
The Thabarwa centres – a mindful foresight strategy

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Abstract: Within the frame of globalisation and the strive for future modes of living in a global society, this article describes the development of the Thabarwa Meditation Centres, which started in Yangon, Myanmar, in 2007. It explains the aim of the centres, their mode of operation and their organisational structure, based on the centres' main paradigms. To understand their stunning growth and success, it is crucial to perceive how they bring their members to understand what is called the 'law of cause and effect' concerning everyone's actions. Once a person understands this law of cause and effect, one can use it to transform his or her life. A Thabarwa centre is the place where any person can abandon creating causes for suffering (understood in the Buddhist sense) and instead make causes for good results. This article describes how the Thabarwa centres are answering the needs of society on material and spiritual levels by offering free food, housing, medical care, education and meditation guidance to everyone that arrives in the centre.

Keywords: social help; Buddhism; Theravada Buddhism; purification of mind; mindfulness; truth; desire; suffering; nature; impermanence; healing; Myanmar; Yangon; meditation.

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Biographical notes: Khema Cari, in search of the solution to unsatisfactoriness, travelled to Asia at the age of 28, where she encountered the practice of Vipassana meditation. She was ordained as a Theravada Buddhist nun temporarily in Myanmar, then spent three years in India. In February, 2010, she came back to Myanmar and was ordained permanently, spending time in meditation centres and in a nun school in Sagine Division. After her respected teacher passed away in 2011, she met with Sayadaw Ottamathara in 2012 and has been happily following and assisting him in his centre in Yangon and all over the world. After her studies and other steps of career, she joined the Thabarwa Nature Centre in Yanglin near Yango, Myanmar, where she is responsible for the international relations of this centre with over 3,000 members.

Aloka Nani started practicing meditation in 2008 at age 23, under the guidance of Satya Narayan Goenka, a meditation teacher from Myanmar. In 2012, she left her home in the USA to meet Mr. Goenka. After several months in Myanmar, she came across some written material about Sayadaw Ottamathara and Thabarwa Centre and went to meet Sayadaw in Thanlyin, outside Yangon.

She soon followed Sayadaw to Vietnam for a meditation retreat and was ordained as a nun there. She returned to Myanmar and stayed on in the Thabarwa Centre for three years and attended a one-year course at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon. She is currently helping Sayadaw to establish a new Thabarwa centre in the USA.

1 Introduction

The main Thabarwa Nature Centre is located in Thanlyin, Myanmar (formerly Burma) about one hour away from downtown Yangon, Myanmar's former capital. The Burmese word 'Thabarwa', refers to nature and natural law, which is the subject of the teaching of the Buddha (Boowa, 1995). Sayadaw Ashin Ottamathara, the Founder and the Leader of the Thabarwa Centre, chose this name because the two kinds of nature described in Buddhism, permanent nature and impermanent nature include all phenomena and Thabarwa Centre is allinclusive (Ottamathara, 2017b). Furthermore, an investigation of nature by observation of one's own body and mind, known as Vipassana meditation, is the tradition of Buddha and his followers, carried on by the meditation teachers of the Buddhist country of Myanmar.

Sayadaw Ottamathara established the centre in 2007 with the mission of "Sharing, Caring, Helping, Protection and Cooperation by Mindfulness and Right Understanding" and with a vision of providing opportunities for people to do a wide range of good deeds on a regular basis. The centre is open to anyone, any time, under any circumstances. Anyone can help in the centre as they see fit, according to the conditions that are present from time to time and anyone can take what they need, be it social and material comfort or spiritual attainment.

As a Founder, Sayadaw Ottamathara did not decide to build a centre to fulfil his personal desire but to answer a dramatic need of the society, which is unsupported by the government for elderly care or much in terms of mental healthcare. To solve the most urgent and significant problems of the people, he used his life to find ways to answer the greatest needs, those of housing, food and medical care.

The main objective of the centre is to help people understand and live according to what is named the truth in the prevailing context of the country. Sayadaw's explanation for how to reach this goal is to do all kinds of good deeds. *Pariyatti* and *Patipatti Sasana*, the theory and practice of the Buddha's teachings (Sugunasiri, 2005), allow centre residents to enhance their power of right understanding¹ or an understanding of non-self nature, that life is just to use, experience and know only, without attachment. By listening to *Dhamma* teachings [explanations of natural law or 'the way it is', according to Buddhism (Sumedho, 2012)], practicing *Vipassana* (i.e., insight, see Ledi, 1994) meditation and *doing limitless good deeds with mindfulness and detachment*, they come to achieve their own understanding of the law of nature.

