

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a small bundle of dried, brown leaves. The hand is positioned in the center-right of the frame, with fingers curled around the leaves. The background is a dense forest of tall, thin trees with vibrant green foliage, suggesting a natural, outdoor setting. The lighting is bright, highlighting the texture of the leaves and the skin of the hand.

Coping
with

a handful
of
leaves

Aggacitta Bhikkhu

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GUIDE TO NON-ENGLISH TERMS

With the exception of proper nouns, uncommon non-English words are italicised, with full diacritical marks on their first occurrence in the main text, followed by their English translations in round brackets. In subsequent occurrences, they are in normal font. More common terms will also be with full diacritical marks and italicised on their first occurrence but will not be accompanied by translations.

For easy reference, a glossary of such non-English terms, including some proper nouns, is provided on pg 18.

Certain words in the main text are accompanied by their original Pali equivalents, which are italicised and placed within round brackets. These are not further explained in the glossary.

Abbr.	Text	Reference according to
SN	Samyutta Nikaya	Samyutta number:Sutta number
Dhp	Dhammapada	Verse number
MN	Majjhima Nikaya	Sutta number

All references are based on Vipassana Research Institute's Chattha Sangayana CD-ROM (V.3.0).

“**W**hat do you think, monks? Which are more—the leaves in my hand or those above the *sāpā* forest?” The Blessed One was staying near Kosambi in the sisapa forest when he picked up a handful of sisapa leaves and posed this question.

“Few are the leaves in your hand, Bhante,” answered the monks, “compared to the abundant leaves above the sisapa forest.”

“It is so indeed, monks,” said the Blessed One. “In the same way, vast is the knowledge that I have directly realised but not revealed. But why did I not reveal it?” The Buddha explained that it was because such knowledge was not conducive to total liberation from the sufferings pertaining to the endless round of births and deaths. (Sisapavana Sutta, SN 56:31).

Centuries later, the “handful of leaves” bequeathed to us was subsequently inscribed in three huge baskets of dried palm leaves, then printed in several thousand pages, and now stored in several hundred megabytes of disc space. How can we relate the method of *vipassanā* (insight) meditation that we are so familiar with to the

handful of sisapa leaves? Could it be a leaf; perhaps just a cell? Or maybe even more minute than that?

Not very long ago, I was involved in an open discussion about various methods of vipassana meditation. A long-time Mahasi *yogi* asked, “What do you think of the Goenka method? They even claim that they are doing vipassana meditation.” I was quite startled by his remark because it implied that only the Mahasi method was vipassana while others were not.

There are, in fact, some yogis who had difficulty making headway in the Mahasi method but found the Pa Auk method more suitable for their meditative progress. Some of them have made such great advancement that they have become qualified teachers of that method.

Yet there are others who assert that access or absorption concentration is an absolute prerequisite before a *yogi* can even start to mentally observe (*vipassati*) the grossest of ultimate reality—material phenomena, not to mention mental phenomena like thoughts, emotions and defilements.

One particular yogi had been regularly practising the Mahasi method on his own for several months when he was talked into accepting this view. He was advised to stop noting predominant physical and mental phenomena “interrupting” his meditation and to just concentrate on the breath at his nostrils. For three months he diligently tried to do so.

Later he told me that although *ānāpānassati* (mindfulness of the in-breath and out-breath) gave him some peace and calmness, he found that his everyday mindfulness was becoming dull and blunt. When he was practising general mindfulness, he could watch his thoughts and emotions even when he was at work, and that helped him in self-restraint. But since he changed to pure *samatha* (tranquillity) meditation, he was getting wilder in his behaviour.

Several years ago when I was in Myanmar, I had a discussion with a brother forest monk, Hman Taung Forest Sayadaw U Candobhasa. He is one of the more exceptional yogis that I have met. Having practised various methods of

meditation, e.g. Mahasi, Sun Lun, Mogok, Than Lin Taw Ya, Kanni, etc., he was still very enthusiastic when I told him about the Pa Auk method.

“How can you cope with so many methods?” I asked.

