A Comparative Study of Two Prominent Schools of Theravada Meditation

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ABSTRACT
The paper presents a comparative study of Burmese (Sayagyi U Ba Khin) and Thai (Ajahn Chah) schools of Theravāda meditation, as being taught by Shri S.N.Goenka and Ven. Ajahn Sumedho. The study brings out how subtle differences in the two meditative traditions arise due to the differences in the interpretation of the Buddhavacanā (words of the Buddha). It also highlights the strengths of the two traditions.

1. Introduction
The second half of the twentieth century has seen a resurgence of the teachings of the Buddha throughout the world. Focussing on the Theravāda teachings we see two traditions -- one originating from Burma (Myanmar) and the other from Thailand -- spreading far and wide across the globe in last four decades. In 1969 Shri S.N.Goenka, a lay disciple of Burmese meditation master, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, arrived in India and soon thereafter started teaching Vipassanā meditation through ten-day retreats. In 1974 the first meditation centre was set up in Hyderabad followed by setting up of the main centre, now the headquarters, in Igatpuri in 1976. By now about 150 centres have been established in various parts of the world, about half of them being in India itself, where over hundred thousand people learn meditation every year.

Another Theravāda tradition has its roots in Thailand where the renowned meditation master, Venerable Ajahn Chah, set up the International Forest Monastery in 1975 to impart Dhamma teachings in English to non-Thai disciples. He appointed Ajahn Sumedho, his first western disciple, its first abbot and this monastery has since become the focal point of dissemination of the teachings of the Buddha among the westerners. In 1977 Ajahn Chah went with Ajahn Sumedho to England and initiated the process of establishing monasteries in the west. By now over 200 monasteries have been set up in various parts of the world (including Thailand) where resident monks lead life according to the ancient tradition adopted by the Buddha, depending on alms from lay people for all their requisites. Naturally, these monasteries have also become the hub of teaching Dhamma to the lay people.
Though the core teachings of the Buddha are reiterated at numerous places in the Pāli Tipiṭaka, there do exist different flavours, differences in emphasis, and even in the presentation of such fundamental aspects like the causal links of patṭicca-samuppāda (dependent origination) in various discourses depending upon the person(s) to whom that particular discourse was addressed. Naturally, differences in the meditation practices of various traditions have arisen due to emphasis on one aspect of the teaching or the other, even though all of them claim to have originated from the ‘original’ teachings of the Buddha. In this paper a comparative study of these two traditions, termed herafter as the BTG (Burmese Tradition as taught by Goenkaji) and the TTS (Thai tradition as taught by Ven. Ajahn Sumedho) respectively, is done to bring out the strengths of both the schools. This study is based mainly on the discourses and the writings of Shri S.N. Goenka (disciple of Sayagyi U Ba Khin) and Ven. Ajahn Sumedho (disciple of Ven Ajahn Chah) who have played a key role in propagation of these teachings throughout the world.

2. The Similarities

Both the schools refer to the fundamental teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path, Patṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), and Satipatṭhāna (establishment of mindfulness) as the basis of their practice. Ānāpānasati (mindfulness of incoming and outgoing breath) is the preferred method for tranquilising the mind. The essence of the practice of developing insight can be summed up in two words: sati and sampajañña. Sati implies right mindfulness and has four aspects, viz. Kāyānupassanā, vedanānupassanā, cittānupassanā and dhammānupassanā, usually translated as the mindfulness of the body, the feelings, the state of the mind and the mental contents. However, some differences in the interpretations of the terms do exist: In BTG it is emphasized that even though vedanā is one of the four aggregates constituting the mind (nāma), it has both mental and physical aspects, the later referring to the somatic sensations felt by the mind. In TTS, on the other hand, there is a general interpretation of vedanā as what the mind feels. Sampajañña is interpreted as ‘continuous clear comprehension of whatever is happening in the body-mind complex’ which implies being aware of the bodily posture, bodily movements, various sensations, the thoughts and feelings, and any reactions to all of these. BTG adds that this mindfulness should be accompanied with an insight into the impermanence of all these through continuous awareness of the ever-changing bodily sensations.
3. The Details of Practice