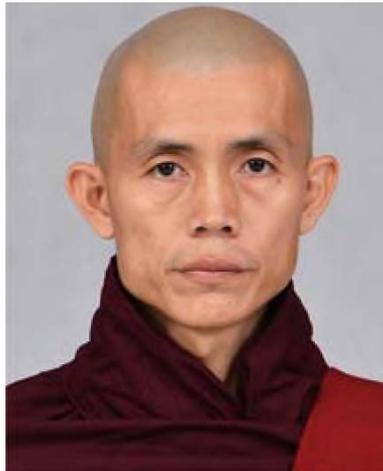
According to Sayadaw, the remarkable success of the Thabarwa Centre is explained simply when applying the paradigm of cause and effect. The historic Buddha (around 500 BC) taught that a good cause will have a good effect, while a bad cause will have a bad effect (Pa-Auk, 2008). Helping someone, for example, will, at some point in time, result in the donor of help being helped herself. Or if one is abusive of others, he will find

himself being abused at some point later on. Therefore, because Thabarwa Centre sets out to solve the problems of people, the problems of the centre will be solved, one by one.

2 The history and development of the Thabarwa centres

All Thabarwa centres were founded by Sayadaw Ashin Ottamathara, who was born in Katha, Myanmar in 1969. After graduating from Yangon University with a degree in English, Venerable Sayadaw Ottamathara, at that time with his civil name Aung Ko Ko, opened his own business and spent the next few years managing it. He had to face problems with the business that he could not solve, which caused him much mental suffering. At that time, he determined to practice meditation very seriously. After three years of continuous meditation practice, he attained insight knowledge about the ultimate truths of nature and abandoned his business and possessions, ordaining as a Buddhist monk in 2002, at age 33. In 2005, he developed *From Avijja to Vijja (From Ignorance to Wisdom)*, an office for free distribution of Dhamma books and audio recordings, on 38th Street in Downtown Yangon. He also started to teach in a Dhamma Hall in Yangon every morning (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Sayadaw Ashin Ottamathara (see online version for colours)



Note: The founder of the Thabarwa centres.

Source: Ottamathara (2015) and Thabarwa (2018)

He setup an impressive way to do things: he went very early in the morning from his monastery to the location on 38th Street to teach. This was also an opportunity for people to offer breakfast to the monk, as supporting the life of a seeker of ultimate truth results in more understanding of the ultimate truth for the donor, at some time in the future. After breakfast, Sayadaw would teach and then leave for alms-round, in which his disciples would assist him. (Alms-round is the tradition of Buddha and his disciples who, having given up career and family life, walked through the streets or villages each morning, collecting in their bowls the cooked food offered to them by the villagers, which would sustain them until the next day.) Having shared his offerings with his

disciples, Sayadaw would then spend the rest of the day going from place to place to give teaching where he had been invited, be it a hospital, a Dhamma Hall or in private homes, followed until late at night by his disciples.

In 2007, to give his disciples a place to stay consistently, Sayadaw established the 45th Street Thabarwa Centre, which was at the top four floors of an eight-story apartment building. Because a monk cannot possess a house or building, according to the Buddhist monastic code, the centre was established under the name of Sayadaw's disciple who had donated the money to buy it. Male and female meditators, monks and nuns could stay and practice meditation there and follow Sayadaw for teaching, living mainly from his alms-round collection. But this situation was unsuitable for a monk according to the authorities of the country, as according to Theravada Buddhist monastic code, monks are not allowed to own property (DeGraff, 2013, 2015). In 2008, they decided to arrest him and force Sayadaw to disrobe on a set date. Sayadaw's disciples warned him the day before the set date, but Sayadaw appeared unconcerned and asked them to all stay together and meditate at the 8th Floor Dhamma Hall of 45th Street. That night the cyclone 'Nilgiris' came and damaged so much of the country that the authorities gave up their plan. They just intimidated Sayadaw to close the centre and leave it within three days. They determined he could still use the building in daytime but was not allowed to live there anymore. Fortunately, Sayadaw had a five-acre piece of land that had already been donated to him in 2006 by U Kyaw Aye, a retired military officer who admired Sayadaw for his free distribution of Dhamma books and recordings in the 'Avijja to Vijja' office.

Quickly, everyone moved to the new centre in Thanlyin, an hour drive from downtown Yangon. Thus, Thabarwa Nature Centre began in July 2008, on a bare piece of land with nothing but bamboo structures. Today, the centre comprises over 250 buildings, including both a four and six story hospital.

