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Wayfaring

A Manual for Insight Meditators

Bhikkhu Sobin S. Namto

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by

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Foreword

The instruction in this manual is that given by the Venerable P.M. Sobin Namto, our teacher (achan), a Buddhist monk and meditation teacher from Thailand. Selected portions were chosen from taped conversations with Achan, recorded in an informal atmosphere. An interview section, slightly edited, is provided for the meditator as general guidance in the initial phases of meditation practice. The instruction is in no sense definitive, as each meditator''s experience differs; however, similar problems manifest under different guises. Our frustrations, anxieties and conflicts appear to have a common genesis: all spring from the root-base of greed, hatred and confusion.

The material presented in this digest presumes the reader''s acquaintance with the techniques of Vipassanā-Insight Meditation and fundamental knowledge of the Dharma. The text is not highly polished; some repetition is inevitable. But if a glint of the brilliance of the Crown Jewel of the Dhamma—the way of mindfulness—is reflected within the mind of the reader, these writings will have served their purpose.

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Introduction by Achan Sobin

As a novice, I carefully studied the Buddhist teaching and diligently applied myself to the study of philosophy, scripture, history and language. I could explain the most abstruse points of Buddhist philosophy and speak on the field of Buddhist meditation. My mind was packed to overflowing with facts. Only when I decided to put the books away and actually entered meditation training myself, did I begin to understand truly what I had studied and what I had been taught.

I sincerely hope that each reader is encouraged to pursue the training with ever-greater determination, to search for the truth—to discover the dharma not found in books.

May you all persevere on the path.

—Achan Sobin

Provisions For the Journey

The arising of Insight-knowledge occurs spontaneously and intuitively. This realisation of truth differs, however, from knowledge born of focusing on painful physical and mental phenomena. The Noble Truth of Suffering is not restricted solely to negative conditions of body and mind, nor to the readily observable facts of birth, sickness, old age and death. The suffering, which the Buddha, repeatedly emphasised, concerned the profound truth of the lack of stability of all phenomena in the mental and physical world . . . the primal insecurity.

The acknowledgement of this particular aspect of suffering is the gateway to deeper levels of Insight-knowledge. All unliberated beings have this original dis-ease, for we have not penetrated fully the profound magnitude and significance of suffering. The root causes of pain—craving and attachment—have not been completely exposed. By entering training in Insight development, the meditator experientially discovers the Dharma. The truth becomes a living reality.

The great majority of Buddhists content themselves with superficial knowledge of the teachings, convinced that

spiritual evolution is quite beyond their capacity. Let us not be so sceptical of our potential for development! Neglecting to take advantage of our good fortune to practise Insight Meditation is to have wasted the finest opportunity for growth afforded a human being.

The Buddha-Dharma pulses with life. Even the distance of 2,500 years has not obscured the way for the earnest seeker. The path is clearly marked. Why delay any longer?

Novice meditators often enter Vipassanā (Insight) meditation practice with keen expectations of experiencing blissful or mystical states of mind; in fact, occasionally meditators seek training specifically to develop supernormal powers. If we believe the purpose of training is gauged specifically to yield altered states of consciousness, we seriously misunderstand Insight Meditation training. The purpose of training in Vipassana is to *know* the mind, in its actual condition, *moment-to-moment*. Training is undertaken to establish the true power of the mind. Its only purpose is the realisation of enlightenment.

The calm and spiritual ease born of Insight is that knowledge giving clear vision of the true nature of existence. We awake to see the illusory nature of the ego concept. The misery-making defilements of the mind are finally totally exposed in the powerful beam of mindfulness. And as we grow watchful and alert, their ability to delude the mind is gradually weakened. This is the coolness that quenches the burning . . . the unshakeable calm born of

seeing things as they are. It is the refuge giving protection amidst the diffuseness of the world.

Insight training builds mindful awareness. It develops clarity of mind that is strong and precise. Meditation is not our goal, but rather serves as the tool enabling the unfolding of Insight into the real nature of the world.

Meditators are often discouraged during the early stages of practice to discover they are experiencing greater mental and physical pain than ever before. Becoming disheartened and lacking proper guidance, many abandon training, or continue "meditating" in a haphazard, unproductive manner, with little or no discernible progress. This unfortunate situation may prevail for some years. And it is not uncommon to see serious mental disorders result from such mismanaged practice. *Mind development should be cultivated with emphasis on careful progression.*

Initial resistance to training the mind is a normal occurrence, and when the rope of mindfulness is finally applied, the struggle for freedom is intense and searing. Applied too tightly, strain is bound to result; applied too loosely, the mind drifts away. It is at this crucial stage that meditators who are experiencing difficulty should seek all possible means to seek proper guidance.