a) The Burmese Tradition

The BTG has a very well laid out structure of meditation. The first level training is through a 10-day retreat. Here the students practice Ānāpānasati – the mindfulness of breath, for the first three and a half days. They keep their attention focussed on the small area around the nostrils and above the upper lip and try to maintain awareness of the normal natural breath going in and coming out. By the third day, they also begin to feel sensations on this small area of the body. Thereafter they practice Vipassanā, the essence of which is presented as mindfulness of the sensations all over the body. The focus is on experiencing the feeling nature of the somatic sensations (vedanā) so as to ingrain the first insight of impermanence – anicca— of the sensory world; and based on this insight the student is advised to cultivate equanimity – upekkhā— towards these sensations. By doing so, one removes the fundamental avijjā (ignorance) which drives the whole chain of anuloma paṭiccasamuppāda (forward order of dependent origination) and thus prevents arising of tanhā (longing) due to unwise reaction to vedanā, and consequential suffering. The forward chain of vedanā-paccaya-tanhā (with feelings as condition, desire arises) is thus replaced by vedanā-paccayā-paṇṇa (with feelings as condition, wisdom arises). Thus no new saṅkhāra (volitional formation) is created and.... ‘one of the old ones will arise on the surface of the mind, and along with it a sensation will start within the body. If one remains equanimous, it passes away and another old reaction arises in its place. One continues to remain equanimous to physical sensations and the old saṅkhārā continue to arise and pass away, one after another. ... Gradually you will progress towards a stage in which all saṅkhārā leading to new birth, and therefore to new suffering, have been eradicated: the stage of total liberation, full enlightenment.’[1]

Nibbāna is therefore posited as the experience of complete cessation of these sensations. Samādhi Sutta of Vedanā Samyutta is cited in this context: [2]

Samāhito sampajāno, sato Buddhassa sāvako;
Vedanā ca pajānāti, vedanānañca sambhavāṃ;
Yathā cetā nirujjhanti, maggañca khayagāminan;
vedanānaṃ khayā bhikkhu, nicchāto parinibbuto’ti.

A follower of the Buddha, with concentration, awareness, and constant thorough understanding of the impermanence, knows with wisdom, sensations, their arising, their cessation and the path leading to their end. A meditator1 who has reached the end (has experienced the entire range) of sensations (and thus gone beyond) is freed from craving, fully liberated. [3]

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1 The word bhikkhu is translated as ‘meditator’ in this text to give these instructions a wider context.
An important characteristic, which is often highlighted to bring out the contrast with other methods of meditation, is that by working on the sensations even the latent tendencies, stored in the subconscious mind, can be eradicated. This claim is supported by the following extract from *Samyutta Nikāya*: [4]

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\text{Sukhāya, bhikkhave, vedanāya rāganusayo pahātabbo,} \\
\text{Dukkhāya vedanāya patighānusayo pahātatabbo,} \\
\text{Adukkhamasukhāya vedanāya avijjānusayo pahātabbo.}
\]

“Eradicate the latent tendency of craving using pleasant sensations (i.e. by equanimous observation of the pleasant sensations, understanding their changing nature), eradicate latent tendency of aversion using unpleasant sensations and eradicate the latent tendency of ignorance using neutral sensations.”[5]

Thus, in this tradition, a pre-eminent importance is given to what the Buddha terms as *vedanānupassana* (mindfulness of feelings/sensations). As Goenkaji puts it clearly in the context of the practice of the four *satipaṭṭhāna*: ‘When the Buddha says, sabbe dhammā vedanā samosaranā, it means that the experience of all mental concomitants includes and is inseparable from vedanā. Hence according to my understanding of the teachings of the Buddha, not only do kayā-anupassanā (mindfulness of the body)\(^2\) and vedanā-anupassanā (mindfulness of the feelings) involve the awareness of *vedanā* but *vedanā* also forms an integral part of dhammā-anupassanā (mindfulness of mental contents) and cittānupassanā (mindfulness of the state of mind).’ [6]

The choice of bodily *vedanā* (feelings) from among the *vedanā* (feelings) arising dependent on the six sense doors (viz. the eye, ear, tongue, nose, body and the mind) as the means for cultivating anicca-vijjā (knowledge of impermanence) is justified on the grounds of the comparative ease of experiencing these and the need for maintaining continuity of practice.

‘The contact of the eye with the form and the arising of *cakkhu*-samphassajā *vedanā* (feeling arising based on the contact of eye with visual objects) is not continuous, nor are *sota*-samphassajā *vedanā* (feelings arising from ear contact), *ghāṇa*-samphassajā *vedanā* (feelings arising from nose-contact), *jivhā*-samphassajā *vedanā* (feelings arising from tongue-contact) and the *mano*-samphassajā *vedanā* (feelings arising from mind-contact). But the *kāya*-samphassajā *vedanā* (feeling arising from body-contact) is ever present, day and night, throughout life, since the contact of mind and body is always taking place, as is the mutual contact of the subatomic

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\(^{2}\) English translation of the pāli words have been added in various quotations of the authors, wherever deemed necessary
particles within the body. This constant contact of kāya samaphassajā vedanā serves as an effective tool for maintaining continuity of awareness and has, therefore been given prime importance in the Vipassanā tradition.' [7]

In the training of senior students too, even in courses of upto 60 days duration, the ‘technique’ of meditation remains the same, with one third of the time devoted to the Ānāpāna and the rest to Vipassanā; the emphasis being always on sati and sampajañña. The students are advised to continually abide in anicca. It is emphasised that the insight into the three characteristics of all existence (tilakkhaṇa – anicca, dukkha, anatta) arises in a sequence. Once the meditator is ‘established’ in anicca, he understands dukkha, and after getting ‘established’ in both, the liberating insight of anatta arises. Meghiya Sutta of Udāna is cited in this context:

