

A MEDITATOR'S GUIDE BOOK
and DHAMMA NOTES
written and compiled
by ALAN CLEMENTS

Along with his Meditation Teachers –
The late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma
And his successor the late Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita

Foreword
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FOREWORD

In 2021, Alan was diagnosed with a terminal heart condition. Not a fuzzy prognosis that presages death like some distant inevitability, but a diagnosis of the immediate. Now. Death at any second.

What a gift.

Alan has used the time since his diagnosis to meditate on death and suffering, love and forgiveness, grieving and repair. In Hawaii, he applied for the right to die by medically assisted release, thinking to consciously choose his own exit. He rethought this approach. Rather than opting for a path of certainty and self-command he entered the “most sacred conversation” he’s ever had, choosing to be present in the realization that every moment is a moment closer to death. “Death will come at any second if you don’t do anything.”

In these past two years, Alan has been more productive than ever: three books, numerous talks, performances, films and retreats. “I wrote for my daughter, the children and people on this earth. I have this deep feeling of the embryo in life, the children, the birds, the trees, the ecosystem of this... feeling this deep integrated largeness. For me, my reason to be has been cultivating something off my own process alone on the road to a more inclusive dharma... Desmond Tutu... your freedom and mine are interconnected. It’s one thing to do your own life. Co-relating to the multi-relationality called totality... it’s not just about death alone but rebirthing. Aspire to the things you want to be known for in your memorial.”

Upon first reading *A Meditator’s Guide Book and Dhamma Notes*, I was filled with excitement and energy. The words elevated, recalibrated, and returned me to feeling the urgent necessity to practice “as though my head were on fire” and to freshen my mind in the wonder, reverence and awe of the Buddha’s teachings.

Alan was one of my first Dhamma teachers, guiding me in the practice of vipassana when I was first introduced to it at 23. He recommended that I travel to Burma, where I would meet our teacher, U Pandita Sayadaw, the successor of Mahasi Sayadaw, Alan’s preceptor when he was known as the monk, U Aggacāra. In the four decades that have elapsed since, Alan and I have aspired to be exemplary spiritual friends to one another, having resolved to support each other’s practices until we reach nibbana. If you are lucky enough to have a spiritual friend, a noble friend, you have in that person a Dhamma refuge. For as the Buddha proclaimed, “spiritual friendship is not half of the holy life, but the whole of the holy life.”

True-hearted friendship is established upon mutual rejoicing in the Dhamma and the goal of awakening by effecting moral virtue, mental concentration, and wisdom. A spiritual friend serves as a virtuous exemplar, inspires and nurtures meditation and mental cultivation and motivates the aspiration for spiritual liberation. Imagine, therefore, a life bereft of spiritual friends who inspire, guide, encourage and help nurture for you the progress of Dhamma development and insight. Imagine, further, an interruption to the succession of wise practitioners of the Buddha’s teachings, for the learning not to be passed down. Or for the teachings to be distorted to conform to present historical circumstances and its local preoccupations with power, politics, economy, society or psychic curiosity and wellbeing.

Yet, this inevitably is the way *samsara* unfolds. We are all ensnared in an infinite cycle of entangled mutual delusion. The dispensation of a Buddha's teachings (*sāsana*) is finite and exquisitely rare. It arises like a great blaze and then, through increasingly feeble efforts and spiritual capacity directed at keeping the blaze burning from one generation to the next, the *sāsana* slowly dies down before extinguishing altogether.

Buddham saranam gacchami I go for refuge to the Buddha;
Dhammam saranam gacchami I go for refuge to the Dhamma;
Sangham saranam gacchami I go for refuge to the Sangha.

Taking refuge in the Buddha (the fully enlightened teacher), the Dhamma (the Truth of cosmic law and order), and the Sangha (the monastic order that preserves and perpetuates the teachings in scriptures and practice) establishes a yogi's conscious sincerity of aim to commit to the practices of the teachings. And for such an aim to be fulfilled, there must be suitable circumstances for practice.