From its inception until now, the centre has always welcomed anyone who sought refuge in the centre. Whenever someone in need appears, Sayadaw invites him or her to stay in the centre so that they will have a chance to hear the Dhamma and get help from him and his disciples.

Located on a private land that was officially recognised as a monastery in 2016, the centre has seen its population increase quickly, from about 300 in 2009 to nearly 3,400 residents in 2018. Initially, the centre could cover only basic needs for residents and even this was with difficulty. Today, Thabarwa Centre offers food and shelter to more than 3,000 people, including monks, nuns, meditators, rich, poor, children, orphans, elderly, infirm, blind, deaf, disabled, mental patients, chronically and terminally ill (including tuberculosis and AIDS patients), homeless, abandoned and neglected individuals, alcoholics, drug addicts or anyone facing any kind of social or financial difficulties.

Some people come to the centre because they want to do good deeds practically. Also, everyone in need is received equitably, with open arms and is provided with basic necessities, free medical care and free education for children. In this way, people can concentrate on the pursuit and realisation of Dhamma or the deep understanding of the ultimate truth, fulfilling both physical and spiritual development. When one's basic needs are satisfied, he or she has the freedom or possibility to explore ultimate reality.

On the event of death, the centre performs the last funeral rites for residents. Over 1,000 people have died in the centre since 2008.

Today, within the immense community of the main Thabarwa Centre operates another diverse group of people, local and international volunteers. They come to

participate in the many activities that keep the centre running, from eldercare or nursing, rendering medical treatments to the elderly and infirm, performing physiotherapy exercises with patients, teaching English or IT, supervising artistic activities with kids, helping in any of the several kitchens in the centre, cleaning the centre campus, general maintenance or machine repair, just to name a few. If they wish, volunteers can also focus solely on activities for spiritual development such as studying Buddhist literature or practicing Vipassana (insight) meditation.

Two Dhamma hospitals have now been created and three more are in plan for different locations in Myanmar. The main centre also has four small intensive care units and a dental clinic (see Figure 3).

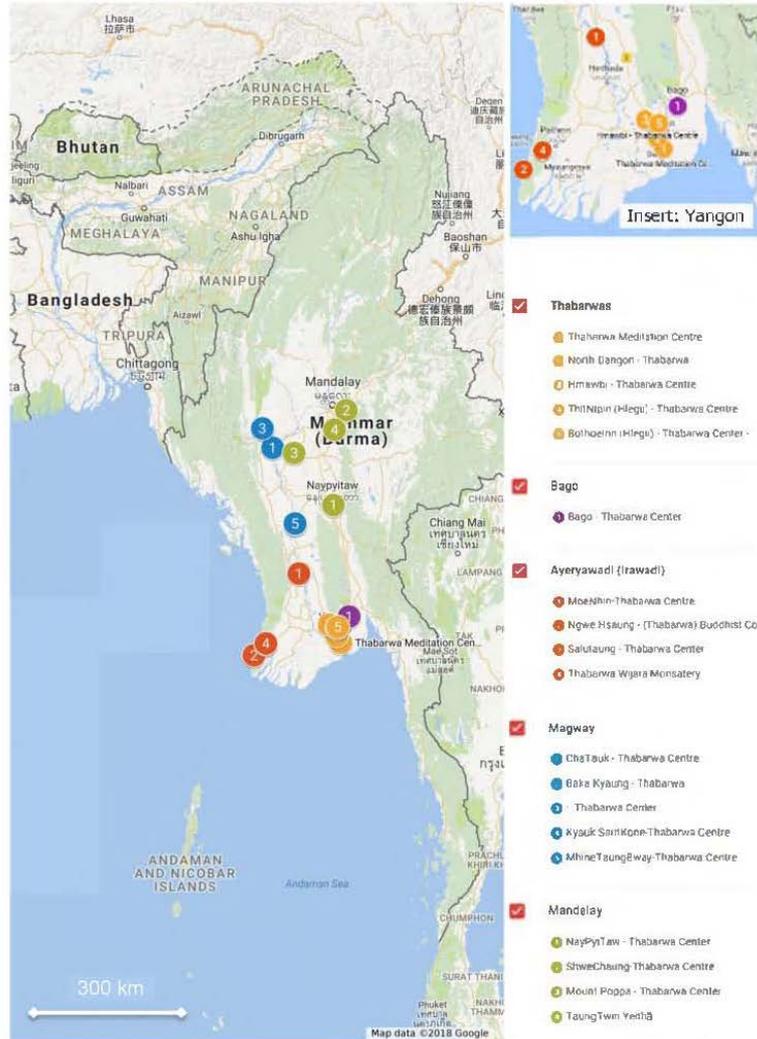
Figure 2 (a) Map of the locations of all Thabarwa centres in Myanmar as of 2017¹ and (b) detailed map of the locations of Thabarwa centres in Myanmar as of 2017, including names of detailed locations² (see online version for colours)