Meditation training follows the same principles governing the mastery of any skill. Step-by-step training assures steady, sure progress. The perfection of the mind requires the utmost determination and a most decidedly courageous

attitude to pursue training through the inevitable confusion, the boredom and restlessness, the physical discomforts and the desire to escape the necessity of disciplining the mind. The desire to run away is strong. But how can we run, shackled as we are by greed, hatred and delusion? The weight of the deluded, unknowing mind is oppressive. We can drop that weight and be free, *now!*

Beginning meditation instruction is simplicity itself: when bodily calmness is present, focus is naturally centred on the breath, an easily discernible object. This main object of mindfulness (the breath) is temporarily averted any time there is awareness of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching or thinking. The mind is then brought back gently to the breathing.

Lapses in attention are a normal occurrence in the early phases of practice. As concentration is stabilised and the mind is calmed, mindfulness is naturally sharpened. The meditator learns to observe the mind objectively. All feeling-tones, desires, memories, etc, are exposed and scrutinised—gently and non-judgmentally. We learn to look closely at what is *actually present*.

Newcomers to training often feel that meditation is "not going well." Surrendering to depression and impatience, they often wish to terminate practice. The correct procedure to follow is to maintain the position of observer, simply acknowledging all feelings which arise in consciousness in a calm, detached manner. Nothing is suppressed. We should

try to train calmly, patiently, sincerely . . . not yearning for quick results.

Training should not be deferred until some nebulous "future time." No certainty exists to guarantee that our mental and physical capabilities will be sufficient to the task. The Buddha had many lay and ordained disciples who made the resolution to practise under the most trying circumstances. Occasionally the ocean of suffering was crossed at the cost of life itself. They felt it was the proper decision, preferable to continuing to live a meaningless existence—a life of desolation and emptiness.

It is not difficult to compose a myriad assortment of rationalisations to justify putting off training to another day. Sometimes, as we approach the moment of commitment, hesitation causes us to retreat . . . fear is awakened, for we are approaching unknown territory and we wonder if perhaps it isn''t better to continue as we are . . . we might miss something. And why, after all, should we embark on such difficult training? Immersing ourselves in the normal round is, after all, so easy.

Ultimately, the great incentive for training is our growing sensitivity to suffering and the vacuous, insipid nature of life. It is not really a question of renunciation of the so-called pleasures of life, but rather of interest dying naturally—the allurements fade and grow dim. Until such time as we are stirred by our own unrest, the mind will be uncertain, wavering and full of doubt.

It is crucial that we become aware of our internal drives and the impulse to remain in the world. The most fatal of attachments can be the clinging to suffering itself: the fear of "letting go," the fear of freedom. So we go on clutching suffering to our hearts. Perhaps that is the only thing we have, and we are afraid. The time may come when we realise there is no need to suffer at all, no need to fear the unknown.

One may speak of the spiritual journey as leaping to the "Other Shore"—to Nibbāna. Leaping here signifies dedicating the mind to the task completely, committing ourselves with the some determination as the first astronaut who jumped from the space capsule onto the moon.

When the woman or man reaches awakening, deluded ways of thinking are abandoned. Though life continues rather normally, the mind is free and luminous. It is an immutable condition, impossible to fully relate to others—as is the astronaut''s experience not wholly communicable to earth-bound people. *No matter what our circumstances in life, each one of us can attempt this journey.*

The birth of Insight is not very far from us, especially when cultivation of the mind is continuous and resolution is present. There is a saying in Thailand that enlightenment is right under one''s nose! So continue breathing mindfulness!

Clarity and radiance appear in the minds of the Liberated Ones. The unenlightened mind is dark. Worldly people do not have a crystalline pure, unfettered mind. If we did, there

would be no need to practise.

Sights Along The Way

Strange mental phenomena appearing during training is a natural event in the course of Insight practice. Do not permit imagination to create two kinds of understanding. Attention given to any vision or peculiar occurrence only serves to hamper progress. Watch closely and see what is happening. Be the good audience of the drama, but remain unattached to the passing show. Mindfulness will be undermined if interest or curiosity is aroused. Students—use your intelligence! Attention must protect the mind at all times. The unguarded mind permits any weakness to easily gain control.

Do not waste time. If there is confusion regarding practice or fears which cannot be resolved by you, consult your instructor for corrective action.

The student of mental training should understand well the differences between samadhi, or concentration-type meditation, and Insight meditation. The mind in higher stages of samadhi is temporarily restrained with regard to the mental hindrances. *The highly tranquillised mind cannot gain wisdom.* The flux of phenomena cannot be observed, for

consciousness is fixed.

Certainly, no Insight develops without concentration. In Vipassana training, a sufficient level of momentary concentration is developed to do the work of *knowing* the arising and passing away of phenomena.

A meditator may have particular fears of uncomfortable memories half-buried in the shadows of consciousness and suddenly, without warning, the difficulty is encountered in practice. Armed with courage and the attitude of not succumbing in the face of anxiety, the meditator will be able to successfully confront any obstruction. *Focus mindfulness on any disturbing mental state.* Be calm, strong and patient. If fear is permitted to hold sway over the meditator''s practice, it will gain in strength and return repeatedly to test the endurance of the meditator. When the obstacle has been faced and the way cleared, training can be resumed. Indeed, the Dhamma protects those who practise it.