Alan and I had the opportunity to practice in Burma at a unique (and very brief) window in the country's history and the history of the Buddha *Sāsana*. U Nu, Burma's first prime minister, had endeavored to promote the Buddha's teachings universally. With government support and the generosity of lay donors (such as Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha founder, Sir U Thwin, and many, many donors and supporters, as well as the Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha Nuggaha committee, and most especially the monks at Mahasi Yeiktha), all foreign yogis who sincerely desired to practice vipassana meditation were provided with all the necessary requisites, that they might strive to realize the teachings of the Buddha *in this very life*.

Alan and I have often commented on how fleeting a moment that was, as we have watched Burma over the decades oscillate between periods of relative, if repressive, calm and periodic descents into paroxysm of military violence and political destruction. During times of political unrest, or in seemingly arbitrary moments of relative calm, the military government would suddenly show up at the meditation center with a notice that foreigners must leave the country. Even during tranquil periods, we might be required to travel temporarily out of the country to renew a visa process that permitted only a few months stay at a time.

Tragically we have watched as our teachers departed this world one by one, extinguishing the living presence of Dhamma knowledge and wisdom of which they were luminous exemplars. The place of our spiritual refuge—Burma—seemed to us to have become the burning end of a world epoch in which Dhamma was practiced as a full and rich tradition but which was now descending into chaos, much like the end of the World Age predicted in the texts.

We watched and witnessed. Alan writing about the fledgling democracy movement and the military's resurgent attempts to subdue the citizens of the country, and I writing about the Mass Lay Meditation Movement and the military's efforts to subdue Buddhism in its conquest of the lifeworld in Burma.

Around the turn of the new century, we also witnessed novel transformations in Dhamma practice in the hands of a new generation of practitioners. These could be traced to the rare Dhamma missions that had brought the teachings of mindfulness practice—especially as codified by Mahasi Sayadaw—to America and the West. Bridging cultural and historical worlds, the Dhamma has been taken up with new significances and ways of accommodating the life worlds of new practitioners. This is to be expected and welcomed. However, there are also teachings that have become mislaid and that can be recovered only with the efforts of learning, deep practice and monastic discipline. A monastic, meditative and scholarly tradition has a richness that cannot be conveyed by an app or a weekend retreat. It is in recognition of this deficit that Alan’s anthology of Dhamma teachings and meditation practice is here offered as a “meditator’s guide book.” As Alan related to me when approaching me to write this preface, “Engage in satipatthana and you have a *kalyāṇamitta* [spiritual friend] here.”

Aware of the shortness of time left to him, the *Meditator’s Guide Book* is Alan’s mostly unedited handwritten entries into a notebook he kept for more than forty years. It is the teachings of the Buddha as handed down through canonical texts, commentary and practical discourses on meditation by Sri Lankan and Burman elders (*thera*) in the Theravada line.

Alan kept copious notes, hundreds of pages, relating to the right conditions for undertaking satipatthana practice. At one time, portions of his notes were confiscated by military authorities as he left the country on one of the expulsions ordered by the *Tatmadaw*. I recall how deeply he felt the loss of those handwritten notes of his meditations. Before the age of the internet and the immediately downloadable, living as a monk in a turbulent country meant rarity of access to a Buddhist library (with its white ant-eaten books). One needed to depend on one’s own handwritten notes and memory to carry around the teachings.

As a monk, U Aggacara was frequently expelled from Burma, interrupting his meditation and training. In 1980, after having been given 24 hours to leave Burma, U Aggacara left for the famed Island Hermitage in Sri Lanka, one of the few places that afforded a refuge for foreign monks. There he spent a year in 1980-81 making ample use of the library, where he undertook painstaking efforts to transcribe key aspects of the Pali Canon and its commentaries. The notebooks were intended as a compendium to the practice in the event that he would no longer have access to the refuge of the teachers and the teachings of Burma. “I intuitively put together the book I would want to have as a compendium if I didn’t have a teacher. It was desire driven by an intensive period of meditation. This book would refer me so that I could not get stuck in any particular *nyana* [insight level.] And to navigate that. If I needed a *kalyāṇamitta* this book would serve it. I documented everything I could find that would support me to navigate the intensive meditation approach to consciousness. I included Abhidhamma and the Progress of Insight. I drew from what books were available at the time, which was Buddhaghosa, and Mahasi. Then put in handwritten notes—a two-and-a-half-month retreat where I took a lot of notes on how to approach intensive meditation.”

