

A Comparative Study of Teaching Methods in Mandalay and Pakokku

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Abstract

For promotion and propagation of *Sāsana*, the members of Sangha have to do the two duties viz. *Ganthadhāra* - the duty to learn and teach the Piṭaka, and *Vipassanādhāra* - the duty to meditate. There are three kinds of Sangha engaged in the *Ganthadhāra* viz. *Cāchiya*, *Cālūk* and *Cāchui*. The teachers or *Cākhya Charitau* (*Ganthavācaka*) use various methods to make the lessons easy for the students. The two widely used methods in Myanmar are Mandalay Method and Pakokku Method. Both the two methods are effective in their respective ways. Most of the students try to be acquainted with both methods. Sayadaws also encouraged them to try both methods until now. In the Mandalay Method, the teacher's mastery of the subject has to be supplemented by his extensive reading. In the Pakokku Method the learner's ability is more important as they have to quote so many commentaries and sub-commentaries besides the text.

Introduction

Myanmar is supposed to be a *Theravāda* Buddhist country and it has a long tradition in the study and practice of Buddhism. To make that possible both monks and men including kings and governments take their equal share in

1. teaching the Piṭaka comprising *Sāntana*, *Vinaya* and *Abhidhammā*,
2. learning the Piṭaka
3. discussing the theory and practice of the Teachings of the Buddha (know as *Sāsana*); and
4. propagating the *Sāsana*.

In the aspect of teaching, the most important thing is to have competent teachers. In the aspect of learning, I find that the medium of teaching is also an important thing to consider. For promotion and propagation of *Sāsana*, the members of Sangha have to do the two duties viz. *Ganthadhāra* - the duty to learn and teach the Piṭaka, and *Vipassanādhāra* - the duty to meditate. (*Buddhist Term*, 2000,62) In order to carry out these duties of the member of the Sangha establish monasteries or *Cāsanthak*, where

2

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Mandalay lies on the east bank of the Ayeyarwady river, about 382 miles (614.638 Km) on the north of Yangon. King Mindon, who founded it in 1859, built eighteen great monasteries in the eastern part of Mandalay with the noble aim of promoting the *Sāsana*. The king further promoted the *Sāsana* by holding the *Pathamanyan* Examinations every year in the month of Nayone (June-July). The



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Pakokku, an isolated town on the west bank of the Ayeyarwady about 300 miles (482.7 Km) on the north of Yangon and the gateway to the Yaw and Chin land to the west, has long been famous a centre of quite an independent monastic learning in Myanmar. The elder monks there said that they have their own regulation book to receive new members in their monasteries. They said in pride that "You are illiterate until you have learnt in Pakokku". That attracts a lot of young monks to seek a chance to learn in Pakokku and eventually Pakokku became an important centre of Buddhism.

Mandalay Teaching Method

Obviously the Mandalay Method of *Ganthadhāra* is quite old and reputable. It emphasized on a full examination of the Pitaka and necessarily it contains a lengthy discussion taking much time. It is widely known as Mandalay Method and it has its roots

in earlier days when the capitals were at Awa and Amarapura. There was a well-known saying:

"*Ngakhun Sayadaw* can teach well the whole *Tiṇṇaka*, *Makyan-to Sayadaw* can complete the *Tiṇṇaka* in a short period and *Sai-an Sayadaw* can explain well the whole *Tiṇṇaka*". (Mūnita, 30 March 2001)

In spite of this, there is a popular assumption that the Mandalay Method was introduced by *Sai-an Sayadawgyi U Sīriyabhīrasā* (13 August 1763- 19 November 1839). (Sīriyabhāna, 1955, 291-294)

In Mandalay, a lecturer would explain the various shades of meaning in a word. It would be just *Samvannanā naya* (an explanation), *Nyāsa naya* (an explanation in connexion with other allied facts) or *Netti naya* (an inferred way) or *Pathana naya* (as it



3

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1. *Sambandha* (connection of words)
2. *Pada* (classification of words)
3. *Padatā* (meaning of words)
4. *Padavigāha* (definition of words)
5. *Codanā* (question) and
6. *Parihāra* (answer). (Uttarānana, 21 May 2001)

There are three types of *naya* that are *Samāsa*, *Taddhita* and *Kitaka* in the *Ñāsa guntha*.⁸ A lecturer made evident his resourcefulness in both *Saddā* (Grammar) and *Abhidhammā* by applying these ways. In accordance with his ability, a lecture could get his lectures very learned and useful. It may take quite a long time to explain even a short sentence (e.g. *Namo tava bhagavato arahato sammāsaṃbuddhassa*) by using this method. Therefore, the Mandalay Method makes evident the lecturer's resourcefulness. One who has studied *Sutta Saṅkhaṇḍha*, *Itthakathā*, *Parajīkam*, *Aṅhakathā* and *Aṭṭhasālinī*, *Aṅhakathā* by this method would be well qualified to take the *Dhammācariya* Examination.

