

Sixty Years Together



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Association for Insight Meditation

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Sixty Years Together

I originally wrote this article, then titled “Fifty Years Together,” while I was last in Rangoon, for the Fiftieth Anniversary and Golden Jubilee of the Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Organization.¹ The BSNO supports and runs the main Mahāsi meditation centre in Rangoon.

A Diamond Anniversary

In the short life-span of human beings, sixty years is a long time. My parents celebrated their Diamond Wedding Anniversary on November 8th 2007.² Sixty years together without any major rows — that’s quite an achievement for any two people living together so closely. In the West, divorce is now far too common because people are lacking in tolerance and contentment, so naturally they cannot stay together for the whole life.

The Six Virtues of A Leader

Tolerance

In his admonishment to the 27th Annual Meeting of his disciples, Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw spoke about tolerance (*khamā*). It is the first of the six virtues of a leader (*nāyaka*), and, according to the Sayādaw, the most important. I think the meaning of *khamā* is slightly different to that of *khanti* — patience or forbearance. Patience or forbearance is the ability to endure pain and discomfort, or mental pain like blame and criticism. To tolerate means to allow others to follow their own way, without interfering or trying to control them for one’s own comfort and convenience. It is more like equanimity (*upekkhā*), which is not indifference to other’s welfare, but just understanding that ordinary people are all limited, weak or defective in

¹ The correct Pāli spelling would be Buddhasāsanānuggaha. Anuggaha means to assist or support, so it is the organisation that supports the Buddha’s dispensation.

² My father passed away six years later in December 2013 aged over 90, so my parents were married for sixty-six years in all. My mother died a year later, also aged over 90.

some way or another. Tolerance allows space for others to understand the Dhamma in their own time.

The Buddha tolerated Devadatta's presence in the Saṅgha for a long time, because he knew it would be for Devadatta's benefit in the long run. You may wonder, "Since Devadatta tried so hard to harm the Buddha, and since the Buddha was Omniscient and must therefore have known beforehand what he would do, why did he grant him ordination?" This question was once asked by King Milinda to the Buddhist sage, Nāgasena. His reply was, "Yes, the Buddha was omniscient and he did know that Devadatta would cause a schism in the Saṅgha and try to kill him, but he also foresaw that by living as a monk for some time and developing the absorptions, Devadatta would become a Paccekabuddha after suffering in Avīci hell for the remainder of this aeon. However, if the Buddha had not admitted Devadatta to the Saṅgha, he would have still done immoral deeds, but not the powerful moral ones, so his suffering would have been unlimited. This shows the Buddha's boundless tolerance. There was no way at all in which Devadatta's presence in the Saṅgha was beneficial to the Buddha, but he tolerated him because of the benefit to Devadatta.

The Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Organization (BSNO) celebrated its Diamond Jubilee on November 13th 2007. Sixty years of working together is an admirable achievement, especially as there are many people involved. It is not easy to maintain harmony in a large group, and the larger the group, the more difficult it is. The leaders of the BSNO must certainly have cultivated tolerance, though I am sure they have also been through some difficult periods, with some members leaving now and then.

It is the atmosphere of tolerance that I most distinctly remember from my first visit to Mahāsi Yeikthā in 1979-1980, especially from the late Sayādaw U Javana, who was my meditation teacher (*kammaṭṭhānācariya*). The Sayādaw knew I was trying my best to progress in meditation, so he gave me only encouragement. There are some teachers who like to scold and

treat their pupils roughly. Perhaps it might be necessary for some pupils, but it is not the best way, since it creates an atmosphere of fear, which often leads to secrecy and deceit. The pupils may seem well-behaved when the Sayādaw is around, but when he's away, or after his death, all manner of wrong-doing will go on because no one was ever allowed to find out for themselves that wrong-doing leads to suffering.

In my opinion, if the pupils are not following the teacher's instructions, the teacher has not explained the method and purpose of vipassanā properly. He should try to spend more time with those students and find out why they are having problems with laziness, or why they feel the need to talk to someone. Probably, they are plagued with doubts and need reassurance. Dhamma is for everyone's benefit, not for their punishment. If a few pupils are wicked and disobedient they should, of course, be asked to leave the meditation centre after two or three warnings, to protect the conscientious pupils, and the good name of the meditation centre. Tolerance does not mean one must be soft in the head — but one does need to be soft in the heart.