A Meditator’s Guide Book is an abridged compilation of sources reflecting the preoccupations of a yogi and a pure expression of *samvega* (spiritual urgency) in the context of uncertain access to teachers and teachings. Alan’s impulse to carry away in a private notebook the most essential teachings that might lead to liberation continues the tradition of transmission.

The work is not over edited. Nor is it intended to be comprehensive in the way that Burmese *Tipitika* scholars or Buddhist academic scholars might attend to the meaning of every Pali word. There are other books for that. This is a notebook—personal—a streamlined version of what you need to know if you find yourself suddenly forced on a journey without access to the entire library of sources. In other words, it is a personal notebook for liberation when the unbearable weight of samsara and one’s position in it (either as a wish for rebirth or a wish for death) can no longer be abided. It is a primer for release from the Conditioned.

Alan has been a teacher of satipatthana meditation in the Burmese Mahasi tradition and this has been the guiding force in his life.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One begins with explanation of the Four Noble Truths, (the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*) the central insight leading to release from the cycle of rebirths through enlightenment as expounded in the *Samyutta Nikāya* of the *Tipitika* Canon.

The second chapter provides an explanation of *Paticcasamuppāda* (Dependent Origination) and describes the causes of suffering.

Chapter Three elaborates upon the Fifty-Two mental factors (*Cetasika*) from the 5th c Buddhist scholar, Buddhaghosa’s commentary (*Atthasālinī*) found in his great treatise, the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path to Purification). Here Buddhaghosa expounds upon the *Dhammasangani*, the first book of the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, which enumerates all mental and material phenomena and the four ultimate realities. Mahasi Sayadaw expands upon the abhidhamma commentary to reiterate that ultimate, personally experienced phenomena is called an “ultimate reality,” that “what truly exists.”

The chapter on *cetasika* establishes the conditions of ultimate reality and of conventional reality (as these are based on conceptual illusions). It is a pivotal chapter in that it can be read as a kind of meditative reflection on kinds of wholesome, unwholesome and delusional or deceptive impressions of mental phenomena that we experience. And it establishes the grounds upon which the path of purification may be undertaken toward the goal of nibbana by “seeing things as they truly are.”

Chapter Four is a treatise on ultimate realities (*paramattha*).

Chapters Five and Six enumerate the requisites of enlightenment and the 62 wrong views.

Chapters Seven and Eight itemize the concentrative meditations and the knowledge of supernormal powers.

Chapters Eight through Fifteen concern how to undertake satipatthana vipassana practice. They explain how to practice and how to report the stages of insight and the explanation of these, including emotional reactions to stages of insight and experiences of insight, including the

Meditation Teacher's Diary (Mahasi Sayadaw's compilation of thousands of yogi experiences for pedagogical training purposes).

Chapter Sixteen, *A Meditator's Guide to Intensive Practice*, is Alan's own extremely detailed and careful advice for undertaking practice based on his years leading meditation retreats. Western yogis new to the practice will find this section particularly valuable as Alan deftly introduces the new yogi to intensive vipassana practice and comportment and outlining the potential pitfalls to be avoided. These are written in the form of 274 aphorisms, admonishments and encouragements for practice.

The final chapters concern *kamma* as action and volition (based on the Pali Canon and commentaries by Ledi Sayadaw) and death and rebirth as outlined in the *Visudhimagga*.

The Passing Away of the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, written by Alan (Bhikkhu U Aggacara) in 1982, forms the concluding chapter. In it he relates the death of his teacher, preceptor and one of the great Buddhist saints of the 20th century. It is a fitting final chapter, reminding us that spiritual friends, mentors, teachers also pass on, and it is upon us to transmit what we have gained from them to future generations. *A Meditator's Guide to Intensive Practice* is such a compendium, given us by a life-long yogi and nibbana-striver. It is a wisdom capsule for those who might find themselves expelled from the places where Dhamma has long been established, and those who seek refuge in truth and dhamma striving.

May all beings be happy and free from suffering.

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