When one truly understands the urgency to cultivate the mind, the student realises that training continues everywhere. To “break training” or “return to training” does not arise in the mind of the meditator who fully comprehends the implications of mind-development. Meditators are often confused regarding practice, and actually believe that meditation only occurs when seated cross-legged with eyes closed! Whenever the eyes see a form, ears hear a sound, nose senses a smell, tongue experiences a taste, body knows touch, or the mind

recognises an idea, one is aware of it. *That is meditation*. We try to remain awake, at all times. If we do not grasp at anything or have attachment, then there is no suffering.

The mastery of the mind increases with devoted practice. We should ask ourselves simple questions and test our understanding daily. Do we feel differently about life? Are we aware of mental defilement when they arise? How soon are we able to remove the nourishment-giving support to these peace-robbing mental stains?

When understanding matures, everything we do in life will be meaningful. When we do any kind of work with attention and clarity, ignorance and defilements cannot enter the guarded mind.

After we have trained in meditation for some time, if there is no improvement in our daily life we may be certain that a particular understanding is lacking. Do we know how to rectify the situation?

Usually a meditator will realise some level of Insight after continuous practise of Vipassana training for seven days, seven weeks or seven months. If no higher knowledge has been realised during these periods, it will be reached during other stages of practice.

A student who wishes to terminate an intensive period of practice and resume training at a later time will continue from the level of development attained. The awakened condition of mind does not have to manifest at any particular moment; in fact, if the goal of liberation is not

attained within this lifetime, one can proceed in the next life. Firm intention and high motivation, however, must be present to walk the path.

As meditation practice develops, the student will have experiences never encountered in ordinary life. The body will seem to disappear and no "self" can be found to exist. Its "ownerlessness" becomes clearer. The physical body will be perceived solely as an accumulation of aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness, conditionally existent and ever-disposed to suffering. Memories and all thoughts will be seen to appear and disappear in lightening-quick flashes. Awakening is approaching when we perceive these truths for ourselves. Our doubts will be completely resolved. Our questions no longer pertain. A calm, unshakeable certainty is born. We simply *know*.

During periods of intensive retreat, it is difficult for the meditator to evaluate progress during certain stages of practice. The major thrust of attention is directed toward keeping mindfulness on all activities, making self-evaluation practically impossible.

Feedback is an essential element in meditation training, and it is the duty of the teacher to be aware of the increasing strength of a student''s practice. After the trainee has been practising for some time, an appraisal should be made so the meditator can be aware of the significance of training. This is especially necessary when the student feels that

meditation has not been going well. The meditator may, in some instances, actually be progressing.

Meditation training should not proceed blindly or unthinkingly.

If we could focus precisely on the present moment when following the mindful walking exercise, then the idea of "my" leg would not arise. There would be no "I" involvement and no "practice." Similarly, the eye would not be able to identify objects coming into the area of perception. Sound, which merely has the function of entering the eardrum and causing it to vibrate, would not be concretized as speech or music, etc. In fact, it is possible to focus on the split-second between hearing sound and recognising it in the conventional manner.

Conventional interpretation of sense data is necessary, of course, for functioning in the mundane world. In Vipassana training, however, the meditator exposes the reality behind all appearances. It is our usual way of interpreting sense perception which leads us astray, compounding the error by superimposing negative and positive qualities on bare cognitive reception.

The Enlightened Ones can see so-called beautiful or ugly physical forms and view them objectively, with equanimity, i.e., without the discriminating mind giving rise to attraction or repulsion. Everything is seen as it really is: impermanent, possessing the potentiality of suffering or dissatisfaction, and ownerless. The man or woman who

truly comprehends the nature of the world does not cling to appearances or conceptions. The ordinary person and the person of Insight can remain in society but the latter truly knows the world as it is. There is no possibility of deception, of having the mind shift off-centre.

This is the truth about our physical and mental world. Each meditator can verify it personally. Rapid progress can then be made toward awakening.

Any time when we can gather together all our meditative energies into one unique, powerful force—specifically the concentrated power of the Eightfold Path—the groundwork has been prepared which has the strength, endurance and direction to enable the realisation of a higher level of Insight.

After some skill has been acquired in training, meditators should be able to more easily detect the instant when mindfulness is weakening. Focus well on every activity and mindfulness will resume its strength.

The meditator may, in fact, be able to detect that developed mindfulness carries a comfortable, alert feeling; when it decreases, a subtle sluggishness can be sensed. In all circumstances, try to be aware of the strength of mindfulness.

In all stages of training, Insight can occur in the presence of so-called "good" or "bad" states of mind. In Vipassana practice, we discover such negative or positive conditions are *equally unstable*—both states rise and fall away. The

deeper the level of truth realised, the more profound will be our understanding of life.

Meditators may find detailed information regarding the development of Insight in the section relating to the Stages of Purification as presented in *The Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*), by Buddhaghosa.

Training which does not proceed through stages of Insight remains training in the worldly sphere and will not lead to the end of suffering and confusion. One''s practice merely remains a practice.