(a)

Source: ¹Google and ²Google MyMaps

Figure 2 (a) Map of the locations of all Thabarwa centres in Myanmar as of 2017¹ and (b) detailed map of the locations of Thabarwa centres in Myanmar as of 2017, including names of detailed locations² (continued) (see online version for colours)



(b)

Source: ¹Google and ²Google MyMaps

When Sayadaw first established the Thanlyin Centre, there was a small village nearby where he would sometimes go for alms-round. The villagers were having difficulty to grow rice from the paddy fields. They asked Sayadaw to buy their land because they could not use it and needed money. Sayadaw bought the land to help them, with the idea of building residences for his disciples. However, he decided instead to offer the land to needy people. This was the beginning of the first Goodwill Village in 2012 (see Figure 2). Anyone who spent a seven-day meditation course in the centre could get a 15 feet square piece of land to build his home and use with his family without charge.

Figure 3 Photos of the 15 Feet Village (or ‘Goodwill Village’) (see online version for colours)



Source: First author

From flooded paddy fields, Sayadaw managed to create roads, bridges and a drainage system using donated funds. Within a couple of years, a muddy field of about 30 acres became a highly populated and organised village. Now, where it was once difficult to reach even by walking, trucks can easily pass and necessary items can be imported. Although this village is not a meditation centre, it is also not just a village. It is a new generation of society on a free-of-charge basis. Today, the village includes over 2,000 families (more than 10,000 people), a school with over 1,000 students, a market, drinking water system, public toilets and showers.

According to Sayadaw, the bad situations that drove these people to look for land in the ‘Fifteen Feet’ Village were the result of not doing good deeds. Sayadaw requested them to listen to Dhamma and practice meditation for seven days before taking their piece of land so that they could improve their karma. Today, this village is about 36 acres.

Sayadaw established another village starting in 2014 in Hlegu, outside Yangon, on 180 acres. That village now has a meditation hall, school, playground, market, cement roads and lanes, bridges, monsoon drains, electricity, artesian wells, drinking water purifiers, public toilets, bathrooms, a forest meditation centre, hostels for meditators, an animal sanctuary and a Dhamma hospital is under construction. Experience with the establishment of the Goodwill Village in Thanlyin allowed for many improvements, upgrades and more efficient development of the new village.

In 2015, Sayadaw also opened the ‘Bank of Meritorious Deeds’, locations in Upper Myanmar that provide emergency assistance and response services to accident victims on highways and offer support to those displaced by natural or man-made disasters. He has

also begun a project for the conservation of wildlife and forests in Myanmar and for assisting in rebuilding the lives of former militants and army rebels in that area.

Sayadaw is continuously working to open Dhamma hospitals, schools, drug rehabilitation centres and animal sanctuaries, as well as offering support to struggling monasteries, nunneries and orphanages across the country.

Dhamma hospitals, the brainchild of Sayadaw Ashin Ottamathara, are a careful and proper integration of the art of medical science with the art of Dhamma. At the Thabarwa Dhamma Hospitals, located inside the meditation centre or Goodwill village compound, anyone, including the elderly, infirm and poor are able to stay until the end of their lives with a peaceful mind, with their medical care provided free of charge. Patients receive the medical attention they need, listen to Dhamma teachings, meditate together regularly and perform other volunteer works as they can. In this way, they are not simply patients but also meditators and volunteers. They get to see those around them doing good deeds continuously as well, which uplifts their minds and brings them peace. In this manner, they detach from their lives as patients and come to live and die without fear and worry. They have the opportunity to pay attention to Dhamma or ultimate truths, instead of life as a patient.