Aniccasaññino hi, Meghiya, anattasaññā saṃṭhāti, anattasaññī asmimānasamugghatam pāpuṇāti diṭṭheva dhamme nibbāna’nti [8]

In him, Meghiya, who is conscious of impermanence the consciousness of what is substanceless, is established. He who is conscious of what is substanceless wins the uprooting of the pride of egotism in this very life, that is, he realizes nibbāna. [9]

The journey on the path of the satipaṭṭhāna is in well identified stages recognized by the nature of somatic sensations being experienced by the meditator:

‘You have to reach certain important stations. You have to feel the body inside (ajjhattam) and outside (bahiddhā), then both inside and outside (ajjhata-bahiddhā). You have to experience arising and passing (samudaya-dhammānupassi viharati, vaya dhammānupassi viharati) then both together, (samudaya- vaya- dhammānupassi viharati). You have to feel the entire body as a mass of vibrations arising and passing with great rapidity, in the stage of bhaṅga (dissolution). Then you reach the stage of body as just body (‘atthi kāyo ‘ti), or sensations as just sensations, mind as just mind, or mental contents just as mental contents. There is no identification with it. Then there is the stage of mere awareness (paṭissati-mattāya) and mere understanding (ñāna-mattāya) without any evaluation or reaction. ... Then anatta is understood: the body is felt as just subatomic particles arising and passing, and automatically the attachment to body goes away. It is a high stage where the awareness, sati, gets established, paccupaṭṭhitā hoti, in this truth from moment to moment. ... The dip in nibbāna follows, where there is nothing to hold, no base to stand on (anissito):

anissito ca viharati, na ca kiñci loke upādiyati

The entire field of mind and matter (loka) is transcended, and there is no world or universe to grasp (upādiyati).’ [10]
b) The Thai Tradition

In the TTS there is no specified structure of meditation. Ajahn Chah often described meditation as a holiday for the heart. Seeing meditation as a holiday implies there is nothing to achieve or attain; just being in a state of relaxed attention – being mindful of whatever is happening in the body-mind complex. Ajahn Sumedho encourages awareness of 'here and now' as the sole practice. The typical instructions that he gives for meditation further elucidate this point:

‘Sitting quietly, being receptive, listening with awareness to the sounds of the traffic outside, having a sense of non discrimination, and allowing everything to be what it is at this moment .... (with) an attitude of letting go, of relaxing, of non-attachment, of nothing to do, of nothing to attain, of nothing to become -- whilst being alert, awake, attentive, receptive. You can be aware of the external things – the sounds, the temperature, what passes in front of your eyes, odours, sensations – and you can be aware of what is happening inside – your reaction to the fire alarm that went off a minute ago, may be, or the traffic which you find too noisy, or whatever. Being aware like this gives you a space in which to notice the way things impinge on your body and mind, and your emotional reaction to them – the liking, disliking, wanting, not wanting, approving and disapproving. In this your position is as awareness itself, not trying to control the situation according to what you like, but allowing everything to be the way it is, being this knowing, being this infinity, this pure, conscious, non-personal reality.’[11]

This is the practice of satipāṭṭhāna in its pristine form, the entire emphasis of this tradition being on cultivating sati, ‘recognizing this Buddho, this knowing’, which enables us to know the body, the breath, the moods, the thoughts – conventionally termed as intelligent or stupid ones; the emotions – conventionally called embarassing or exalted; the feelings— pleasant or unpleasant, that enter consciousness. One’s relationship to all these constituents of the body-mind complex is through awareness and wisdom, and as one experiences their nature of arising and passing away one becomes aware of their impermanent and impersonal nature. The attention is then directed to that ‘which’ is aware of these changing conditions, viz. the pure awareness:

‘We therefore begin to notice our feelings, thoughts, and energetic physical and sensory experiences in terms of the characteristics of change rather than in terms of like or dislike. But that which is aware of the change – what is that? Can one condition know another condition? If all conditions are impermanent, can this condition know that condition? What is it that knows the conditioned? Is that a condition? This is an inquiry. .... when you recognize the way it is, then 'all conditions are impermanent', and the deathless (amatadhammā), ... immortality or whatever you want to call it, is ‘just this’; it is awareness itself. This is what the
Buddha was pointing to; and this is the opportunity we human beings have. We are not just conditioned creatures hopelessly trapped in conditioning. This opportunity for awakening, this waking up, is the Buddha's compassion, and it is very simple. [12]

The final goal of the practice, liberation from suffering or nibbāna, is also interpreted in terms of this pure awareness:

... It is awareness, then, that is liberation. In that natural resting in awareness, problems disappear; they are just gone. The sense of myself and the resentment ..... ceases if I trust in awareness. ... One simply recognizes the stillness, the unshakeable deliverance of the heart (akuppa-cetovimutti), the still point. One recognizes it through awareness not through seeking it or trying to get it, but just through relaxing, opening, trusting and receiving both pleasant and unpleasant experience. [13]...