An erratic stop-and-start pattern of meditation practice delays progress. Nevertheless, students should be aware of their zeal for training and not proceed if faith in the practice has weakened. Further progress in the development of Insight meditation can proceed only when confidence, earnestness and powerful mindfulness are equally matched.

There is an initial stage of Insight which leaves the meditator experiencing a strange depression and restlessness. This uneasiness is peculiar to the dawning of Insight and has no parallel with worldly mental states of distress. A sense of amazement appears, as though one has seen for the first time the impermanent, suffering and impersonal nature of the world. These facts of existence were known before, of course, but seen only with worldly understanding—until now.

A loneliness suddenly descends. There is nothing in the world in which we can place our trust. A nauseating

desolation, sometimes approaching oceanic proportions, may be acute for a time. And one feels isolated from the rest of the world.

The meditator who is not aware of the basis of these feelings very likely may develop pronounced feelings of anxiety and agitation. Rebellion at this stage is a frequent response to this melancholic condition. The meditator may feel training is useless and that it is preferable to leave practice rather than endure such trials. During this crisis a teacher can direct attention to the source of this most stressful condition. The student will understand that these feelings appear as a phase in practice and the disquiet emanates from his own mind. The temptation to abandon practice will be put to rest and training can be resumed.

When first entering practice, trainees have to contend with the hindrances of sensuous desire, ill-will, laziness, restlessness and sceptical doubt. When the student progresses beyond that point, even more subtle defilements appear to test the endurance of the meditator. These tests along the path are called Defects or Defilements of Insight. There are ten Imperfections: effulgence of light, rapture, tranquility, happiness, faith, exertion or energy, mindfulness, knowledge, equanimity, and gratification. Each category can be further enlarged as to the particular variety of Imperfection the meditator may experience. *Please understand they are not in themselves defilements, but may become the basis for subtle feelings of pride.* In fact, many meditators experiencing one or the other may feel they have

reached enlightenment! Some practitioners of Vipassanā meditation reach a plateau where total peace and emptiness prevails and they think that Nibbāna has been realized. They ask their teacher to release them from practice. Others take great pride in believing themselves to be good meditators. It is extremely easy to grasp at any one of these stages. Inability to progress further in practice is often linked to attachment at this stage. It is the rare person indeed who can self-monitor practice at this point. The inexperienced student will hardly realise that attachments are being formed.

Our feelings therefore can cause us many difficulties. It is the mind which is fooling us, playing games. The mind has been enslaved by defilements for so long that it will not relinquish its hold without a death struggle.

Continue your practice steadfastly. Above all, don''t let your feelings be your teachers.

The Way Clears

Correct practice of Vipassanā Meditation is the highest cultivation of The Noble Eightfold Path. Correct practice of The Eightfold Path means living constantly with mindfulness. Mindfulness is our only protection from

delusion and suffering in the world.

Only when realising the first stage of deliverance can the precepts for wholesome living or morality be firmly established. Until that attainment, ordinary human beings will experience fluctuations in observing the requisites for harmless living.

According to Buddhist tradition, the Stream-Winner (*Sotāpanna*) is one who has realised the first liberation. He or she has perfected the Five Precepts of basic morality which arise spontaneously and never disappear. No necessity exists for formally taking the precepts. The Once-Returner (*Sakadāgāmi*) also has the Five Precepts which appear automatically. The Never-Returner (*Anāgāmi*) spontaneously observes the Eight Precepts at all times. Though they may live at home, they have truly given up attachment to their families. The Buddhas and Enlightened Saints have established natural morality permanently. It is true morality of the purest kind, for the Awakened Ones always have mindfulness. The specific development of spontaneously-arising morality for living in the world belongs exclusively to those Noble Persons who have entered the path to Nibbāna.

The type of virtuous conduct or morality maintained during periods of meditation retreat is observed by those disciples who are committed to walking the path to liberation. The requisites for correct living are fulfilled when mindfulness rules all activities of thought, word and deed. No delusion

or suffering can gain entry into the protected mind.

It should be noted that the blameless conduct born of following the Five, Eight or Ten Precepts of the Buddhist lay devotee, or the many disciplinary rules governing the monk or nun, are essential for the orderly functioning of the lay or religious life. The observance of these worldly rules permit the follower, lay or clergy, entrance into the heavenly worlds alone. Not even the most rigid adherence to these precepts, however, will permit the realisation of Nibbāna if penetration into the true nature of life is lacking. *The discovery of truth is gained only by insight, which is inextricably linked with the development of concentration and morality.*

When attachment to the world begins to wane, there arises a deeper penetration of the world as it is. A natural compassion and sympathy begins to flow to all creatures; their suffering is seen sharply. Life moves on and for the person of growing Insight, life tends to appear as rather normal in most respects—but there is a difference. When something in the worldly sphere is not obtained, no disappointment arises. There is the understanding that nothing in the world is actually "mine," that nothing really belongs to one. This awareness allows us to live more at ease than the person who lives with grasping, who does not see the world clearly.