3 ‘Doing limitless good deeds’ in a rough real-world environment

When given continuous opportunities to help others, people start to take them and improve themselves. Though it might seem as if opportunities are always available in the society for helping people and doing good deeds, with so many people suffering in the world, it is often not easy to actually do them. Generally, it is our nature to retreat to our homes and apartments, to our work schedules and family affairs and therefore, we spend the great majority of our time caring for ourselves and our families only, or maybe a few close friends. But Thabarwa Centre brings the opportunity to help all kinds of people, 24 hours a day. In the centre, you cannot go far or be awake for long, before encountering someone in front of you who could benefit from your assistance and in the centre, you can find the support necessary to provide what they need. This is the result of Sayadaw’s intent to allow anyone to the centre who needs help, welcoming them openly, without disapproval, along with those who wish to help. In the centre, those who wish to help are not distracted by whatever else a busy day might hold, because helping people is the busy day. It is totally self-driven and no one will reprimand you for doing nothing, or necessarily commend you for doing a lot. So, you get to see your own motivations, your own mind and your own habits. There are no deadlines, only ideas and figuring out how to implement them. It is free. It is growing naturally like a forest, in which the flora and fauna come into balance by way of cause and effect, not by any external support or intervention. Sayadaw just put together the people who need help with people who want to help. People can do as little or as much as they please and still eat and stay for free. The atmosphere is so relaxed, the mind begins to release itself from the tight grasp of obligations and societal expectations.

In a recent Dhamma talk (Ottamathara, 2017a), Sayadaw explained,

“Meditation centres are like us, the monks. They are constructed by the donations of the people. Some people will donate land, some will donate money, or some will donate labour. Some will donate their life by coming to stay at the centre. So all the donations together will make a complete

meditation centre. Thanlyin Thabarwa Centre is like that. It is complete with need and support, supply and demand. Some people want to meditate, so they will go to the centre and some monks, nuns or other people want to teach meditation, so they will come to the centre. And then at the centre they will meet and they will work together. Some people want to donate and some people need help, so those people will meet at the centre and then they can work together. Some people are sick, but they don't have enough money for medical treatment and some doctors want to use their skilfulness for the patients, to do good deeds, so they meet at the centre. Then they can do good deeds."

"The essence of a meditation centre or meditator is to rely on doing good deeds. You may not be able to teach meditation, but you may be able to learn meditation. You may not be able to donate money, but you may be able to volunteer. When all the donations are combined, there will be a complete meditation centre. In this way people can be alive, can survive, without money, without insurance, without their own land, without their own home, without their own food. Now in Thabarwa Centre in Thanlyin there are altogether 3,000 people who can survive by doing good deeds as much as they can." (Ottamathara, 2017b)

Sayadaw leads his disciples by example. He continually goes beyond limits to do wholesome deeds. He encourages and inspires people to work continuously, consistently and diligently on doing good deeds until they reach the destination of real wisdom.

Instead of confronting and solving problems directly by using traditional methods, he guides those coming to Thabarwa Centre with health, social and financial problems to solve those problems with the aid of Dhamma (meditation practice of mindfulness, right understanding and detachment).

In Vietnam, in 2014, Sayadaw mentioned that

"All our physical and mental problems come from not knowing the truth. That's why compassion should not be for the person, not for the poor people, not for the animals, but for their wrong understanding or wrong view. Compassion should be for wrong view. I'm helping various kinds of people who are in need, including meditators, with compassion, not for him, not for her, but for her ignorance, for the ignorance and wrong understanding in him or her. If someone sees from the side of a human, they cannot understand this. They may understand that I have pity for old aged and patients, that I am helping people who are in need. In fact, I am helping them to be free from wrong view. They may be educated or not, healthy or not, rich or not. I'm not interested in their situation. I am interested in whether they are free from wrong view and attachment or not." (Ottamathara, 2014a)

By providing food, shelter, medical care and education, Thabarwa Centre gives residents the opportunity to focus on enhancing their power of right understanding by listening to Dhamma teachings, practicing insight meditation and performing good deeds as much as possible. As their situations improve, people gradually come to realise that their problems were solved due to the merits they gained doing various good deeds at Thabarwa Centre.

Sayadaw has been proving too many people that it is possible to use life for doing good deeds only. If merit-making tasks were impossible to fulfil, he would not have been able to establish dozens of Thabarwa centres, sanctuaries that operate continuously for the benefit of thousands.

In the past, the centre faced many difficulties and ran on very limited funds. Because of the lack of ability to care for everyone, it was first an exclusive area for a small group

of people. But Sayadaw never gave up his work and continued to do good deeds for anyone in need as he could. The situation improved as Sayadaw's endeavours became more publicised, due to the loosening of media control in Myanmar in 2014 and even more so after the democratic elections in November, 2015. More individuals and groups, from far and near, including those from foreign countries, started visiting the main Thabarwa Centre in Thanlyin. They came to learn Dhamma teachings, support Sayadaw's mission, help and participate in greater and greater good deeds. With a significant increase in donations, the centre became able to assist more people in various ways and find solutions to countless problems that society had been unable to handle. For example, the centre was able to offer housing to alcoholics and drug addicts whose families were being torn apart by substance abuse, save the lives of elderly and disabled people who were stuck at home alone and provide places for single expectant mothers. Sayadaw also solved the problems of meditators by offering a place to continue a life of practice uninterruptedly, without financial concerns. Additionally, hundreds of animals who would have been slaughtered, homeless or sold to circuses or other abusive situations have been provided a shelter. The centre is now able to assist and help the general public, individuals, families, societies and organisations who are facing a broad range of difficulties.