Pakokku Teaching Method

Another method of *Pariyatti* teaching, that is quite different from the traditional one, is used in Pakokku. The Pakokku Method, was introduced by Yezagyo Sayadawgyi *Buddanta Ganthasīra* (18 March 1833- 4 October 1914). (Keldsa, 1970, 198-218) In this new method, a lecturer tries to cover the whole course of teaching in the shortest possible

4

time. The student has to learn all the Pāli texts first. Then he has to attend the lectures. This is known as "getting through the major texts" (Sergyi hauki). The Pakokku Method is in fact a copy of the method of Mahāpādama and Mahasāma of Śrīlankā. (Kumāra, 1996,175) The Mandalay Method emphasizes on full explanation of the text whereas the Pakokku Method emphasizes on understanding the text. It cannot be said however, that the Pakokku Method neglects grammar. It teaches the rudiments of the Pāli grammar and it proceeds to explain the text in the simple way. In this way the *Tipitaka* course is completed within seven years, and five *Nikāyas* in five years. By this method, a learner:



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Pāli. *Atthakathā, Tīkāmakāya, kyaṃ-gaṇakākhya, nāḷayacassam, naṇḷ-camyajāṇā, kyaṃ-ākkhāp, dunnayāṇhaṇ, khyaṇakāhā-hā, Pakhakkācākhya, naṇḷ-nayā.*

The Pakokku Method can be explained best that it uses all relevant *Atthakathā* to give the meaning of each Pāli word and to use the *Tika* to understand the whole theme. In some way difficult passages are best explained by using the *Yojanā* Method of discussion on interrelated themes. (Kellāsa, 1981:299)

The Pakokku Method does not encourage examination system. In other words it is not a cramming for the examination. Generally, those who have learnt the Pāli do not sit for the *Pathamāgāyaṇa* Examination.

A Comparison on both Teaching Methods

In brief, the characteristics of the Mandalay Method are as follows:

- The *Kissī* Grammar and other grammatical books that elaborate and explain Pāli language, are taught well.
- Abhidhammā* is also taught in detail.

- Atthakathā* are used to explain the Pāli texts. (Khin Thein, 1972, 262)

The main characteristics of the Pakokku Method are as follows:

- Pāli Grammar is taught only for a fundamental knowledge of the Pāli Canon.
- Abhidhammā* is also taught to understand its rudiment.
- Most of the text of Pāli Canon is taught with the help of *Atthakathā* and *Tika*.
- No attempt is made to give the explanation of a Pāli word.
- Students are supposed to work on their own if they want to know in detail.
- Atthakathā* are used only superficially so that after about three years the student could make his own self-study.
- Evening lectures in three years called "Nā-wā" on *Abhidhammā* are not



5

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- (a). Pāli Grammar is taught only for a fundamental knowledge of the Pāli Canon.
- (b). *Abhidhammā* is also taught to understand its rudiment.
- (c). Most of the text of Pāli Canon is taught with the help of *Atthakathā* and *Tīlā*.
- (d). No attempt is made to give the explanation of a Pāli word.
- (e). Students are supposed to work on their own if they want to know in detail.
- (f). *Atthakathā* are used only superficially so that after about three years the student could make his own self-study.
- (g). Evening lectures in three years called "Nā-va" on *Abhidhammā* are not compulsory. (Khin Thein, 1972, 265)

It can be obviously seen that the Mandalay Method takes emphasis on Grammar and *Abhidhammā* whereas the Pakokku Method does not do so but focuses on completing the whole course in the shortest possible time. The Pakokku Method, however, does not pay much attention to the mastery of Pāli Grammar. The student is expected to work by himself to have a full understanding of the Pīṭaka. In practice, most pupils felt that they have to combine the Mandalay Method with the Pakokku Method to have better results. Therefore if those who have learnt grammar by the Mandalay Method continue to learn the whole course by the Pakokku Method, grammar and the text will be integrated and it will reinforce the learning and teaching of Buddhist Scriptures effectively.

Both the two methods are effective in their respective ways. So most of the students try to be acquainted with both methods. Sayadaws also encouraged them to try both methods until now. In the Mandalay Method, the teacher's mastery of the subject has to be supplemented by his extensive reading. In the Pakokku Method the learner's ability is more important as they have to quote so many commentaries and sub-commentaries besides the text. It is difficult to become a good teacher in Mandalay whereas it is not easy to become a good student in Pakokku.

According to Sayagyi Dr Than Tun, a well-known scholar, the Mandalay Method is "I will teach you as much as I know" and the Pakokku Method is "I will teach you so that you can learn". (Than Tun, 15 March 2001) In the opinion of a learned monk, the teachings of the Buddha can be learnt through the Mandalay Method and if a treatise is

6

thoroughly learnt, there shall be no difficulty to learn the others. However, the Mandalay Method cannot teach a variety of treatise, i.e., the whole course of the Tipitaka. So the Pakokku Method does not follow it. (*Mānira*, 30 March 2001) Another learned monk points out that the Mandalay Method elaborates a little piece of the text in many ways so it is hard to learn all. It is not good for examination purpose. The Pakokku Method helps the learner to study the entire course so that he knows the text well. (*Kamīra*, 29 March 2001)

The Mandalay Method emphasizes the techniques and grammar but the Pakokku Method focuses on the courses without much consideration on the techniques. For example, "*Tikāyān*" has to be learnt for seven years in Mandalay but it takes only one year in Pakokku. (*Uttara Nāsa*, 9 April 2001) It helps the learner to understand the text



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Conclusion

The teachings of Lord Buddha are just like hidden treasures. The ways to discover those treasures depend on teaching methods. In the course of my studies, I interviewed so many learned Sayadaws of the Mandalay school and they maintain that their method is the best. On the other hand, prominent Sayadaws of the Pakokku school assure the fact that theirs is the best. In my opinion, both the two methods should be combined for better results and many a scholar has done this way. Both methods, however, are becoming less in importance because of the examinations. Examination becomes more important to all the students. The monk must learn the Teachings of the Buddha to know it and to practice it. If the monk is learning it for an examination, he would be an opportunist, seeking praise and reward. Even if a monk holds a teachership certificate, he would not be able to teach the wisdom to others because he do not know it properly himself. He just crams it for examination. So I suggest that examination system should be terminated, as it does not help much the Buddhist studies.

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