The Buddhist texts say that the person with clear spiritual vision sees the world as a grand, gorgeous play, forever rolling on and on, one act following another. A play. A

dream. Buddhist scripture also tells of a glittering chariot belonging to a king. His subjects were so entranced by this splendid vehicle that its true purpose was all but forgotten. Our true purpose in this world is to end suffering—to go home, to realise Nibbāna.

The Buddha and his disciples, of course, wished to help suffering humanity. They lived in the same physical world with other beings. They were, however, enlightened, free beings. They knew the magnitude of suffering and looked upon this sorrowful world with utmost compassion. In their wisdom, however, they knew that human beings differ in their capacity for understanding the truth. There were people who had difficulty understanding the truth and could not follow the path at all. Others listened, but had no desire to change their life. Only those people who had been taught the lessons that suffering so amply provides could benefit at all from the teaching. At least they were willing to change the direction of their lives.

The Buddha used the simile of a lotus to describe the spiritual ascension of the human being. The lotus begins its journey to the sun from an under-water bed of mud. No one knows exactly when—or if—the lotus will bloom. When the bud finally does open, the plant may be healthy or rotten. As the bud pushes its way to the surface, it may be snapped away by a sea animal. Some flowers will indeed be hovering above the surface of the water, and when the sun warms the petals, they bloom—and receive the light.

The life of the individual is no different with regard to understanding. Some may not come in contact with the path in this lifetime, others will meet it and, depending on their understanding, develop the path to a lesser or greater degree. And, of course, others may turn to another direction.

When it is possible we should try to help others. There are many different ways we can aid each other, but it is extremely difficult to help others skillfully. We do not know their past history or their tendencies. Sometimes we can help by doing nothing at all. If we can maintain a balanced mind then we can aid others in the very best way, without becoming entangled in suffering ourselves. To ensnare ourselves in suffering is of no help to anyone at any time.

In the first and final analysis, we should rely on ourselves alone in the development of the spiritual life. The Buddha cautioned that the truth was to be our Supreme Teacher, the only refuge. The Buddha cannot cleanse our defilements, for it is *our* mind which is steeped in confusion. The Buddha and his teachings give the proper direction to follow, but neither he, the teaching, nor the Buddhist clergy possess any power in themselves to lead anyone to Awakening. It depends entirely on our own determination to end suffering. No one can do our work. Similarly, the Good Friend, the meditation teacher, can only offer instruction, pointing the way and helping clear obstacles from the path.

The Buddha always encouraged monks, nuns and laity to

constantly develop mindfulness. The Enlightened Ones have freedom from ignorance and do not, therefore, have to develop mindfulness as a practice or training. For various reasons, laypeople have a tendency to curtail training. We should, therefore, be aware of the great gift of the Dharma bestowed on us and apply ourselves diligently to the practice of mindfulness.

There are only a few guiding principles to be emphasised for all-round practice of mindfulness in our everyday life:

- Try to cultivate mindfulness at all times.
- Have only a single thought—that of staying in the middle path, and not falling into the trap of liking and disliking.
- We only have this day, this hour, this moment. Continue training until finished.

The Teacher

For many meditators, the association with an experienced teacher can be the pivotal experience influencing the maturation process leading to Insight-knowledge. Perhaps months or years of nearly fruitless meditative efforts may be corrected by merely the briefest hint from a teacher. As the meditator ascends to higher stages of Insight, the obstacles

strewn along the path grow so subtle that often the lack of proper guidance precludes further advancement.

The relationship of meditation teacher and student is a delicate, intense and intricate one. Most of us need guidance to integrate our understanding into daily life. Until the day comes when we are “on our own,” cut loose from delusion and neurotic attachments, the Good Friend, the meditation teacher, can be the helpful companion during much of that long journey.

The Preparation

The personal interview is the basic communication link between teacher and student. Inquiry is made regarding previous meditation experience and basic knowledge of Dharma. Instruction is given in the theory and practice of Vipassana meditation. Careful watch is made of the student''s progress. New instructions are given on the basis of the meditator''s stage of knowledge or awareness realised.

The Interview

The meditation interviews which follow trace the practice of two students, commencing on the seventh day of training. Though both students had previous meditation experience, this retreat marked the initial introduction to intensive practice. Quite often questions overlapped and responses are grouped together. The reader is reminded again that instructions are given solely as guidelines for the serious meditator who may not have access to qualified instruction. No written statement, however, can replace the personal guidance of a skilled teacher in assessing the step-by-step progress of a student.

Interview Section

Seventh Day

Achan: Now that your mindfulness (*sati*) is stronger, have you noticed anything about your breathing?

Student A: Yes, there is space between the rising and falling of each breath, and the next round of breathing.

Achan: Good. The fact that you perceive space means sati is following the breathing well. When the meditator is clearly aware of space in the breathing in-and-out cycle, it is necessary to find additional objects of attention to "spoon-feed" the mind, as you would a child. If attention is placed

only on acknowledging breathing and sitting, the mind may find the opportunity to stray. We have to give it more work to do.

I would like you to focus on breathing in . . . out . . . sitting . . . and, now, touching. By "touching" I mean mental touching, not physical impact as such. Actually, they are the same reality for it is the *mind* which focuses on the point of touch, and it is the mind which knows the perception of touch. Focus on the touching point as being a small circle. Place your attention on that point, while mentally acknowledging touching. After you have acknowledged touching, I want to see if you can move your mind and have it "touch" a different area of your body. Choose one point which is most distinct to you: your knee, buttocks, shoulder, etc. Whatever body part is chosen, focus attention there until I have another interview with you and tell you to go ahead and change the point of observation. Since your sati is strong now, I want to increase your level of concentration (*samadhi*) as a balancing factor. If you change the point of focus too often, samadhi will not arise.

I would like you also to test your sati by walking slowly and walking almost normally. Please report the results tomorrow.

Eighth Day

Achan: How is your mindfulness today?

Student B: In this morning''s practice, mindfulness was not good at all. Nothing seemed to go right, and my practice was falling apart. I was thoroughly depressed. In the afternoon, however, practice was a good deal better.

Achan: At this stage of training, it is not unusual to have such a varied day. Meditators become extremely sensitive to altering conditions of mind and become easily upset, depressed or worried. They often veer to the other extreme and feel elated by a period of steady mindfulness. Trainees often make judgments: this is good practice; this is bad practice.

Both depression and elation are forms of clinging. One will inevitably suffer when conditions change. Most of us usually wish an unpleasant condition to change and, of course, we want a happy state to remain. You are making too much effort, and strain naturally leads to discouragement and depression which, in turn, drains mindfulness. Elation, as well, pulls you off-centre and similarly hampers development. The variance in your practice is proof of the fact of impermanence. Everything in life is uncertain. Though we should certainly try to use our intelligence and act skillfully in the mundane world, the truth is that we really cannot control events as much as we think we can. Most of us dimly perceive this truth, but it makes us uneasy to admit it. We are experts in submerging this fact of life most of the time.

What you have experienced first-hand proves many of the

teachings of the Buddha. Suffering happens all the time, by itself. It is the suffering inherent in the worldly condition. Though we cannot fully control a given situation, we can learn to watch the mind. We can give up attachments and unrealistic expectations for ourselves and others. Enough clarity of mind must be present, however, to do this. This is one of the reasons we train in meditation. We can learn from every situation that presents itself. Disappointments arising in life have their value as teaching experience. We should learn the profound truth that disappointments carry: that life is truly uncertain. We should not, however, grow cynical, but rather try to be deeply aware at all times that life is change.

Ninth Day

Achan: Are you able to clearly focus in-out breathing, sitting and touching?

Student A: Yes, every meditation object is quite clear now.

Achan: Fine. I want you to work at making each object of attention as clear as all other objects which rise in consciousness. They are of *equal value*; they all rise and fall away. Each phase of attention should be clear: the contraction and expansion of the abdomen, the sitting, and the touching. When walking mindfully, you should be able to clearly know the lifting of the heel, the rising of the foot, and the placing of the foot on the ground. The word "clear" means focusing on the present moment; noticing precisely

how each of these movements arises, stays momentarily, and then falls away.

The clarity that I wish you to develop can be compared to standing by a lake and watching raindrops slowly fall into the water . . . watching each drop fall, the rising of the bubbles and circles . . . and its spreading out into nothingness. It is like walking in the bright sunlight and seeing spots appear before your eyes—rising and falling away. It is with this precise clarity that each object should be known.

Yesterday, I asked you to test sati by walking slowly and walking faster. Were they different? Can you follow mindful walking?

Student A: Both the slow and faster walking were clear most of the time.

Achan: Slow walking is a training exercise in mindfulness. If you can keep mindfulness when walking normally, then do so. It is like riding a bicycle. At first you must exercise great care and hold on with both hands. As skill develops you can relax and even let go with one hand . . . or you might let go with both hands. But you must know what you are doing!

Having you walk faster helps prevent laziness which often occurs with only slow movements. But I do not want you to walk in a natural gait for a long period. It is easy to become careless in practice and to "forget" mindfulness. I think your sati has ability, but I want you to take good care of it—to

make sure it is constant.

When you first entered practice, your samadhi was much too strong, which is often the case when meditators work alone or are not guided properly. When samadhi levels are elevated, it often causes the meditator to feel drowsy, heavy, dull or simply peaceful. Mindfulness is weak when concentration levels are raised. This is important for the student to know.

Testing mindfulness was a way of correcting your overbalance of concentration. From now on, I have to carefully watch the progress of your meditation and closely control your practice. The way to build your samādhi now —to balance sati—is to have you sit for longer periods of time. Be constantly mindful and samādhi will arise of its own volition.

At the present time, there is no other work to do except to watch the appearing and fading of bodily and mental states.

Interview with Student B

Achan: Can you focus equally well on all phases of mindful breathing, sitting and touching?

Student B: The breathing in-and-out is always clearer than the touching.

Achan: Usually the perception of breathing is always clearer. Breathing is a natural activity. It is constantly there, whether we focus on it or not. Our focusing on touching is done less naturally; it is more artificial. But mental

"touching" is most important. If a thought were to arise to "touch" the mind, the meditator will be able to know or be aware of the thought. When you are aware of thinking, you will know: "I am thinking," and you can observe how thoughts rise and fall away. We use our mind in the same way that we use it to focus on touching. And when there is awareness of thoughts rising and falling, no grasping occurs —and there is no suffering. I would like you to focus mindfulness on touching until the perception of touching is as clear as the perception of breathing. Do you have any questions?

Student B: Yesterday I experienced a tremendous sense of impermanence. It was overpowering and it was much stronger than anything I have ever experienced. Today it has recurred, but not to such an intense degree. Will it return again to its original strength?

Achan: If you would like it to recur because of curiosity or ego involvement, it will not reappear. In fact, the desire to have it return will actually decrease the power of mindfulness. It will return naturally if you relax and do not think about past experiences. Just continue to develop mindfulness. Do not feel that something is being lost. You are not losing anything at all. Keep to the middle way. There is resistance occasionally to moderating our feelings. We think we will miss certain experiences. With the cultivation of our practice, the natural development of higher stages of Insight will help loosen this particular attachment.

Tenth Day

Student A: I have physical pain now almost all the time. I decided to rest most of the day, and I wonder now if it was correct to surrender so easily to discomfort.

Achan: Of course it is correct you rested; it is a physical necessity. The problem arises, however, that you had to temporarily break your schedule, slowing you down.

Student A: Yes. It took me two hours of walking practice for mindfulness to resume its previous strength.

Achan: Yes. It is as if one were paddling in a boat, confronting the waves. Stop for an instant and the waves push you back all the time. Similarly, the meditator has to use considerable effort to regain lost territory. Physical problems arising in the course of meditation practice is a normal occurrence, and handling them is a test of progress in mind-development. Pain is one kind of opponent or obstacle the meditator has to face and conquer. After all, we enter meditation training to understand the root cause of suffering. Certainly, bodily pain is one of the most obvious forms of suffering. Physical obstacles are preferable, however, to mental defilements: sometimes we battle with the mind—and lose. When a physical problem arises, rest will usually relieve the discomfort, and practice can be resumed.

Student A: When mindfulness is keen, I can sometimes just look at the discomfort and see it as pure pain, without an

emotional overlay . . . but usually I cannot be so objective.

Achan: The man or woman who enters the first stage of liberation, the Sotapanna, no longer identifies the physical form as being the self. No degree of intellectual affirmation can substitute for the experiential realisation of this truth.

We usually learn more about the constructs of clinging when we are ill than in periods of good health. Indeed, good health is only a relative condition. We need to pay particular attention to bodily pain, as this is the body''s natural condition, though we are usually not aware of this truth, for distractions in everyday life cover this awareness. In Vipassana practice, however, we see the true nature of the body.

The meditator should try to understand the arising of physical feelings and emotional states associated with physical discomfort. I am not recommending that the meditator withstand torture—pain for pain''s sake—but the more pain experienced at a certain point in practice, the more suffering will be perceived. Normally we all fear pain, and so it is imperative that we observe pain and confront our fears. It is one of the objectives of Vipassana practice to deeply penetrate the truth of suffering. *Every Buddha and enlightened saint has to realise suffering and perceive its significance clearly in order to see the falling away of suffering*.

We find instances in the Buddhist scripture where enlightenment was realised at a moment of extreme physical pain. The mind was primed and ready for

deliverance, and at that moment the greatest possible focus and penetration occurred. I know it is difficult for you now, but we should not be unduly concerned with physical discomfort at this point. We should rather content ourselves and make deliberate haste to practise so that suffering can be escaped for all time. If training is halted now, we will be born again with the five groups of clinging—with corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness—and experience suffering again and again. Confidence and commitment to our training will support us during any period of crisis.

There is another kind of physical pain, pain which arises specifically in Insight practice. It appears to make us tired of pain, all pain, tired of revolving in the cycle of birth-and-death. The understanding of this kind of pain strengthens our determination and we resolve to escape suffering once and for all.

The Buddha taught a method of spiritual development which can be termed non-violent practice. It refers to "killing oneself," and it is also applicable to meditation training, that is, to bearing the various gradations of pain, frustration and other trials which beset a meditator walking the path.

Visualise an angry person who insults you. Receiving his insults are better than him striking you. If he hits you, it is far better than him killing you. If he kills you, it is better than you "killing yourself." In this context, "killing

yourself" refers to the decision to fight and you killing the other person. Our defilement would follow us into future lives. When applied to mind-development, neither flee from pain nor torture yourself, thereby "killing" your training and wasting the opportunity to realise Insight. If we can make the effort to bear this discomfort now, we can move forward with training.

In practical application, regardless of how many times you must mindfully change position to relieve any discomfort, you should still resolutely continue your practice and not break the flow of mindfulness and concentration.

Interview with Student B

Student B: I injured my leg slightly before practice. When I focus on pain, it reduces a bit but never really goes away.

Achan: The mind is exaggerating the pain, concentrating its force in a weakened area. There are basically two ways to handle pain. Continue to meditate and mindfully change position when necessary. The second method, however, requires well-developed sati and samadhi. One continues to meditate on the discomfort until the feeling of pain separates from the mind. It may be called a way of separating mental images. If the meditator has sufficient power of mind, one can take the mind away from the body. Focus attention on the pain itself and you will see it rise and fall. If the pain does not disappear, then observe the mind itself rising and falling. When your mindfulness is strong there will be nothing which "sees" the pain and it will

disappear.

I have noticed that your sati is stronger in the morning than in the afternoon or evening. I recommend that you save some of your strength by changing position and walking in the morning. This reservoir of strength will aid in overcoming the discomfort in the latter part of the day. When you first entered practice, your mindfulness was unevenly balanced. If you were making a retreat of indefinite length, this imbalance would he resolved and sati would equalise throughout the day and night. Do not let this pain weaken mindfulness.

Eleventh Day

Student A: In yesterday''s practice, I began to experience hallucinations and sensory distortion. What is happening?

Achan: Strange phenomena appearing in practice occurs to almost every meditator. It arises when mindfulness increases in strength. This is a crucial stage in your practice. If these visions do not appear at this level, you will confront them at another time.

You are moving through one stage and approaching a higher level of meditation. The gap between these two levels is too wide and the mind now has an opportunity to play games. The meditator may be so upset or shaken by these experiences that it may be very difficult to focus mindfulness. The student must clearly understand that

these strange phenomena arise from one''s own mind. They are temptations born to lure the meditator from practice. When external phenomena are no longer distracting to the meditator, then imagination begins its attack by creating pictures or other distortions. If you cling to these visions, most assuredly mindfulness will be weakened or even destroyed. This is also a test for you—to determine if you have sufficient understanding or control of your mind. Weird phenomena may arise at any point in practice when sati strengthens, but visions occur most frequently during the sitting exercise, for this is a most concentrated position. If you "see" pictures when your eyes are closed and fear or agitation arises, practice by opening your eyes until you feel stronger. Relax and do not strain. Over-exertion will only increase tension and create more pictures. If pictures keep flooding your mind and mindfulness cannot keep pace, try to take longer breaths. When walking, if you encounter sensory distortion, increase your pace. If you do not follow this method of coping with visions, you will have a most difficult time re-establishing mindfulness.

Your attention should be directed toward your practice, that is, focusing mindfulness on all phenomena arising in consciousness, and then letting them go. Even if you see the Buddha or Christ, do not let anything whatsoever divert your attention. Do not think about previous meditation experiences. You will be distracted again. They have come and gone.

It is crucial that the meditator understands the reasons for

strange phenomena appearing. It is equally important that instructions given by the teacher be followed carefully. Many meditators who do not have competent guidance entirely abandon practice when they encounter these visions. They fear the past and they fear the future.

When I was teaching in Thailand, meditators who reached this stage would often visualise ghosts or people threatening them with knives. They would completely lose control of themselves. Becoming hysterical, they would run away from the temple. I would have to find them and try to persuade them to re-enter practice. If they did not resume training, they would have surrendered to their anxiety.

When the student of mind-development gains the skill of cutting off external disturbances by watching the rise and fall of phenomena, soon internal temptations will also be "cut off"—and when you cut off everything, freedom appears.

The student who is familiar with every step in training will know how to approach any problem. When mindfulness is strong and skillfully applied, no disturbance will be too bothersome. Whenever one sees, hears, touches, tastes, smells or thinks, the skilled and mindful meditator will be able to detect its rise and fall and not be attached to any situation.

Twelfth Day

Student A: My breathing is very shallow now and sometimes I can hardly catch my breath. I become frightened. I am not sure if I can continue to practise.

Achan: This is a normal occurrence in the last moment before you make a final decision to enter deep meditation. When the mind begins to separate from the idea of identifying the body as the self, it is natural to experience these unsettling conditions of mind.

As the power of the mind gradually strengthens and reaches higher stages, many different kinds of fear will appear to the meditator. Meditators feel that everything seems to be out of control . . . that something is being lost. The breath becomes almost imperceptible, and one naturally may panic and think: "I want to breathe." When fear occurs, immediately collect yourself and focus accurately on the feeling and it will disappear.

If you stop practice now you will meet these same difficulties any time training is resumed. You should try to continue with your training even when mindfulness is not very clear. Everyone has the same feelings. It is an inevitable part of practice.

[Same student, late evening]

Achan: You look anxious.

Student A: I feel afraid so much of the time now. It is a strange kind of fear . . . an unnamed fear. I sometimes find myself weeping and I have all the symptoms of anxiety. It is

very difficult to practise.

Achan: Our person is composed of five groups of clinging. They are sometimes called Mara, or opponents. