabin that their mother had donated after the Sayadaw had repeatedly refused her offers throughout her life-long devotion to him. One layman lived nearby to handle financial affairs. In subsequent years more people came to practice with him, and they moved to the area; after working during the day, they would come to the *yeiktha* to meditate each night. The Sayadaw would give a short discourse most nights, and the females who lived there helped to prepare the food collected on alms round for all the monks and yogis to eat. They spent the remainder of their

time practicing meditation. Sayadaw would not allow the trees in the monastery to be cut, nor would he accept the many offers of new buildings, building repairs, installation of electricity, phone, cement paved walkways, nor a road so vehicles could drive there. He had never sought, nor allowed, expansion for the sake of prestige or extravagance, but whenever construction or repairs were essential the resources and personnel were faithfully and bountifully offered. He has managed to maintain a secluded forest hermitage for meditation practice even as Rangoon has grown and surrounded it. This is a rare endeavor in the world today, even for Burma.

The Alms Round

Through a series of fortuitous circumstances and clockwork precision timing, I was allowed to return for further intensive practice. And so one night not much later, as dusk was approaching dark, and night noises and dim light were filling the forest hermitage, I briefly greeted the Sayadaw and was shown out the back door into a long narrow room with an attached bath. Sayadaw offered me his personal walking room as a meditation hut for the next twelve days. I was surprised to receive such good accommodations and delighted to have twelve days of seclusion. But when I asked what time I should prepare for alms round the following morning, I was encouraged instead to continue with my practice; I need not go on alms round, but could eat with the monks when they returned.

After the noise, crowds and construction, pomp, ceremony and organizational protocol of the large, monolithic concrete *yeiktha* where I had been staying for several years, I felt fortunate to have the opportunity to practice in the simplicity, seclusion, and quiet of this small forest hermitage.

The days and nights of silent practice passed quickly. And when with four days remaining, Sayadaw asked me if I wanted to go on alms round in the morning with the other monks, I readily agreed. The following morning, after a brief meal of thin rice gruel and dried fish, I prepared my robes and bowl for going out. When the bell rang I followed the other monks to line up near the meditation hall. The sun was up but it was cool in the forest shade when Sayadaw led us (about ten monks and four novices) out of the monastery. Just outside the monastery in the bright sun several devotees were patiently standing alongside the foot path, and when Sayadaw drew close and silently lifted the cover off his bowl, each would mindfully place a spoonful of rice in his bowl and, if they had fruits or curry to offer, Sayadaw

would accept them and hand them over to a lay boy to carry. Curries and fruit are not added to the cooked rice in the bowl while on alms round, but are prepared and distributed to all monks and meditators for the late morning meal back at the *yeiktha*.

As we continued barefoot along the beaten dirt path, other villagers would silently approach to offer when they had. After a short walk atop a rice paddy dike, and across several weathered boardwalk bridges desperately in need of repair, we entered a roadway that had a raised path of brick work down the middle, with beaten packed dirt on either side. Few automobiles ever travelled these roads; ox carts, bicycles, and sandaled feet were much more common. As we proceeded along the brick walk-way, children would gather in groups, kneel, and energetically singsong Buddhist chants while we slowly passed by. They were surprised and curious to see a foreign monk on alms round in their neighborhood. As we silently proceeded with downcast eyes, village women of all ages, and a few elderly men, would stand out in front of their shack houses or would come out when they heard we were coming, and each would offer a small amount of cooked rice as support to each of the monks and novices in the line.

When I have the opportunity to go for alms, I am usually as curious as I am mindful, and on this day I began to notice racks of bamboo poles covered with great bunches of recently and brightly dyed thread drying in the sun outside most of the houses. One yard often sported two or three different colors, up to twenty five different bunches each. We continued along several parallel streets like this, and I thought it evidently was a thread dying district. But when I heard a rather loud steady clacking hum, I looked around curiously, and noticed what can only be considered as a Burmese weaving factory: a large, wooden room with a low corrugated tin roof in which a couple dozen young Burmese girls were busily weaving *longgi* cloth on large handmade wooden looms (circa 1800s USA). Throwing the shuttle, pulling the beater. Throwing it back, pulling again. Click clack, THUMP thump, click clack, THUMP thump. There were enough of them, and they were fast enough, to create a steady and not unpleasant soft hum. I realized then that the whole neighborhood was a cloth weaving enterprise. A few curious eyes watched us as we went by, and before we left that section of town we passed a couple more similar cloth factories. Our full bowls of cooked rice had been emptied into large wicker baskets for lay boys to carry back to the monastery.

