

A Reflection on the Dhamma Teachings of the Late Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita

From a conversation at his monastery in Yangon, on the final night we had together before he passed away in 2016, at 95 years of age.

Burma, the newest-born democracy on Earth,
a fragile phoenix rising from the ashes of tortured history.

I sat with the Venerable Sayadaw, in his humble cottage,
his wisdom refracting like a prism of light—
a rainbow of inseparable truths arching across the sky of shared existence.

This was a great nation, forged in centuries of complex struggles,
121 years under the tyrannical grip of British colonialism's maniacal control.
A grand land of mountains, teak forests, vast rice fields, and endless
seascapes, carved up, exploited, its riches siphoned, its spirit suppressed.
Its 131 different ethnicities divided, ruled, and abused,
their diversity weaponized as a tool of oppression.

The tragic upheaval of World War II scarred this ancient land even further—
incessant aerial bombings and relentless warfare left wounds that still bled.
Yet, within the chaos, autonomy stirred,
revolution flickered like embers refusing to die.

An independence so short-lived it was barely a blink—
a breath in samsara's relentless convulsions and volcanic traumas.
Freedom's promise stolen by a succession of dictatorships—
each one more lethal than the last.

Decades where people's voices whispered only in coffee shops,
bedrooms, and the shadows of fear.

Layer upon layer, the challenges of transition grew—
a militarized state entrenched in the coma of totalitarianism,
its grip unrelenting, its shadow long and suffocating.

Even in the dawn of hope, the chains were not fully broken.
The 2008 military-drafted constitution ensured their control—
a labyrinth of clauses and provisions
cementing their iron grip over the lifeblood of power:
defense, home affairs, border affairs.

This was not governance in parallel;
it was the illusion of freedom—
a torturous mandala of deception, terror, and control.

A civilian government existed, but only as a fragile shard,
a delicate shimmer of autonomy beneath the watchful gaze of the generals.

Yet, the tides had begun to shift.
Political prisoners were being released,
and nationwide elections, held just months earlier,
ushered in the first rays of hope.

The people breathed the air of freedom,
fragile but exhilarating,
their voices finally heard after decades of silence.

Members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers—
once prisoners of conscience—
now architects of a nation reborn.
Leaders carrying the weight of history,
their scars from years of chains
etched into the fragile foundation of a new democracy.

I asked the Venerable teacher, Aung San Suu Kyi's spiritual advisor,
and mentor to so many elected leaders of the NLD:
“What does it mean to lead? To embody the Dhamma,
to walk the path of compassion in power?”

His voice, steady as mountains, carried the answer:
“Look to the qualities of a good friend, a *kalyāṇa mitta*—
six jewels to illuminate the path:

Integrity so true it draws love like a magnet.
Respect earned by conscious actions, not force.
A presence so kind it invites metta—loving-kindness—to bloom.
Moral courage to speak the truth when silence could betray.
Grace to endure criticism, even hardship, without venomous retribution.
And mindful restraint—refusing to use others for selfish personal gain.

For a true leader is first a friend, a sacred ally.
And a wise friend holds the world in their palms,
embodying freedom in their breath.”

His words resonated like liberating poetry in the air,
the music of freedom infused with wisdom.
But I pressed further.

“Is that enough? Can these qualities reach beyond today,
into the fragile fabric of tomorrow?
Can they touch the unborn—
the trees, the waters, the lives not yet seen?
Can they hold the peace and unity of tomorrow?”

He paused, his gaze piercing lifetimes:
“A leader needs more: patience like oceans,
vigilance sharp as a falcon’s eye,
and foresight—reasoning that transcends self.

To ask: Will this choice bear fruit?
Will it nourish or destroy?
Will it uplift or diminish the dignity of others?

To see beyond the mirage of the now,
to cradle generations not yet conceived.”

Back then, Burma’s democracy seemed a fragile light,
flickering against the storm of scapegoating, patriarchy, and ignorance,
both within and beyond its borders.

And yet, hope filled the air with the promise of peace.
People were smiling again; tears of joy trickled down cheeks
etched with the lines of trauma.

But today, that light is dimmed.
The military, desperate to survive in its obsolescence,
grips power with iron fists,
turning dreams to ash in a single coup.

In February 2021, everything unraveled:
21,000 imprisoned,
thousands dead, disappeared, tortured, executed.
Aung San Suu Kyi silenced in solitary confinement,
as Russian and Chinese-made rockets and drones rain hell—
relentless, indiscriminate,
destroying villages, monasteries, churches, schools, life itself.

No one is spared—except the elites.

Rakhine, Chin, Karen, Shan, Kachin—
regions now synonymous with suffering.
Entire towns burn in brutal battles with revolutionary forces—
Generation Z, women and men, who have had enough.

Entire towns turned to rubble,
millions displaced, starving, bleeding,
their lives scattered like ash in the wind.
Mothers clutching children beneath the roar of jets.
Elders walking barefoot through jungles.
Their homes gone, their hearts hollowed by monetized war.
The suffering is endless, relentless.

The people of Myanmar?
Broken but unyielding.
Their cries echo through a world too distracted—
by Gaza, Ukraine, Lebanon,
and propaganda—to truly listen.

“What, then, can be done?” I asked him that night,
a question trembling under the weight of the world.

The Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita smiled,
a tender light in the vastness of his age:

“Begin here, now.
With mindfulness like fresh air—essential, unceasing.
Breathe in morality. Breathe out greed.
Stand by the truth,
even when the winds howl lies into your ears.

Be the calm in the storm,
the clarity amidst chaos.

For the Buddha taught:
with *sīla*, morality as the base,
saṃādhi and *paññā*—concentration and wisdom—
can untangle the tangles of this world.”

And as his words settled into the silence,
he offered one last teaching:

“Be the guardian of the unborn.
Exchange yourself for the future,
feel the weight of forests not yet grown,
the cries of rivers yet to flow.

Only with such compassion—multi-generational, boundless—
can the world heal,
and the newest-born democracy stand firm.”

His wisdom lingers,
a temple bell ringing across time:
Burma’s courage.
Her people’s sacrifice.
And the path ahead, steep but illuminated.

We stand now,
on the cusp of something ancient and new.
The Dhamma breathes through us,
urging us forward,
to act with metta and karuṇā—
with truth as our guide and the unborn in our hearts.

And on this very day,
I wonder what Sayadawgyi would say,
if he spoke to the people of his country
from the Deva realm where he now abides.

Perhaps his voice would carry across the land, saying:
“Courage, my children, for this darkness is not eternal.
The seeds of freedom have been planted;
they only need time and care to grow.

To the people of Burma, I say:
Let your hearts not be consumed by anger,
but illuminated by hiri and ottappa—
a sense of shame at wrongdoing,
and a fear of its consequences.

These two guardians of the world will guide you
to stand upright even amidst the ruins.

To the displaced and traumatized, I whisper:
Your suffering is seen, your pain not forgotten.
Hold on to your dignity,
for justice will bloom
when compassion breaks through this barren soil.

And to Min Aung Hlaing, the dictator, I implore:
Turn away from the path of destruction.
Even the great King Asoka, steeped in conquest,
awoke to the cries of the slain and transformed.
Let the light of wisdom pierce your heart.
Trade the sword for the pen of reconciliation.
Lay down power not in shame but in grace.

For the path of true greatness
is not one of dominion but of service—
to all beings, to the Earth, to generations yet unborn.”

He would leave us with a final truth:
“The wheel of Dhamma turns eternally.
No tyranny lasts forever,
and no act of compassion is ever in vain.

Hold fast to your morality,
and the day will come when Burma rises again—
free, united, and radiant.”

As the evening deepened, the Venerable Sayadaw’s words hung in the air,
gentle yet piercing, like a temple bell echoing across lifetimes.

I sat before him, feeling the weight of his wisdom settle into my being,
his presence a mirror reflecting the truths of the Dhamma.
He had spoken of courage, compassion, and the responsibility we all bear—
to guard the unborn, to cradle the future,
to breathe life into the fragile light of freedom.

And then he paused, his eyes clear, timeless,
piercing through the veils of samsara to meet my heart.
“With goodwill for the entire cosmos,” he said, his voice soft yet firm,
“cultivate a limitless heart.

Above, below, and all around,
unobstructed, without hostility or hate.”

These were not just words—they were a calling,
an invitation to embody the ancient path,
to keep alive the luminous thread of the Dhamma,
woven through the fabric of existence,
binding us all to the beauty of liberation.

I bowed deeply to him,
my forehead touching the ground,
my heart overflowing with gratitude and reverence.
This was my final connection to my beloved teacher in this life,
a moment both sacred and eternal.

As I rose, his smile carried the lightness of a thousand lifetimes,
his encouragement etched into my soul:
to live with metta, karuṇā, and courage,
to carry forward the ancient teachings,
to act as a guardian of the unborn,
and to trust that the wheel of Dhamma turns eternally.

I left his cottage that night,
the vast sky above me whispering his words:
“Unobstructed, without hostility or hate.”

And though the path ahead may be steep and shrouded in shadows,
his teachings remain my guide—
a compass pointing toward the boundless heart.

~ Alan Clements