

THE VENERABLE MAHASI SAYADAW
A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH BY U NYI NYI

The Venerable **Mahasi** Sayadaw was born in the year 1904 at Seikkhun, a large, prosperous village of pleasing appearance lying about seven miles to the west of historic Shwebo town in Upper Myanmar. His parents, peasant proprietors by occupation, were U Kan Taw and Daw Ok. At the age of six, the Sayadaw was sent to receive his early monastic education under U **Adicca**, presiding monk of Pyinmana monastery at Seikkhun. Six years later, he was initiated into the monastic Order as a **Sama¹/₄era** under the same teacher and given the novice's name of Shin **Sobhana** (which means auspicious), a name that befitted his stalwart, impressive features and his dignified, serene behavior. He proved to be an apt and bright pupil, making quick, remarkable progress in his scriptural studies. When U **Adicca** left the Order, Shin **Sobhana** continued his studies under Sayadaw U **Parama** of Thugyikyaung monastery, Ingyintaw-taik, till he attained the age of nineteen when he had to make a fateful decision in his young life-whether to continue in the Order and devote the rest of his life to the service of the **Buddhasasana** or to return to lay life. Shin **Sobhana** knew where his heart lay and unhesitatingly chose the first course. With due and solemn ceremony, he was ordained a full-fledged **Bhikkhu** on the 26th day of November, 1923, **Sumedha** Sayadaw Ashin **Nimmala** acting as his spiritual preceptor. Within four years of his ordination, the future **Mahasi** Sayadaw, now Ashin **Sobhana** took in his stride all the three grades (lower, middle and higher) of the **Pali** scriptural examinations conducted by Government.

Ashin **Sobhana** next went to the city of Mandalay, noted for its pre-eminence in **Buddhist** learning, to pursue advanced study of the scriptures under Sayadaws,

well-known for their learning. His stay at West Khinmakan monastery for this purpose was, however, cut short after little more than a year when he was called to Mawlamyaing by the head of the Taik-kyaung monastery, Taungwainggale (who came from the same village as Ashin **Sobhana**) to assist him with the teaching of his pupils. While teaching at Taungwainggale, Ashin **Sobhana** went on with his own studies of the scriptures, being specially interested in and making a thorough study of the **Mahasatipatthanadsutta**. His deepening interest in the **Satipatthana** method of **Vipassana** meditation took him then to neighbouring Thaton where the well-known Mingun **Jetavan** Sayadaw was teaching it. Under the Mingun **Jetavan** Sayadaw's instructions, Ven **Sobhana** took up intensive practice of **Vipassana** meditation for four months with such good results that he was in turn able to teach it properly to his first three disciples at Seikkhun while he was on a visit there in 1938. After his return from Thaton to Taungwainggale (owing to the grave illness and subsequent death of the aged Taik-kyaung Sayadaw) to resume his teaching work and to take charge of the monastery, Ven. **Sobhana** sat for and passed with flying colours in the Government-held **Dhammacariya** (Teacher of the **Dhamma**) examination in June, 1941.

On the eve of the Japanese invasion of Myanmar, **Mahasi** Sayadaw had to leave Taungwainggale and return to his native Seikkhun. This was a welcome opportunity for the Sayadaw to devote himself wholeheartedly to his own practice of **Satipatthana Vipassana** meditation and to teaching it to a growing number of disciples at **Mahasi** monastery, Ingyintaw-taik (whence the Sayadaw came to be known as **Mahasi** Sayadaw) at Seikkhun which fortunately remained free from the horror and disruption of war. It was during this wartime period that the Sayadaw was prevailed upon by his disciples to write his monumental Manual of **Vipassana**

Meditation, an authoritative and comprehensive work expounding both the doctrinal and practical aspects of **Satipatthana** method of meditation.

It was not long before **Mahasi** Sayadaw's reputation as an able teacher of **Vipassana** meditation spread far and wide in the Shwebo-Sagaing region and came to attract the attention of a devout and well-to-do **Buddhist** in the person of Sir U Thwin who wanted to promote the **Buddhasasana** by setting up a meditation centre to be directed by a meditation teacher of proven virtue and ability. After listening to a discourse on **Vipassana** meditation given by the Sayadaw and observing the Sayadaw's serene and noble demeanour, Sir U Thwin had no difficulty in making up his mind that **Mahasi** Sayadaw was the ideal meditation master he had been looking for.

Eventually, on the 13th of November 1947, the **Buddha Sasana Nuggaha** Organization was founded at Yangon with Sir U Thwin as its first President and scriptural learning and practice of the **Dhamma** as its object. Sir U Thwin donated to the Organization a plot of land in Hermitage Road, Kokine, Yangon, measuring over five acres for erection of the proposed meditation centre. Today, in 1978, the Centre occupies an area of 19.6 acres, on which a vast complex of buildings and other structures has sprung up. Sir U Thwin told the Association that he had found a reliable meditation teacher and proposed that the then Prime Minister of Myanmar invite **Mahasi** Sayadaw to the Centre.

After the end of the Second World War, the Sayadaw alternated his residence between his native Seikkhun and Taungwainggale in Mawlamyaing. In the meantime Myanmar had regained her independence on 4th January, 1948. In May, 1949, during one of his sojourns at Seikkhun, the Sayadaw completed a new

Nissaya translation of **Mahasatipatthanasutta**. This work excels the average **Nissaya** translation of this **Sutta** which is of great importance for those who wish to practise **Vipassana** meditation but need guidance.

In November of that year, on the personal invitation of the former Prime Minister, **Mahasi** Sayadaw came down from Shwebo and Sagaing to the **Sasana** Yeiktha (Meditation Centre) at Yangon, accompanied by two senior Sayadaws. Thus began **Mahasi** Sayadaw's spiritual headship and direction of the **Sasana** Yeiktha at Yangon. On 4th December, 1949, **Mahasi** Sayadaw personally inducted the very first batch of 25 **Yogis** into the practice of **Vipassana** meditation. As the **Yogis** grew in numbers later on, it became too strenuous for the Sayadaw himself to give the whole of the initiation talk. From July, 1951, the talk was tape-recorded and played back to each new batch of **Yogis** with a few introductory words by the Sayadaw. Within a few years of the establishment of the principal **Sasana** Yeiktha at Yangon, similar meditation centres sprang up in many parts of the country with **Mahasi**-trained members of the **Sangha** as meditation teachers. These centres were not confined to Myanmar alone, but extended to neighboring **Theravada** countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka. A few such centres also grew up in Cambodia and India. According to a 1972 census, the total number of **Yogis** trained at all these centres (both in Myanmar and abroad) had exceeded the figure of seven hundred thousand*. In recognition of his distinguished scholarship and spiritual attainments, **Mahasi** Sayadaw was honored in 1952, by the then President of the Union of Myanmar with the prestigious title of **Aggamahapandita** (the Exaltedly Wise One).

Soon after attainment of Independence, the Government of Myanmar began planning to hold a Sixth **Buddhist** Council (**Sangayana**) in Myanmar, with four other

Theravada Buddhist countries (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos) participating. For prior consultations for this purpose, Government dispatched a mission to Thailand and Cambodia, composed of Nyaungyan and **Mahasi** Sayadaw and two laymen. The mission discussed the plan with the Thathanapaings (Primates of the **Buddhist Sangha**) of these two countries.

At the historic Sixth **Buddhist** Council which was inaugurated with every pomp and ceremony on 17th May, 1954, **Mahasi** Sayadaw played an eminent role, performing the exacting and onerous tasks of **Osana** (Final Editor) and **Pucchaka** (Questioner) Sayadaw. A unique feature of this Council was the redaction not only of the **Pali** Canon (canonical texts) but also of the **Atthakathas** (commentaries) and **Tikas** (sub-commentaries). In the redaction of this commentarial literature, **Mahasi** Sayadaw was responsible for his part for making a critical analysis, sound interpretation and skilful reconciliation of several crucial and divergent passages in these commentarial works.

A significant result of the Sixth **Buddhist** Council was the revival of interest in **Theravada Buddhism** among **Mahayana Buddhists**. In the year 1955, while the Council was in progress, twelve Japanese monks and a Japanese laywoman arrived in Myanmar to study **Theravada Buddhism**. The monks were initiated into the **Theravada Buddhist Sangha** as **Sama¹/₄eras** (novitiates), while the laywoman was made a **Buddhist** nun. Next, in July 1957, at the instance of the **Buddhist** Association of Moji on the island of Kyushu in Japan, the **Buddha Sasana** Council of Myanmar sent a **Theravada Buddhist** mission in which **Mahasi** Sayadaw was one of the leading representatives of the Myanmar **Sangha**.

In the same year (1957), **Mahasi** Sayadaw was assigned the task of writing in **Pali** an introduction to the **Visuddhimagga Atthakatha**, one that would in particular refute certain misrepresentations and misstatements concerning the gifted and noble author of this **Atthakatha**, Ven. **Buddhaghosa**. The Sayadaw completed this difficult task in 1960, his work bearing every mark of distinctive learning and depth of understanding. By then the Sayadaw had also completed two volumes (out of four) of his Myanmar translation of this famous commentary and classic work on **Buddhist** meditation.

At the request of the Government of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), a special mission headed by Sayadaw **U Sujata**, a senior lieutenant of **Mahasi** Sayadaw, was sent to Ceylon in July, 1955, for the express purpose of promotion **Satipatthana Vipassana** meditation. The mission stayed in Ceylon for over a year doing good work, setting up 12 permanent and 17 temporary meditation centres. Following completion of a specially constructed central meditation centre on a site granted by the Ceylonese Government, a larger mission led by **Mahasi** Sayadaw himself left on 6th January, 1959, for Ceylon via India. The mission was in India for about three weeks, in the course of which its members visited several holy places associated with the life and work of Lord **Buddha**, gave religious talks on suitable occasions and had interviews with Prime Minister Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, President of India Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Vice-President Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. Especially interesting feature of the visit was the warm welcome accorded to the mission by members of the depressed classes who had embraced the **Buddhist** faith under the guidance of their late leader Dr. Ambedkar.

The mission emplaned at Madras for Ceylon on 29th January, 1959 and arrived at Colombo the same day. On Sunday, the 1st February, at the opening ceremony of the permanent central meditation centre named “**Bhavana Majjhayhana**”, **Mahasi** Sayadaw delivered an address in **Pali** after Prime Minister **Bandaranayake** and some others had spoken. Led by **Mahasi** Sayadaw, the members of the mission next went on an extended tour of the island, visiting several meditation centres where **Mahasi** Sayadaw gave suitable discourses on **Vipassana** meditation and worshipping at various places of **Buddhist** pilgrimage like Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura and Kandy. This historic visit of the Myanmar mission under the wise and inspiring leadership of **Mahasi** Sayadaw was symbolic of the close and mutually beneficial ties (dating from ancient times) of spiritual kinship between these two **Theravada Buddhist** countries. Its positive contribution to the welfare of the **Buddhist** movement in Sri Lanka was a steady revival of interest and activity in **Buddhist** meditational discipline which seemed to have declined in this fraternal land of ours.

In February, 1954, a visitor to the **Sasana** Yeiktha would be struck by the spectacle of a young Chinese practising **Vipassana** meditation. The **Yogi** in question was a young Chinese **Buddhist** teacher from Indonesia by the name of Bung An who had become interested in this kind of **Buddhist** meditation. Under the guidance and instructions of **Mahasi** Sayadaw and of the late Sayadaw **U Nanuttara**, Mr. Bung An made such excellent progress in about a month's time that **Mahasi** Sayadaw himself gave him a detailed talk on the progress of insight. Later he was ordained a **Bhikkhu** and named **Ashin Jinarakkhita**. **Mahasi** Sayadaw himself acted as his spiritual preceptor. After his return as a **Buddhist** monk to his native Indonesia to launch a **Theravada Buddhist** movement in that country, a request was received by

the **Buddha Sasana** Council to send a Myanmar **Buddhist** monk to promote further missionary work in Indonesia. It was decided that **Mahasi** Sayadaw himself, as the preceptor and mentor of Ashin **Jinarakkhita**, should go. Along with 13 other monks from other **Theravada** countries, **Mahasi** Sayadaw undertook such essential missionary activities as consecrating **Sima's** (ordination boundary), ordaining **Bhikkhus**, initiating **Samañeras** (novices in the **Buddhist Sangha**) and giving discourses on **Buddhadhamma**, particularly talks on **Vipassana** meditation.

Considering these auspicious and fruitful activities in the interests of initiating, promoting and strengthening the **Buddhist** movements in Indonesia and Sri Lanka respectively, **Mahasi** Sayadaw's missions to these countries may well be described as "**Dhamma-vijaya**" (victory of the **Dhamma**) journeys.

As early as the year 1952, **Mahasi** Sayadaw, at the request of the Minister in charge of **Sangha** Affairs of Thailand, had sent Sayadaws **U Asabha** and **U Indavamsa** to promote the practice of **Satipatthana Vipassana** meditation in that country. Thanks to the efforts of these two Sayadaws, **Mahasi** Sayadaw's method of **Satipatthana Vipassana** meditation gained wide currency in Thailand where many meditation centres had come into existence by about the year 1960 and the number of trained **Yogis** had exceeded the hundred thousand.

On the exhortation of **Abhidhajamaharatthaguru** Masoeyein Sayadaw who headed the **Sanghanayaka** Executive Board at the Sixth **Buddhist** Council, **Mahasi** Sayadaw had undertaken to teach regularly **Ven. Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga Atthakatha** and **Ven. Dhammapala's Visuddhimagga Mahāvīka** to his **Sangha** associates at the **Sasana** Yeiktha. These two commentarial works of the **Theravada** School deal in the main with **Buddhist** meditational theory and practice, though they

also offer useful explanation of important doctrinal points in **Buddhavada**. They are thus of the utmost importance for those who are going to be meditation teachers. In pursuance of his undertaking, **Mahasi** Sayadaw began teaching these two works on 2nd February, 1961, for one and a half or two hours a day. On the basis of notes of his lectures taken by his pupils, **Mahasi** Sayadaw started writing his **Nissaya** translation of **Visuddhimagga MahaYika** and completed it on 4th February, 1966. The production of this **Nissaya** translation was an exceptional performance on the part of **Mahasi** Sayadaw. The section on **Samayantara** (differing views held by other religions or faiths) formed the most exacting part of the Sayadaw's task in producing this work. For tackling this part, the Sayadaw had to, among other things, familiarize himself with ancient Hindu philosophical doctrines and terminology by studying all available references, including works in Sanskrit and English.

Mahasi Sayadaw has to his credit up till now 67 up to October 1978 volumes of Myanmar **Buddhist** literature. Space does not permit us to list them all here, but a complete up-to-date list of them is appended to the Sayadaw's latest publication namely, A Discourse on **Sakkapañha Sutta** (published in October 1978).

At one time, **Mahasi** Sayadaw was subjected to severe criticism in certain quarters for his advocacy of the allegedly unorthodox method of noting the rising and falling of the abdomen in **Vipassana** meditation. It was mistakenly assumed that this method was an innovation of the Sayadaw on his own, whereas the truth is that it had been approved several years before **Mahasi** Sayadaw adopted it, by no less an authority than the **Mula** (original) Mingun **Jetavan** Sayadaw, and that it is in no way contrary to the **Buddha's** teaching on the subject. The reason for **Mahasi** Sayadaw's preference for this method is that the average **Yogi** finds it easier to note

this manifestation of **Vayodhatu** (element of motion). It is not, however, imposed as an obligatory technique upon any **Yogi** who comes and practises meditation at any of the **Mahasi** Yeikthas (meditation centres). Such a **Yogi** may, if he likes and if he finds that he is better accustomed to the **Anapana** way (observing the in-breath and out-breath), meditate in this latter mode. Mahasi Sayadaw himself refrained from joining issue with his critics on this point, but two learned Sayadaws brought out a book each in defence of **Mahasi** Sayadaw's method, thus enabling those who are interested in the controversy to weigh and judge for themselves. This controversy was not confined to Myanmar alone, but arose in Ceylon also where some members of the indigenous **Sangha**, inexperienced and unknowledgeable in practical meditational work, publicly assailed **Mahasi** Sayadaw's method in newspapers and journalistic articles. Since this criticism was voiced in the English language with its world-wide coverage, silence could no longer be maintained and the late Sayadaw **U Ñānuttara** of Kaba-aye (World Peace Pagoda) campus forcefully responded to the criticisms in the pages of the Ceylonese **Buddhist** periodical "World **Buddhism**".

Mahasi Sayadaw's international reputation and standing in the field of **Buddhist** meditation has attracted numerous visitors and **Yogis** from abroad, some seeking enlightenment for their religious problems and perplexities and others intent on practising **Satipatthana Vipassana** meditation under the Sayadaw's personal guidance and instructions. Among the earliest of such **Yogis** was former British Rear Admiral E.H. Shattock who came on leave from Singapore and practised meditation at the **Sasana** Yeiktha in 1952. On his return home to England, he published a book entitled "An Experiment in Mindfulness" in which he related his experiences in generally appreciative terms. Another such practitioner was Mr. Robert Duvo, a French-born American from California. He came and practised

meditation at the Centre, first as a lay yogi and later as an ordained **Bhikkhu**. He has subsequently published a book in France about his experiences and the **Satipatthana Vipassana** method of meditation. Particular mention should be made of **Anagarika Shri Munindra** of **Budhagaya** in India, who became an **Antevasika** (close) disciple of **Mahasi Sayadaw**, spending several years with the Sayadaw learning the **Buddhist** scriptures and practising **Satipatthana Vipassana** (insight) meditation. He now directs an international meditation centre at **Budhagaya** where many people from the West have come and practised meditation. Among these **Yogis** was a young American, Joseph Goldstein, who has recently written a perceptive book on insight meditation under the name “The Experience of Insight: A Natural Unfolding”.

Some of Sayadaw’s works have been published abroad, such as “The **Satipatthana Vipassana** Meditation” and “Practical Insight Meditation” by the Unity Press, San Francisco, California, U.S.A., and the “Progress of Insight” by the **Buddhist** Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka. Selfless and able assistance was rendered by U Pe Thin (now deceased) and Myanaung U Tin in Sayadaw’s dealings with his visitors and **Yogis** from abroad and in the translation into English of some of Sayadaw’s discourses on **Vipassana** meditation. Both of them were accomplished **Yogis**.

The Venerable **Mahasi** Sayadaw is profoundly revered by countless numbers of grateful disciples at home in Myanmar and abroad. Today the Sayadaw is already in the seventy-fifth year of his life and has no longer the strength and vigour of youth and middle age. But like a true son of the **Buddha**, he carries on valiantly, spreading the word of the Master throughout the world and helping unnumbered thousands and tens of thousands on to the Path of Enlightenment and Deliverance.

May the revered Sayadaw live long and continue to shower the blessings of the
Buddhadhamma on all and sundry for many many years to come!

U Nyi Nyi

Mahasi Disciple and Yogi

Member of the Executive Committee

Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization

Yangon

The 18th day of October 1978