Nibbāna is a reality; it isn’t an ideal, and it isn’t beyond the average person’s capability. On the thinking level, we might put it as the ultimate attainment.... The point is, nibbāna is not a matter of attainment, but of awareness and the cultivation of awareness. Generally, in the Thai Forest tradition, nibbāna means ‘the reality of non-attachment’ or non-self. And this isn’t about wiping out the personality because we think we shouldn’t have one; it is rather about realizing non-personality. And this is what awareness is; awareness is non-personal, empty, pure, unconditioned; it isn’t even an ‘it’. This is where you try to be accurate with words, but can’t! [14]...

So then reflect on what is the unborn, unformed, uncreated, unoriginated? ...... the unborn, this to me seems to be very clearly stated by the Buddha: mindfulness, sati-sampajañña.

Appamādo amatam padaṃ: mindfulness -- or heedfulness, attentiveness – is the path to the Deathless.’ [15]  

Thus the quintessence of the practice in the TTS is to train to abide in awareness continually so that the whole world, including what we call as ‘my personality’, is seen as a phantasmagoria of conditioned phenomena which are impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self (anicca, dukkha, anattā). With practice, slowly the habit of grasping these out of ignorance is attenuated. Since attachment to the five aggregates, which constitute the personality, is the root cause of suffering, non-attachment to personality naturally leads to freedom from suffering. The various meditation techniques taught by other Theravāda teachers – like Ānāpānasati, feeling the sensations all over the body, various kinds of jhānā etc. are all acceptable as expedient means of settling the mind, and improving the personality by reducing defilements. But, according to TT, liberation does not accrue from improving the personality by purifying the mind (which it doesn’t decry) but by ‘seeing’ the body-mind complex for what it is – a conditioned phenomenon – and giving up identifying with it by abiding in pure awareness – sati sampajañña, sati pañña, i.e. in mindfulness with clear
understanding and wisdom— which the TTS posits is our real identity, our true refuge, our real home.

4. Comparative Analysis

As should be clear from the above exposition, both these traditions are based on the teachings of the Buddha on cultivation of mindfulness as expounded in the Maha-satiyapāṭṭhāna Sutta. However, there are significant differences in their approach to meditation which are highlighted and analysed below.

i) While the BTG sees mindfulness of somatic sensations as the quintessence of the practice of satipaṭṭhāna, TTS doesn’t give any special role to it. In TTS the mindfulness of the state of the mind, the thoughts, the emotions, the feelings, is given as much, if not more, importance. BTG posits that if a meditator doesn’t observe sensations, and, say, observes only the mental states, he is not working properly:

‘Whatever arises – anger, passion, or anything else – if the sensation is observed the meditator is working properly. Otherwise it is an intellectual game. Anger may have gone away at the surface level, but deep inside the sensation remains, and the mind continues to react with anger to this sensation without the meditator even knowing. Therefore, so far as this tradition is concerned, the sensations on the body cannot be missed.’[16]

Thus in BTG the main instruction given to senior meditators is: ‘sati-sampajaññā’: be aware of the sensations and their nature of impermanence. This experiential realization of ‘sabbe sañkhārā anicca’ (all conditioned phenomena are impermanent) should lead to reduction in craving and aversion.

The TTS also uses same words, ‘sati sampajaññā’ but these are interpreted as implying comprehensive awareness of whatever is happening – emotions, sensations, feelings, confusions, etc.; not just bodily sensations. Ajahn Sumedho calls it intuitive awareness. It is non-judgemental but certainly aware and discerning. It thus discriminates the ti-lakkhaṇa (the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and impersonality), anicca, dukkha, anattā, of all the conditioned phenomena that it is aware of, and through this discernment the development of wisdom takes place, the focus being not only on ‘sabbe sañkhārā anicca’ but also on ‘sabbe dhammā anattā’ (all phenomena are substanceless, non-self) – which helps in reducing identification with the pañca khandhā (five aggregates) leading to liberation from all suffering.

ii) In BTG the journey on the path is marked by certain benchmarks of the nature of somatic sensations experienced by the meditator. Great emphasis is laid on the meditator ‘reaching’ the ‘station’ of bhaṅga, i.e an experience of the complete ‘dissolution’ of the body in which the body is seen as a mass of vibrations arising and passing away with great rapidity [17].
Maintaining equanimity during this experience on the basis of an understanding of the impermanent nature of these sensations is said to eradicate deep rooted sañkhārā and result in equanimity at the depth of mind. It is primarily to ‘reach’ this stage that a structured approach to scanning the whole body – from the top of the head to the tip of the toes -- is advocated so that the meditator ‘progresses’ from the experience of ‘gross sensations’ to the experience of ‘subtle sensations’ all over the body within a short span of time.