Energy

The second virtue of a leader is vigour or energy (*uṭṭhāna*), which means one must be active. Meditators often have a problem with this because they do not make a clear distinction between meditation and daily life. In meditation we must apply all of our energy to observing our own mental and physical processes. We must try to keep our daily activities to a minimum, and we must note all of them in as much detail as we can manage. However, if the retreat centre managers and staff practise like this it will be disastrous. The meditators will get no proper food and the hostels will soon become neglected and unsuitable for meditation. Thanks largely to the Mahāsi Sayādaw's unblemished reputation, Mahāsi Yeikthā is very fortunate to have plenty of volunteers to help with running the centre. They should fulfil

their duties energetically with the full support and encouragement of the management. Then, when they get a chance to meditate, they will have lots of joyful energy for mindful noting, due to the merits they accumulated while serving others.

Vigilance

Vigilance or wakefulness (*jāgariya*) is the third virtue. A leader cannot be too fond of sleeping since he or she has many duties. Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of England, used to sleep only about four hours a night. Long after her aides had gone to bed, she would be going through papers for the next day's meetings. The Buddha was even more vigilant. After the lay-people had gone to their homes he would instruct the bhikkhus. After the bhikkhus had gone to their own dwellings he would instruct the celestial beings. After that he would practise walking meditation for an hour. Only then would he sleep, yet he was still up long before dawn to meditate again. Very few can even approach his level of diligence. Not only must one get up early and sleep late, but one must be prompt in performing one's duties. "Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today," is a very good motto. Another one is, "If you want to get something done, ask a busy person."

Sharing

The fourth virtue of a leader is distribution or sharing (*saṃvibhāga*). The managers are appointed to decide how to apportion the organisation's funds, and to manage the staff and volunteers wisely. Funds for a religious organisation like the BSNO come entirely from donations. The donors give from their savings because they want the yogis to meditate. They hope that some conscientious yogis will attain the path, its fruition, and nibbāna, because their donations will then be extremely beneficial. Many donors give to Mahāsi Yeikthā because they have strong faith that the meditators there do

attain deep insights at least. The Sayādaws also often teach about such attainments. So the managers have a heavy responsibility to use the funds as effectively as they can.

Compassion

Fifthly, a leader should have compassion (*dayā*). If one has attained a high level of skill and knowledge after many years of hard work, it is not difficult to look down on others who are less skilled, due to pride and conceit. It is easy to forget that one was once a beginner in meditation, just like others are now. It was because of our benefactor, the Most Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, that we have gained some insight, whether we learned directly from him or from his disciples. The Venerable Sayādaw too needed the guidance of the Mingun Jetavan Sayādaw when he started meditation. It is not easy to find the right path. Even with the Buddha himself as their teacher, a few people went astray. So the teachers and managers should have great love and compassion for those who are struggling to overcome defilements. If they regularly undertake refresher courses themselves, they will not find it difficult to practise compassion.

Foresight

Lastly, a leader should have foresight (*ikkhanā*). I suppose the ideal would be to have psychic powers, but at least we should learn to think ahead. There are three kinds of people: the blind, the one-eyed, and the two-eyed. There are some who do not know how to behave even for their own welfare in the present life, so they stumble through life, meeting difficulties everywhere, like a blind person. The second kind of person knows how to profit in this life, so has some foresight, but not enough to consider the likely result of his or actions in the next life. They are like one-eyed persons because they can see, but not so clearly. The third kind of person knows that death is certain and that life is uncertain. So they are more concerned with the

long term effects of their actions than any short term benefit. We can say that they are individuals with vision. To plant a forest of hardwood trees takes vision. Any fool can cut them down for a quick profit, but to plant trees that will be enjoyed or sold by others at least a hundred years from now requires a different view of the world. That is what is meant by foresight (*ikkhanā*).

The leaders have many years of experience, so they may know very well how to deal with the day-to-day running of things. However, they also need to understand what is likely to happen many years from now. Future success depends very much on how the younger generation are trained. The leaders should be on the lookout for deterioration of any kind. The buildings will soon deteriorate if they are not maintained properly. Standards of discipline will slip if the leaders set a bad example.

The Buddha and the Arahants had eradicated all of their own defilements. However, they did not stop meditating, nor neglect their duties to the Saṅgha. Their attitude was, “We are the elders and leaders, therefore others will follow our example in the future.” So they continued to pay the utmost homage to the Dhamma by meditating constantly, by living alone in the forest and so forth. To develop tolerance, energy, vigilance, sharing, compassion and foresight to the full, may the leaders practise meditation until they reach the highest goal of Arahantship. May they be worthy of the highest honour.