“Whenever I start to learn a new method I make sure that I completely let go of any other techniques that I have learnt before,” replied Sayadaw. “One must be unbiased, objective and believing when practising under a competent master. Only then can one reap the most benefits,” he stressed.

Such are the words of a true Truth Seeker. Faith in, gratitude and loyalty to one’s teacher are, doubtless, cardinal virtues of a devout student. But should a Dhamma sibling be accused of unfaithfulness (or “spiritual adultery”, to coin a new term) and snubbed for having the guts to try another alternative that may very well prove to be more suitable than the Dhamma family’s usual method of practice? There is a great deal of subjectivity involved in walking the path to liberation. What is suitable for one may not be so for another. “One man’s meat is another man’s poison” may be a

mundane English saying, but its message reverberates through the Tipitaka and its exegetical literature as well as among yogis of all traditions and ages.

Most of us would be quite familiar with the story of Ven Sariputta's newly ordained student¹ who struggled in vain with an unsuitable meditation subject until the Buddha came to the rescue. He was, it seems, a goldsmith's son. Observing that he was still in his robust youth, Ven Sariputta, the Buddha's foremost disciple in great wisdom, gave him *asubha* (loathsomeness of the body) meditation to subdue lustful thoughts that he could be prone to. It was a disastrous diagnosis, which goes to prove that even *arahants* (liberated person who has eradicated all mental defilements) are human enough to err. Throughout the *vassa* (rainy season retreat of three months' duration), one-pointedness of mind eluded him. His mind simply did not want to concentrate on the loathsome subject.

After four months of coaching and persistent striving, both teacher and student were exhausted.

¹Found in the Commentary on the Dhammapada verse #285

Ven Sariputta, with all his intelligence and wisdom, could not figure out what was wrong. Finally he took him to see the Buddha. Through his psychic insight into others' inclinations and proclivities, the Buddha perceived that this new monk had been born in a goldsmith's family not only in this existence, but for the last 500 lifetimes!

The poor novice was absolutely repelled by such a gross subject because he had been used to working with refined, beautiful objects of gold. It was obvious why his mind could not concentrate on the asubha meditation. Realising that a pleasant meditation subject would be suitable for him, the Buddha created a huge golden lotus with drops of water dripping from its petals and stalk. "Here, take this to the fringe of the monastery, erect it on a heap of sand and meditate on it," he said.

The monk's eyes lit up with pleasure when he saw the beautiful golden lotus in the Buddha's hand. He reached out for it and his mind was immediately absorbed in the golden lotus. Following the Buddha's instructions, he progressively attained and mastered the four *jhānas* (states of

meditative concentration) in a single sitting. The Buddha then made the lotus wilt and fade in front of him. At that moment, the new monk realised impermanence and he attained enlightenment when he heard the Buddha's words, projected through psychic power from afar:

Pluck off one's attachment
 Like the autumnal lotus with the hand
 Just develop the Path to Peace—
 Nibbana, preached by the Buddha.

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Dogmatic Theravada meditators should be asked, "Under which of the 40 objects of meditation described in the *Visuddhimagga* can this golden lotus be classified? Can it be ascertained that he went through the classical 16 stages of insight knowledge? Did he directly perceive the cause-and-effect connection of his past lives before he qualified to attain *maggaphala* (path and fruition of enlightenment)? It can be argued that individuals during the Buddha's time had superior *pāramāñ* (perfections of spiritual virtues), so they could break all the rules

and still attain enlightenment; whereas lesser mortals like us shall have to trudge every inch of the way just to get a glimpse of Nibbana. With all humility, we may have to admit that we have inferior parami credentials. But who on earth has the audacity to determine which method is best for an individual when even Ven Sariputta, the Buddha's wisest disciple, could prescribe a wrong subject?

“I tell you, Ashin Phayah², all of them lure [their students] according to their respective inclinations. Consider for example, Ven Ananda's case. The scriptures say that he attained *arahantship* (total liberation from all defilements) while he was practising *kāyagatāsati* (mindfulness established in respect of the body). Teachers from the Mahasi tradition would of course assert that he was noting the movements of his body as he was lying down. Teachers who favour *anapanassati* would, instead, suggest that he was observing his breath at that time. ‘He must have been contemplating one of

² Burmese word roughly meaning ‘Venerable’.

the thirty-two parts of the body,' asubha enthusiasts would insist. None of them can be proven wrong because the term 'kayagatasati' can refer to any of those meditations. This is only one example, mind you. The scriptures are full of ambiguities like that," disclosed Hman Taung Forest Sayadaw.

"They're all so eloquent and convincing; we don't really know whom to believe or not to believe. In the end, it's the actual practice—the direct, personal experience—that matters most," he continued. "After trying out so many different methods, what do I conclude? Each may start differently, but eventually they all end up doing the same thing—observing the arising and passing away of mental and material phenomena. The clarity and subtlety of the perception, of course, depends on the strength and intensity of one's concentration."

During the Buddha's time, monks of different clans, castes, districts and countries stayed and meditated together in one monastery, living in harmony and in accordance with the Dhamma-Vinaya. But not all of them were meditating on the

same type of meditation. One might be practising *mettabhāvanā* (development of loving-kindness), another anapanassati, and yet another contemplating the four great elements. Others might be practising more than just one type of meditation.

For instance, Ven Rahula, the Buddha's son, at one time was given six different subjects of meditation: thirty-two parts of the body, five elements, four divine abodes, asubha, impermanence and anapanassati. (Maharahulovada Sutta, MN 62).

As the Omniscient One was still alive, monks were prescribed the meditation subjects most suitable for each individual. Our story of Ven Sariputta's student is just one of the many cases where monks who were given inappropriate meditation subjects by their teachers struggled in vain until the Buddha came to the rescue. The Visuddhimagga and other commentaries also discuss at length the subject of suitability, not only confined to meditation subjects, but covering other areas such as food, posture, climate, lodging and Dhamma talk as well.

All this points to the fact that there is a great deal of subjectivity involved in the practice for liberation. Starting off on the spiritual path on the wrong foot could have far reaching consequences. Imagine what could have happened to the ex-goldsmith monk if the Buddha had not intervened. In my association with yogis and meditation teachers of various traditions, I've met and heard of many yogis who got on the right footing only after they had tried other methods without much success.

If we know that a Dhamma sibling has discovered a new method of practice different from ours that is conducive to clarity of mind, freedom from the Hindrances (*nāvaraṇā*) and deepening of insight, what should we do? Would it be to anyone's advantage to ostracise him or her out of loyalty to the good old teacher or to the Dhamma family's usual method of practice? Why can't we maintain the spirit of liberality prevalent during the Buddha's time? Even the venerables Sariputta, Moggallana and Ananda would send their students to one another for training. Why don't we hear of student exchange programmes, e.g. between the Mahasi,

Goenka and Pa Auk traditions? Why can't we live in harmony and with mutual understanding, respect and support within our own organisation or society even though we may be practising different methods of meditation?

The handful of leaves given to us by the Buddha may be insignificant compared to the bountiful leaves of knowledge and information available to us today. But the wonder of that little handful is that it can be so varied, so versatile, so readily customised, and so effective—if only we allow ourselves the freedom to choose and experiment. If only we are humble enough to admit the limitations of our knowledge and experience. If only we are discreet enough when commenting on others' meditative experiences that are beyond our ken. If only we are tolerant and understanding enough to encourage our Dhamma siblings to try another path that is different from ours. If only we have enough unconditional love to rejoice in the success achieved through the Pa Auk method by a long-time Mahasi yogi. If only we know how to cope with just a handful of variegated leaves.

Mutual support, understanding and respect, and unity in diversity are essential virtues that will help to nurture our practice while we walk on the spiritual path together. As a minority in a Muslim country, and even among the Malaysian Buddhist community, we Theravadins can no longer afford to be further decimated by our petty dogmatic differences, opinionated assertions and partisan loyalties. To react emotionally or behave judgementally towards our Dhamma siblings who have found their mecca in the “opposite camp” may well cause an obstruction to their spiritual progress and well being. It may also undermine our own precious fraternity, strength, unity and direction as the privileged heirs of our Master’s handful of leaves, given without a closed fist.

Glossary

<i>ānāpānassati</i>	mindfulness of the in-breath and out-breath
<i>arahant</i>	a liberated person who has eradicated all defilements
<i>asubha</i>	loathsomeness of the body
<i>DhammaVinaya</i>	Doctrine and Discipline—the name given by Gotama Buddha to his teachings
<i>jhāna</i>	state of meditative concentration
<i>kāyagatāsati</i>	mindfulness (established in respect) of the body
<i>maggaphala</i>	path and fruition (of enlightenment)
<i>mettabhāvanā</i>	development of loving-kindness
<i>Nibbāna</i>	Cessation of all physical and mental formations. This is experienced by an enlightened person as a state of incomparable bliss and peace
<i>pāramā</i>	perfection of 10 spiritual virtues: giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truthfulness, resolution, loving-kindness and equanimity

<i>samatha</i>	tranquillity; serenity (meditation)
<i>Sayādaw</i>	Venerable teacher (Burmese)
<i>sāpā</i>	name of a strong, tall forest tree found in India
<i>Theravāda</i>	Doctrine of the Elders—one of the two main traditions of Buddhism, the other being Mahayana. It claims to be the earliest, most authentic extant record of Gotama Buddha’s teachings and stresses on striving for one’s own liberation as the priority in spiritual practice.
<i>Tipiṭaka</i>	Three Baskets—the full set of canonical Theravada scriptures
<i>vassa</i>	rainy season (retreat) of three months’ duration
<i>vipassanā</i>	“seeing clearly”—insight meditation
<i>Visuddhimagga</i>	Path of Purification—an authoritative meditation manual of Theravada. It is a post-canonical commentary composed around 5 th century CE.
<i>yogi</i>	one who practises meditation



Venerable Aggacitta Bhikkhu is a Malaysian Theravada Buddhist monk who received *upasamapadà* (higher ordination) at Mahasi Meditation Centre, Rangoon, Myanmar, in 1979. He has trained under various teachers, notably Sayadaw U Pandita (Panditarama), Sayadaw U Tissara (Yankin Forest Monastery), and Sayadaw U Acinna (Pa Auk Forest Monastery).

Besides practicing meditation, he studied advanced Pali and translation in Thai and Burmese under Sayadaw U Dhammananda at Wat Tamaoh, Lampang, Thailand, from 1983 to 1984. He continued to study the Pali Tipitaka and researched on its interpretation and practice in Myanmar until his return to Malaysia at the end of 1994.

In 2000, he founded Sasanarakkha Buddhist Sanctuary (SBS), a Theravada monk training center nestled among secluded valleys and brooks near Taiping, Perak, Malaysia.

Languages that he is knowledgeable in are English, Bahasa Malaysia, Hokkien, Myanmar, Thai and Pali. Among his major literary contributions are:

- Honouring the Departed (authored, 2004)
- Discourse on Atanatiya Protection (translated, 2003)
- Role of Sangha in the New Millenium: The Monastic Perspective (authored, 2002)
- Kathina Then and Now (authored, 2001)
- Dying to Live: The Role of Kamma in Dying and Rebirth (authored, 1999)
- In This Very Life (translated, 1993)
- Dhamma Therapy (translated, 1984)
- The Importance of Keeping the Five Precepts (authored, 1982)

Can any one method of vipassana meditation claim superiority over another? Then again, is it true that absorption concentration is an absolute prerequisite to vipassana? These are some of the perennial debates that haunt Buddhists walking diverse roads to liberation from samsara.

In *Coping with a Handful of Leaves*, Ven Aggacitta touches on these issues with reference to the Pali scriptures and contemporary experiences. He reminds us that we should not allow our differences to become a source of disagreement and a cause of disunity. Rather, he urges us to practise unconditional love, mutual respect and sympathetic joy as a means of transmuting our discriminative energy into positive qualities such as strength and unity within the richness of diversity.

Coping with a Handful of Leaves does not only encourage yogis to be brave enough to try other methods of meditation if the first one they have been introduced to is not suitable. It would also help to bring about a paradigm shift in the mental attitude of yogis, irrespective of their methods of meditation.



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