When he visits somewhere to give teaching, the local people are often inspired by Sayadaw's actions and donate land and finances to his cause, allowing him to open new centres. When he establishes a new centre, the word spreads and many people in the area come forward to get involved (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Figure 4 World map including the first five Thabarwa centres outside Myanmar (see online version for colours)



Note: More are planned in 2018 such as Virginia, the USA, Germany, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore and Japan

Source: Google Maps and authors

By seeing Sayadaw's character of selflessness, compassion and abandoning power, people are willing to follow his way of doing limitless good deeds for greater and greater

numbers of people. This is how Sayadaw leads meditators, disciples and devotees by example, encouraging them in a relay of limitless good deeds.

Ignoring his own health condition, the weather, poor roads and other hardships, Sayadaw travels to all parts of Myanmar and abroad, reaching ever greater numbers of people. In this way, people follow his footsteps in being able to transform ignorance to knowledge, greed to detachment, hatred to compassion and selfishness to selflessness. This is his great aim and mission for humankind.

4 Mindfulness and detachment as fundamental guidelines in Thabarwa Centre

This chapter deals with the fundamental principles for the social functions of Thabarwa Centre. These fundamentals are described in the following publications:

- *The Practice of Detachment* (Ottamathara, 2013)
- *Mindfulness with Detachment* (Ottamathara, 2014b)
- *The Teachings of Thabarwa Sayadaw* (Ottamathara, 2015)
- *Detachment Meditation in Four Steps* (Ottamathara, 2016a)
- *Dhamma Elections* (Ottamathara, 2016b).

Meditation, Sayadaw says, is mainly concerned with the mind. Mindfulness and detachment are the essential aspects of meditation. The first object to be mindful of is our self, rather than others. We may be young or old, healthy or sick and male or female. Our self is the most basic object of mindfulness (Silananda, 1990). The more we are mindful of our self, the more we can detach from others. Our self and others are to use, know and experience only, without rejection or attachment. If there is rejecting, there will also be attaching. If there is attaching there will also be rejecting. As per habit, the mind only knows how to react with one of these two extremes of attaching (welcoming, liking, wanting) or rejecting (aversion, rejecting, disliking, refusing) (Dhammananda, 1996). The alternative option the Buddha discovered is the middle way or the action of knowing, experiencing or using only, without attaching or rejecting (Mahasi, 1992; Pandita, 1993).

There are physical, verbal and mental actions. These are the causes we are always making. The present condition of our life, our body and mind, is the result of the causes we have done before and those we are doing now (Pa-Auk, 2003). Each of our physical, verbal and mental actions is teaching us, "This is right, or, this is wrong". If we are not mindful of our self we cannot understand this law of cause and effect or action and reaction.

Both our intentional and habitual actions are the causes of our present condition (Silananda, 1993). Good experiences are caused by right or good actions. Bad experiences are caused by wrong or bad actions. If we know the causes of good and bad experiences, we can change a situation easily (Silananda, 2004).

To be mindful of our self as opposed to others is the most basic level of mindfulness practice. It will also help us to detach from others. If we are not mindful of our self, we may be mindful of others, which mean we are relying on others or the actions of others.

We should rely on our self and our own actions. The practice of mindfulness and detachment is the way to correct our habitual mistakes.

The second object of mindfulness is to know the present happening of our body and mind. By the practice of mindfulness within our body and mind, we will be able to detach from our habitual perceptions of our self. If we do not meditate, we will take care of only the exterior of our self. Fat or thin, white or black, man or woman, all these are different only in appearance. The present happening of our bodies and minds is not much different from one to another (Narada, 1970).

Desire to be fat or thin, white or black, young or old, man or woman, all these are because of our own attachments. Because of attachments to one side, we may reject the other side. Because of rejecting one side, we may attach to the other. The mind should be free from desire for like, dislike and ignorance. Like, dislike and ignorance are mental diseases. If we like, dislike and misunderstand that something or someone is true, the mind will never be healthy. The practice of mindfulness can make the mind stable and healthy.