We continued on across a long recently constructed boardwalk bridge to a wide dusty road with a few parked vehicles and a small market. Here there were frequent open air coffee shops: a couple of low tables with low stools offering snacks, drinks, and taped *Dhamma* talks. Dust and dogs, kids and hawkers, mixed and mingled with the occasional ox cart and beggar. It was a more lively section of town, and still many were silently waiting to offer some of their meager supplies to the monks. Many who were eating at a coffee shop would kick off their sandals and reach for an extra piece of deep fried dough or a piece of fruit to offer to Sayadaw: the first monk in the line. Several would wait to offer it to me, probably never having had the chance to offer to a foreign monk before, and one soldier who did not have time to unlace and remove his bulky combat boots stepped up to offer anyway.

Though there is an air of excitement as monks are approaching, the offering is silent and solemn, without eye contact between monks and offerees. The unspoken appreciation and respect is deeply felt in the mindful pace of the monks and the gentle offering of rice. These people knew this Sayadaw. He had been in their neighborhood for more than thirty years, even before it was a neighborhood, and in all likelihood, many had been to his monastery for the opportunity to practice the *Dhamma*. The gratitude one feels to those who preserve, practice and preach the *Dhamma* is expressed in the joyful, heartfelt humility of a daily, simple offering of support so that it may continue. This reciprocal offering in this way has been preserved and practiced since the time of the Buddha more than 2500 years ago.

Alms round lasted about an hour and our full bowls of rice had been emptied a few times as we continued on a circuitous route back to the monastery where we emptied our bowls for the last time into a large stainless steel pot on the dining room porch. After walking the there miles barefoot in the hot sun, I welcomed the opportunity to rinse off my feet and rest.

I am sure there was enough food collected that day for all in the monastery to have more than enough for a few days, but in all likelihood after the noontime meal they would offer whatever remained to others nearby. Burmese Buddhists tend to be very generous in their support of monks and monasteries, and it is estimated the average Burman donates one quarter of his/her income to the monks, nuns, monasteries, and pagodas—which is remarkable given the fact that the people of Burma are so very economically poor. There are no facilities at the Gold Cave Hermitage to keep food overnight, other than fruit, so it is imperative that the monks go out each day

for their food. In this way monks keep contact with the laity and the laity in turn receives the benefit of daily offering to and paying faithful respect to their Sayadaws and others who preserve the Buddha's teaching as a living tradition.

In the Buddha's Footsteps

On the last day of my stay at the Gold Cave Hermitage, I again awoke in the early morning dark and sat and walked until rice gruel was offered at dawn, then prepared my robes and bowl for going out to collect alms. The night before had been an occasion for a monastery or village festival nearby, and the volume of the loudspeaker broadcasting *Dhamma* talks, musical *Jataka* tales, and announcements late into the night created the impression of great excitement and busyness in contrast to the normal mellow pace of life in Burma. But at dawn, as we lined up for the alms round awaiting Sayadaw's arrival to lead us out of the monastery, the loudspeaker was quiet and the silence was welcome. Sayadaw came carrying his large leaf fan for protection from the tropical sun, and after suggesting minor adjustments in some monks' robes, we mindfully began walking towards the far end of the meditation hall, where we turned left and proceeded along the last fifty yards of the path in the shade of the forest. Sayadaw stopped short of the edge of the trees and stepped aside but gestured to the following monks to continue on their way, speaking briefly with the leading monk. As I came to walk past, Sayadaw motioned me to stay with him, and I stepped out of line, stood beside him, and watched the remaining monks and novices solemnly pass by, eyes cast down, robes neatly rolled, bare feet padding along a well worn dirt path through the forest. Sayadaw then turned to head back into the monastery, beckoned me to come, and as I turned to follow, I stole a glance at the other monks who had passed by, and saw a solid line of devotees with offerings of rice, fruit, curries, etc., all along the path and roadway beginning at the edge of the monastery forest; many more offers than on previous days and I wondered what was going on. After turning back into the monastery, we proceeded to walk through it and out another pathway, under the jungle forest canopy. Within a couple of minutes, we were walking alone on a dusty ox cart trail along the perimeter wall of another monastery. The sun was filtering through the trees. It was quiet and I presently settled into the mindfully mellow pace without wondering where we were going, or why the change. As we continued walking along the winding deserted dusty lanes, seemingly in the backyard of a neighborhood, hemmed in by a brick wall on the left and bushes and trees on the right, only a few people on foot or

bicycle slowly passed by on their way to market or work. After ten or fifteen minutes, the narrow lane opened out onto a wider vehicle-less dirt road, and as we turned left, I noticed a busier street ahead. We were approaching a colorful, busy market of fruit and flower vendors, hawkers of all kinds, and numerous tea shops with early morning customers nursing large, stained cups of strong milk tea, and many people milling about.

As we slowly, solemnly approached, it seemed as if we were quite invisible for some time. No one was in evidence waiting for us, and it took a minute or two for someone to realize that monks were approaching for alms. Then a most amazing thing happened. A young Burmese boy probably hollered "*Pongyi la bee*" – "Monks are coming", and as if on cue, without thinking, there was a redirection of activity among the vendors, shoppers, coffee shop patrons, and residents in the houses nearby, who began slipping off their sandals, some kneeling down to bow in the dusty roadway, others choosing fruits, baked goods, or pastries from the tea shops – all lining up along the right hand side of the road, to offer what they could spare, afford or felt moved to. The immediate response of faith and generosity was spontaneous and bountiful. We stopped at the first devotee for offering, and dozens more came to make their offer to us as we stood there. Our bowls were full without taking another step! Someone received plastic bags from a hawker (and even plastic bags are valuable in Burma!), took the offerings out of our bowls, and within minutes, if not seconds, our bowls were full again! Only after some time were we able to slowly make our way through the market, but our bowls were filled several times over, and numerous village boys were trailing along behind us, each lugging several plastic bags full of food. One layman went ahead of us to accept the small offerings of hard earned cash which some chose to offer, but which monks are not allowed to accept. We weren't offered much cooked rice in that area, since they weren't expecting us, but they were certainly willing to offer whatever was available.

Just we two monks, the elderly unpretentious Gold Cave Hermitage Sayadaw and a young foreign monk, set off a ripple of excitement and aroused curiosity. But Sayadaw calmly proceeded, unaffected by all the commotion around him. I followed along behind, tears welling up in my eyes in appreciation, gratitude, and great joy at witnessing such happiness, generosity, faith, and sincere devotion these villagers had for the humble, reclusive, though obviously well-liked Sayadaw it was my good fortune to have met. The market thinned out and we were passing along less busy dusty roads, but still, when people saw us coming, they would drop what

they were doing, kneel, bow or prepare some small offering that we would accept as we passed by. The village boys had gone back to the monastery with the bags full of food.

I felt my heart open, inundated with rapture, faith, and a flood of images. Reflections, fantasies, intuitions of lifetimes of following in the Buddha's footsteps in this way passed through my mind. I was profoundly touched by the simplicity, the silence, and mostly by the sincerity of the Sayadaw's life. Appreciation and gratitude was streaming from my eyes down my cheeks. I felt privileged and honored to have the opportunity to follow in his footsteps. Somehow my connection with Sayadaw seemed so much more than could rationally be claimed as a result of the short time I had known him. During my brief stay with him, he had been an observant but unobtrusive guide, teaching more by example than by volumes of words. My connection with 25 centuries of monks doing the same since the time of the Buddha was so strong and palpable that I was completely unaware of the twentieth century. My bare feet barely touched the earth as joy and happiness elevated my spirit. Taking refuge in the Sangha took on much greater significance by being with the Gold Cave Hermitage Sayadaw. The exemplary conduct of his life stirred in me a greater commitment to realize and practice the Buddha's *Dhamma*.

Before I took my leave from the Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, I wanted to make an offering to Sayadaw as a token of my respect, appreciation, and faith in him. But I had been told by the sisters that he refused to accept more than he needed, and certainly nothing that was luxurious or extravagant. But when he expressed appreciation of my stainless steel monk's bowl (made in Thailand and unavailable in Burma), I saw my opportunity and though he refused to accept my own offered bowl, I was able to secure another one and he allowed me to offer it to him. In return, he offered me a large leaf fan and a pair of monk's sandals.

After leaving I heard that the village loud speaker the night before had announced that the Sayadaw would be going on alms round on a specified route the following day. Therefore hundreds of additional people were prepared to offer alms, but Sayadaw evidently was not interested in organized, lavish offerings for his benefit, and his humility and wisdom indicated an alternate path for him to take me on that day. A few days after I left his monastery, he quietly slipped away unannounced to proceed to his isolated hermitage on a forested mountain in southern Burma for an

indefinite period of solitary practice. This was an annual practice of his for three to four, and up to seven or eight months each year for the past thirty years, and the results were clearly evident. He had delayed his leaving while I had stayed with him at his Gold Cave Hermitage, and for that I will ever be grateful.

Venerable U. Buddharakkhita is an American monk and an ex-staff person from IMS who has returned from five years in Burma where he practiced and studied under U Pandita Sayadaw and others.