In TTS there is no such discussion on kinds of somatic sensations. In fact Ajahn Sumedho cautions against this emphasis:

‘Insight meditation, as it is often practised now, concentrates on the nature of the forms too much – this is just my thinking on it—and a great deal of emphasis is placed on noting that conditions are impermanent, not-self and unsatisfactory. But that can lead to merely becoming obsessed with form. As you develop increasing levels of concentration, you find yourself dealing with the minutiae of form – the more subtle forms that you might have never noticed before – and that can be just in an ordinary moment. The tendency then is to become fascinated by the groups of existence (kalāpās), the different movements and the subtleties of form, and seeing their impermanence. But what is the result of that? It doesn’t liberate. It is interesting and is a good practice, but in terms of liberation, you are still only concentrated on form; your attention is still limited to forms, coarse and subtle. But the formless or the immeasurable is also here and now, and that you cannot conceive. Even the words are negation of forms. This is where you need to trust your intuitive sense, your awareness, your ability to receive the moment.’[18]

iii) In BTG the whole process is described as progressive purification of the mind of the dross of rāga, dosa and moha (craving, aversion and delusion). The teacher’s instructions constantly remind the meditators that they should be careful not to let craving arise when the sensations are pleasant, nor let aversion arise when these are unpleasant. In TTS such an attitude is not encouraged:

‘Our attitude toward meditation need not be one of striving to get rid of our defilements, our kilesās, our faults, in order to become something better. It should be one of opening up, paying attention to life, experiencing the here and now, and trusting in our ability to receive life as an experience. We don’t have to do anything with it. We don’t have to straighten out all the crooked parts, solve every problem, justify every thing, or make everything better. After all, there will always be something wrong when we’re living in the conditioned realm.... conditions are always changing; we will never find any permanent perfection. [19] ..... You can never purify the conditioned. You can’t make yourself a “pure person”. That’s not where purity is. Purifying yourself as a person is a hopeless task, like trying to polish a brick to make it into a mirror. ... This is where the awakened state is the original purity.’ [20]
iv) In TTS the practice focusses entirely on the realization of anattā, the reality of non-self, which is seen as the quintessence and the primary distinguishing teaching of the Buddha. The roots of cravings and aversion lie in this primal delusion of ‘self’ -- pañca- upādānakkhandhā dukkha (the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering) -- and if this root cause is not addressed, liberation from suffering is not possible. Though this thesis is implicitly accepted by BTG also, but the emphasis is on purifying the mind by reducing rāga, dosa, and moha by the practice of maintaining equanimity with the understanding of impermanence of the somatic-sensations. This, it is expected, would naturally lead to the realization of anattā.

The TTS does not agree with this approach:

‘In a logical sense we should purify the mind; we should free ourselves from these passions. These are imperatives in the holy life – having to purify and free ourselves from the lower realms, the passions, the selfishness. It isn’t that it is wrong, but just notice the attachment to the idea that ‘I’ve got to get rid of this; it’s my problem and I’ll never be enlightened as long as I have this anger’. This is what the Buddha was constantly pointing to, this attachment (upādāna), which is coming from the sense of ‘I am this person; I am this body; these are my problems and they are blocking me from enlightenment; I’ve got to get rid of them’. The whole thing is based on the delusion of ‘I am this person’. ’[21]

v) Even in the presentation of the final goal of Nibbāna, there are some subtle differences between the two traditions.

In BTG the experience of nibbāna is a transcendent experience:

‘A person in nibbāna is as if dead: none of the senses function, although inside the person is very aware, very alert, very awakened. After that the person returns and again starts functioning in the sensory field, but a fully liberated person has no attachment, no clinging, because there is no craving.’[22]

The first time a meditator experiences nibbāna only when ‘all the saṅkhāra which would have taken you to a lower field are gone, the mind becomes perfectly balanced- fit to transcend the field of mind and matter and gain the first glimpse of nibbāna’[ 23].

This first glimpse of nibbāna transforms a person so that he cannot generate any saṅkhāra of the lower fields of life. He is termed as a sotāpanna, one who has entered into the stream of liberation. As the meditator continues to practice and eradicates further deep saṅkhāra, he has deeper experiences of nibbāna, which are indicated by arrival at the 'stages' of sakadāgāmi, (once – born) anāgāmi (non returner) and arahanta (fully liberated). An arahanta is one who is fully liberated and will have no more future births. He is free from craving, aversion and delusion and abides in equanimity.

In TTS this presentation of nibbāna as a hard-earned transcendent experience is not appreciated:
'If nibbāna depends on conditions supporting it, then it is just another condition, isn’t it? If you have to depend on controlling the environment and everything around you in order to attain nibbāna, then nibbāna is a very unstable state, because the world is ‘like this’. ... That word nibbāna, after all, implies that which is not dependent on conditions.' [24] TTS sees Nibbāna as not a high, sort of super-conscious state, but a reality here and now, which is not beyond an average person’s capability. It is basically cultivation of awareness, which it sees as unconditioned, non-personal, and pure: 'The Buddha made very clear statements about nibbāna being reality, about it not being an attainment. To put it simply, we can say, it means ‘the reality of non grasping’. Grasping is what we are involved with. The unaware, unenlightened individual is conditioned to grasp things, then be born into them, and then be limited by those grasping habits. In that case, one blindly grasps just out of habit, not knowing any other way of dealing with life. As we awaken, however, we see the suffering of that grasping. .... So when we realize the suffering of grasping, we can let it go. Then the reality of non-grasping is known. That is what we call ‘nibbāna’. ... It isn’t refined. It isn’t like going into heavenly realms of bliss'. [25]

Quoting Dhammapada, Ajahn Sumedho posits awareness as the gate to the deathless: 'So then reflect on what is the unborn, unformed, uncreated, unoriginated? Is that some kind of metaphysical reality that someday I might understand and we can try to imagine? ...... the unborn, this to me seems to be very clearly stated by the Buddha: mindfulness, sati-sampañña. Appamādo amataṃ padaṃ: mindfulness -- or heedfulness, attentiveness -- is the path to the Deathless. [15]... Awareness is natural and not simply an attainment. So it is ordinary -- so ordinary, in fact, that we don’t really notice it. ......It is awareness, then, that is liberation. In that natural resting in awareness, problems disappear; they are just gone. The sense of myself and the resentment ...... ceases if I trust in awareness. .... One simply recognizes the stillness, the unshakeable deliverance of the heart (akulpa-cetovimutti), the still point.... Liberation is now! It is this immanent reality of awareness wherever you are -- on the train, in the supermarket, on a meditation retreat -- and with or without a method.'[26] Thus nibbāna is not seen as an exalted refined state, beyond the ken of ordinary mortals, but the reality of non-grasping which can be experienced by everybody through awareness. It is a natural state of being which is recognized by unreservedly accepting the reality of the moment as it is.

vi) In BTG the consciousness or viññāna is seen as conditioned, the sense sphere consciousness, which arises when a sense faculty, say ear, comes in contact with its corresponding ‘object’, i.e. a auditory signal; and so on.
TTS sees this as a limited view of consciousness:
'Sometimes we think of the consciousness in a very limited way, just as something that arises through contact via the eye, ear, nose and so forth – just in terms of sensory consciousness. In this case the consciousness is very much limited to perceiving through the senses. But it is possible to begin to recognize consciousness that is not attached to the senses, ... anidassana viññāna .. primal non-discriminative consciousness .. which is the natural state of consciousness before we impose the notion of self in it.'[27]

Ajahn Sumedho cites two discourses of the Buddha where this word viññānaṃ anidassanaṃ occurs [28, 29] and explains this concept in a simple language:

'When a baby is born it is ... a human body that is conscious. Consciousness, then, is natural and cannot be culturally perverted by anything. And that which is natural – that which is according to the natural law – is what we mean by ‘dhamma’. We are experiencing consciousness through separate forms. We each experience through ‘this’ body and the kammā of ‘this being here’. If we recognize pure consciousness, we then have perspective on the limitations and conditions of the physical body and the emotional habits we have, and the ‘self’. And we realize that consciousness has no personal quality. We create the personal, and consciousness then combines with the sense of being a person. If we let go of ‘the person’, there is just pure consciousness which has no boundaries. And this is immeasurable.'[30]

This, of course, is a very contentious issue, for the whole idea of ‘pure consciousness’ is traditionally rejected by Theravāda traditions, especially those in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, as a Mahāyāna innovation. These traditions insist on impermanence of viññāna and usually do not take cognizance of this ‘viññānaṃ anidassanaṃ’, which forms the bedrock of all Thai forest traditions. Of course, Bhikkhu Bodhi does admit that ‘these lines have been a perennial challenge to Buddhist scholarship’ and even faults Ven. Buddhaghosha’s interpretation which equates this phrase with nibbāna. The translation that he seems to approve is the one given by Maurice Walshe viz. ‘consciousness that is signless, boundless ...’, which agrees in spirit with the above interpretation! [31]

5. Concluding Remarks

The strength of BTG lies in its structured approach to meditation, as taught in the retreats of duration ranging from 10 days to 60 days. The key factor that is emphasized over and over again is continual non-reactive awareness of somatic sensations based on an understanding of their impermanent nature. The efficacy of this practice of ‘observing sensations with equanimity’ in transforming the habit patterns -- especially in reducing negative emotions like fear, anxiety, anger, hatred, etc. -- has been conclusively established by many empirical
psychological studies e.g. [32, 33] as well as by anecdotal evidence. Recent studies on neurological basis of emotions and feelings give a scientific basis for the same [34]. But, as is emphasized in the TTS, liberation from suffering lies not just in becoming a better person (which obviously is very desirable!) but in seeing through the illusion of personality. This is a very crucial point since often meditators give too much importance to these personality changes (which anyway are impermanent!) and lose sight of the main objective of the Buddha's teachings viz. liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Unless one is cognizant of this, many a times, this ‘improvement in personality’ – some reduction in anger and greed, increase in generosity, etc.– could even result in a subtle increase in ‘self-worth’ leading to strengthening of ego, which eventually increases suffering by insidiously strengthening subtle defilements like self-righteousness, pride etc. This aspect is not emphasized in BTG even though the very first discourse of the Buddha points out: ‘saṅkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā’ (in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering). The avijjā (ignorance), which, according to the formulation of the paṭicca samuppāda, powers the cycle of suffering, implies ignorance of the true nature of our being (and not just lack of awareness of the somatic sensations, as the BTG seems to suggest), as a result of which we consider ourselves to be unique physio-psychic entities comprising of the pañcakkhandhā. It is because of this ignorant attachment to these khandhā (aggregates) that we react to the vedanā (feelings), generating new saṅkhārā (volitional formations) which give momentum to the cycle of suffering. The roots of vedanā paccayā taṅhā (feelings condition desire) lie in this avijjā of ‘self view’ and unless this is understood, it is not really possible to maintain true equanimity with respect to the sensations; one is always ‘trying’ not to react! This point is strikingly brought out in a short interaction between a deva and the Buddha reported in the *Samyutta Nikāya* [35]:

Devata: ‘As if smitten by a sword, as if his head were on fire,  
A bhikkhu should wander mindfully, to abandon sensual lust.’

The Blessed One:  ‘As if smitten by a sword, as if his head were on fire,  
A bhikkhu should wander mindfully, to abandon identity view.’

The Buddha here clearly suggests that abandoning self-view, the identification with the pañcakkhandhā, is a pre-requisite for abandoning rāga (craving)! Thus the term nāṇa (knowledge) in yathābhūtanānādassanaṃ should imply an understanding of not just anicca (impermanence), but a deep understanding of ‘anattā - netam mama, nesohamasmi’ (non-self - this is not mine, this I am not). This is the most crucial aspect of sammādiṭṭhi (right view) the absence of which only increases our sojourn in the worlds [36]: micchādiṭṭhim na sevyya, na siyā lokavaṭṭhano (Do not follow wrongviews; do not prolong your worldly sojourn), Ven. Ledi
Sayadaw, also points this out: ‘It is because of the forcible possessive act of personality-belief that this kamma accompanies beings throughout their samsaric wanderings and will produce its resultants in due course. ... But all the old unwholesome actions that have accompanied beings throughout the long and beginningless round of rebirths, will be extinguished completely when their head and chief, personality-belief (sakkāyadiṭṭhi), has been made to disappear entirely.’ [37]

While the importance of mindfulness of the sensations is beyond doubt, giving it the supreme importance over other anupassanās enumerated in the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna discourse is again not supported by Buddhavacana. Even from a practical point of view it is seen that mere observation of the sensations, without being mindful of the state of the mind or the mental contents, does not lead to quick restoration of equanimity. One can keep on observing sensations and yet roll in thoughts, especially when one experiences pleasant somatic sensations while the mind is mildly upset! Such disjointed situations which confound the saññā (perception) can occur since the somatic sensations depend upon a complex interplay of numerous factors like the bodily posture, any illness or injury, the state of environment, the kind of food eaten, the state of mind, any emotion that might have arisen, etc. On the other hand, if one recognizes the mental state / contents, say the arising of an emotion, and understands, this is not me, not mine, ‘netam mama, nesohasmī’, in the true spirit of yathābhūtaṇāṇadassanam as mentioned above, the equanimity is almost immediately restored. Thus we can conclude that for the establishment of mindfulness, all the four anupassanās, as explained by the Buddha, should be simultaneously practised. There is no evidence anywhere in the Tipiṭaka that the Buddha gave an overriding importance to any of them. It is worth pointing out that one of the two texts quoted in BTG as the basis of interpreting sampajañña as ‘constant awareness of impermanence of sensations’ mentions not only about awareness of sensations, but also of perceptions (saññā) and nascent thoughts (vitakkā) [38]; and the other, in fact, mentions about observing the arising and passing away of all the five aggregates ‘khandhānaṃ udayabbayaṃ’ [39].

