

Introduction to the book

Wisdom for the World:

The Requisites of Reconciliation

For the last thirty-seven years of his life, Sayadaw U Pandita was my spiritual teacher, my life mentor, and my friend. In the early years of that period, I was a monk living at the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha, the monastery in Yangon which had been founded by Mahasi Sayadaw in 1947 and which had been Sayadaw U Pandita's home since 1954. He later moved to his own monastery, Panditarama, where I visited him in the months before he died. It was here that I was privileged to have nine nights of profound conversations with him. These were among his final teachings. He died forty-five days later on April 16, 2016 at the age of ninety-five. This book is the edited record of those conversations, his offering on the way of reconciliation for a troubled world.

By the time of his passing, he had been in the monastic order within Burma for eighty-three years, having ordained as a novice monk as an orphan at the age of twelve. During his years at Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha he became a senior meditation teacher and founded an annual four-week Buddhist Culture course specifically for children in the development of "mindful intelligence." When Mahasi Sayadaw passed away in 1982 Sayadaw U Pandita was appointed the Ovadcariya Sayadaw (Head Monk) of the monastery. As the senior teacher, he was for many years the spiritual advisor to Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders in Burma's democracy movement and had been influential in honing their strategies of nonviolence. Over the years, he also became the dhamma teacher to many thousands of Asian and Western students worldwide.

I met Sayadaw U Pandita within a few months of my arrival at Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha in 1979. He was already a senior teacher at that time, and on our first meeting we talked well into the night. Despite not having travelled much at that point, he had a vast knowledge of science, literature, culture, art, and, of course, classical Buddhist teachings and in particular, vipassanā (mindfulness practice). He spoke several languages and could quote at will from, say, Tolstoy to an obscure Buddhist text from the 1920s. Often in the middle of a discussion he would cheerfully pull a passage from one of the thousands of books in his greeting room at the monastery. A great conversationalist, he also had a natural curiosity about his young western guest and wanted to know all about my life growing up in America: what were my interests as a child, my difficulties, my education. Thus began a cross-cultural understanding that was to deepen over the decades. Perhaps we educated each other in the differences of how eastern and western minds are conditioned.

I was dazzled by his brilliance and his kindness to me, and I think he found in me a novice in need of direction. I asked for and was granted permission for him to be my

primary teacher there in that exotic land of Burma in which I found myself, eager to come to terms with my mind, living as a monk in a monastery far from home.

Eventually, I made my way back to my own homeland but Sayadaw U Pandita and I never lost touch. I organized his first trips to America and Australia, and I went regularly back to Burma to visit him and to continue our exploration of the deeper streams of life. His wisdom and intellect only grew with time.

Although these nine nights of conversation cover a wide range of subjects, in the end Sayadaw U Pandita's passion was to convey the importance of finding ways to live in harmony with each other. He could see the trends in the world and their potential for political and social strife. As someone who had lived through World War II along with the more recent troubles in Burma, he also knew the limits of force, hatred, and abuse of power. His lifelong message was that peace is only possible through communication and understanding. Thus, he spent some of his last moments on earth emphasizing these ideals in the art of dialogue, which was his particular genius.

Alan Clements

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