We are always using the mind. The mind should be stable and pure. The mind should be healthy and wealthy. That is the most important for everyone. There are many young, educated, rich and healthy men and women. But if their minds are not healthy and wealthy, their lives are useless for others. If the mind is healthy and wealthy, the body may be sick or old or poor or uneducated. The life will be useful for the others. The wealth and health of the mind is more important than the body. As we take care of the health and wealth of the body, we should also always be mindful to have a healthy and wealthy mind, or stable and pure mind.

If we are mindful of our self, we can detach from the others. If we are mindful of the present action and happening of our body and mind, we may be able to detach from our self.

The last and most important object of mindfulness is the present moment. The present moment is limitless. This life, this place, this year, this month, this day, this hour, this minute, this second are not the present moment. The present moment is immeasurable, a very short time (Bodhi, 2006). We can accept the limited time, therefore we attach to limit, or something or someone. To detach from limited time, we should accept limitless time, or present moment time. So be mindful within our self at the present moment.

There will be many actions and happenings within our self. We should be mindful of the most obvious one. Something is obvious because of ignorance. If we are able to be mindful enough, that obvious thing will disappear. Then another one will be obvious. So, we should be mindful again and again until whatever it is disappears, hot or cold, still or movement, good or bad and knowing or not knowing. All these are just temporary. Nothing is forever. It will come and it will go. It will disappear as soon as it appears. That is the nature of impermanence. No one creates or stops that impermanent nature. In fact, there is no I, no you, no mine, no yours, no something, no someone, no living beings or non-living beings, no life, no death, just ever new impermanent nature.

The truth is the same everywhere, every time, with everyone. We should not forget the truth. The practice of mindfulness and detachment are the way to understand the truth. The truth is also neither for rejecting nor attaching – to use only. If we do not understand the truth, we will use just created truths, which are living and non-living beings. We will

live and die in the created world. We will misunderstand that we are living beings or man or woman.

The practice of mindfulness is to be doing, using, knowing and experiencing only without attachment. If we are not mindful, we are doing, using, knowing and experiencing with attachment.

5 An example for a meditation in a Thabarwa Centre

Sayadaw Ottamathara's centre is the place for people to improve their quality. Although Thabarwa Centre is fulfilling the physical and mental needs of people, this is not the centre's final aim. Once people's basic needs are met, they are free to do good deeds for ridding the mind of the deepest defilements of greed, anger and delusion. Good deeds are to do only, without attachment or rejection of what is happening and without the misunderstanding of 'I' or 'you'.

Doing only is not the action of something or someone. It is the action that takes place when there is no attachment to the idea of something or someone. We need to do good deeds and our daily activities without attachment. That means doing them because it is what should be done, not because 'I' am doing good or 'I' am a good person. Action taken with the notion that there is 'I' or 'you', something or someone, is acting from our intelligence. It is not doing only. It is sure we do not know the whole truth of nature with our limited, created intelligence.

In fact, mind and matter are appearing and disappearing moment to moment (Karunadasa, 1989). This is the natural process of ever new impermanent nature. Every moment, mind and matter appear, completely new and then disappear. The mind and matter appearing in this moment are therefore not the same as those that were existing in the previous moment or the same that will appear in the next moment. This reality prohibits the existence of a lasting entity that carries on moment to moment (Silananda, 2008). Given the reality that there is no lasting entity in what we refer to as 'I' or 'you', we need not worry about our self, but about the actions we are performing, each of which will give any number of effects.

Thabarwa Centre is based on doing action according to the nature of no 'something', no 'someone' and teaches people how to do good action based on this natural law. 'In the society', Sayadaw said recently,

"Many young, healthy and educated people are busy for money, fame or authority. If they are busy doing good deeds and helping the people in need, the greatest problems of the society will be solved. Education, business and medicine are not the complete way of solving problems and inconveniences. Mindfulness of the truth and practicing in the right way are the complete way of doing good deeds." (Ottamathara, 2017a)

Practicing in the right way means contemplating with the right understanding of non-self or mindfulness and detachment. There should be mindfulness of nature as it is happening, that is, of body and mind or of the present moment. There should be detachment from the experience as mine or experiencing only. Fulfilling other people's desires will naturally fulfil our own desires, because of cause and effect.

6 The communication strategy of the Thabarwa centres

In an interview from October, 2017 Sayadaw explained,

“Social media is necessary for this modern age. That’s why it has developed very quickly. I understand we cannot reject the media. The new generation is skilful in using social media, so I try to use it to do good deeds. Not only for me, but also for all, especially the new generation. I try to use social media to do good deeds widely, including Dhamma teaching online, answering questions and sharing experiences. But there is also a side effect, which is strong attachment to using social media.”

“It is difficult to use social media in our country because it is very new here. Most people are not skilful in using it, which is why we have to face a lot of side effects, because of misleading messages put out by unskilful reporters or Facebook users. I allow the reporters because I understand I cannot reject the media, and it is difficult to control it. So, I have to be patient in using the media as a tool to do all kinds of good deeds. Now we are much more able to use social media than before.” (Ottamathara, 2017a)

The centre uses all kinds of media available to link the centres across Myanmar and abroad. The centres are not working individually but as one force resulting from a collection of good deeds as well as individual abandoning. There are many examples of the worldwide collaboration involved at any time by Thabarwa volunteers for helping each other, sharing knowledge or skills, helping in translation, solving people’s material or social problems around the world, assisting near death patients at their last moments via internet, etc. At any time of day, anyone can listen to or see Sayadaw’s teachings or actions. Many people in the world become involved in that process with their skills or materials. Those present with Sayadaw create video or audio recordings, share them globally and others take those recordings to edit, transcribe, translate and share whatever material is produced within minutes or hours of the event.

One good example of this kind of process involved a foreign mental patient who was staying in the Thanlyin Centre. When he had an urgent problem, one of his main caregivers, who was out of the country, connected with the leaders of the centre, with those staying near him and with his relatives and friends in his own country, creating a team involved in finding complete answers to his material needs, translators, emotional support and guidance.

Sayadaw also mentioned in reference to communication strategies that

“Meditation, or mindfulness and detachment without limit or attachment, is necessary for all, everyone, everywhere, all the time. That’s why it is suitable to do this kind of work. Doing this can make many people understand the truth and do good deeds. What I understand about science is that it’s the most powerful method or weapon to destroy ignorance and for knowing the truth of worldly affairs; it cannot be compared with mindfulness and detachment, but if we speak about worldly affairs, science is one of the most effective techniques for destroying ignorance, so it is good. I am also trying to destroy ignorance. I try to share books and share through the internet, in every language. I am trying to use all media, languages, people and places to spread the knowledge and practice about the truth.”

“Science has limits, because it relies on modern technology. For the practice of mindfulness, we need to emphasize our own mind. Mind is the most advanced weapon. If we can study our mind we are complete. We can know many things.”

According to Sayadaw,

“We have to learn everything in the society to know the truth of everything and everyone, so if we are interested in science we need to know the incompleteness or nothingness of science. In this way we may be able to detach from science and scientists. Only when we are able to detach from all living beings and non-living beings we can associate with all living beings and non-living beings, including through business, politics, philosophy and science. All these practices are incomplete, not something, just nothing. This is the truth of everything and everyone. Only when we are able to know that truth can we understand the original truth, which is impermanent nature and permanent nature. This is the complete or right conclusion for everyone, everything or every action and every practice. That’s all.”

7 Conclusions: applicability in a globalised world

The first Thabarwa Centre, which started with Sayadaw Ashin Ottamathara and a handful of followers to abandon society’s traditional way of solving problems, including the problems of meditation, has developed into a multinational effort of solving problems by doing good deeds. As day by day, more people learn about the centre, come to visit, make donations and volunteer, the word about the successful outcomes of doing good deeds spreads further and further. Thousands of lives have improved as a result of the work going on in Thabarwa Centre. The centre is a combination of theory and practice. One can learn the theory about mindfulness and detachment and then put it into practice by fulfilling the needs and desires of others day by day.

Sayadaw will not stop his work of creating new centres throughout the world, with the help of all those interested in doing good deeds. He always encourages people to stay in the centres, because they are already established as places doing the work of good deeds full time. In our personal lives, it is difficult to find the way to fully dedicate ourselves to doing good deeds continuously. And doing good deeds continuously is the way to solve all problems, down to the most subtle problems of misunderstanding ourselves and the truth of birth, aging, sickness and death.

As Sayadaw explains: “Ever since I came to realise that practicing meditation or contemplating the truth is vital for everybody, every circumstance, every time and place, I accepted anyone who came seeking refuge in Thabarwa Centre.”

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Notes

- 1 In Buddhism, the term 'right' understanding refers to the truth of non-self, that there is no permanent entity that carries on through time but just the nature in constant change or evolution. It is also used to explain the concept of not attaching nor rejecting phenomena, but being in the middle way, or at point of equanimity with them, which Sayadaw describes as using, knowing, doing and experiencing only. Right understanding also understands the Four Noble Truths or the Buddha's explanation of the laws governing all reality, that there is stress, a cause of stress, an ending of stress and a path leading to the ending of stress.