Sometimes BTG is criticised on the ground that in the Buddha’s discourses we do not find any reference to systematic scanning of the body to feel the sensations, and therefore to claim that this is THE teaching of the Buddha is questionable [40]; and that giving special importance to observing sensations at the hadaya-vatthu (the heart basis) is against the basic tenet of equanimity towards all conditioned phenomena. Even though this may be literally true, development of kusala upāya (wholesome techniques) is very much a part of the teachings of the Buddha. The usefulness of this training of systematic observation of the sensations all over the body, including observing the sensations at hadaya-vatthu, is well established on the basis of the experiences of thousands of meditators, and so this should be seen as a kusala-upāya
developed/ being followed in this tradition. TTS also has its share of such *kusala upāyā*. One of these is use of syllables ‘Bu’ and ‘dho’ along with in-breath and out-breath during the practice of mindfulness of breathing. Another, even more radical *upāya* is, using what Ajahn Sumedho calls, ‘the sound of silence’ – the ever present, seemingly beginningless and endless, high pitched ringing tone discerned by many meditators-- as an object of meditation [41]. Again these ‘innovations’ are justified by TTS on the grounds that these skillful means help achieve the objective of ‘freeing the heart’.

On the issue of differing exposition of Nibbāṇa in the two traditions, all that one can say is that both the traditions agree that the path to *Nibbāṇa* is through progressive attenuation in attachment to the five aggregates. The differences in the two traditions can be appreciated in the light of two approaches to liberation pointed out by the Buddha himself, viz. *cetovimutti* (liberation through purifying the mind) and *paññāvimutti* (liberation through cultivating wisdom)[42]; the only difficulty in drawing this conclusion with certainty being that TTS, which seems to advocate *paññāvimutti*, terms the results of its practice as *akuppa cetovimutti*! [43]. There is, of course, no doubt that getting established in *sati sampajaññā* has a great liberating effect: one can live in the world, without being enmeshed in it.

Finally, it can be said that while developing the ability to feel sensations all over and inside the body is a strength of the BTG, giving importance to the root cause of suffering – *pañcupādānakkhandhā*—and insisting on developing the insight of *anattā* through every experience is the strength of the TTS. In BTG there is a conscious attempt to train the mind not to react to the sensations occurring both on the surface of the body and deep inside, while in TTS more emphasis is given to bare observation of whatever is happening in the mind from moment to moment. Thus, if the mind reacts to sensations, that also is noted, without taking it personally, in the pristine spirit of the *Mahāsatiipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. No deliberated attempt is however made to raise concentration level to the extent that even the sensations deep inside the body are felt. Of course, in the BTG also the students are advised not to get upset if the mind reacts to sensations, but the message is clear: be more careful next time; there is thus a subtle acceptance of ‘responsibility to change my mental make up’, of ‘doing something’ to prevent reaction. In contrast, the impersonal attitude advised in TTS has a great ‘unburdening’ effect. And, as has been pointed out by Zen teacher Bayda, ‘Trying to change yourself prevents true transformation’. [44]

Nonetheless it is also evident that for anyone who is just beginning to follow the *ariyo atthaṅgiko maggo* the initial motivation usually is to bring about a salutary change in his psyche. Most people take to *dhamma* practice to alleviate the *psychological suffering* they face
in their lives due to the three root kilesā viz. rāga, dosa and moha. The practice of 'activating' anicca through mindfulness of the somatic sensations, as taught by BTG, is of great help in reducing various strands of kilesā like anger, acquisitiveness, pride, illwill, fear etc.; and that explains its growing popularity. That all saṅkhārā are anicca can be quite easily experienced and intellectually understood; while the concept of anattā is quite counter intuitive and not easily experienced. However, unless 'anattā' is also activated, the possibility of sundering sakkāyadiṭṭhi, the very first fetter which the Enlightened one enjoins us to cut en-route to liberation - i.e. complete extinction of existential suffering -- is rather remote.

Senior meditators keen on developing the practice should therefore not restrict it to the mindfulness of sensations only, but should also be constantly aware of the arising and the passing away of the other aggregates – i.e. 'khandhānṃ udayabbayāṃ'; widen the scope of ānāna in yathābhūtañāṇadassanām to include all the ti-lakkhanā (anicca, dukkha and anattā), and not just focus only on anicca.

The perspective with which such a seeker should interact with the world has been elucidated by the Enlightened one in many discourses like the Phena Sutta in the Saṁyutta Nikāya, and is nicely summed up in the Dhammapada [45] as:

yathā bubbulakaṃ passe, yathā passe marīcikaṃ;
evāṃ lokam anvekkhantām, maccurājā na passati.

One who sees this world, in the same way as one sees a (fleeting) bubble and a (unreal) mirage. him the King of death does not see (i.e. he transcends his sovereignty- is liberated from the saṁsāric cycle).

As the TTS empasizes, senior meditators should be continually aware of this perspective, which in practical terms implies not taking anything 'personally', both during meditation as also in day-to-day life, i.e. always taking refuge in awareness, and being mindful of whatever is happening within; in short being awake! This would greatly help in developing the insight of anattā, without which real liberation from all suffering is not possible.

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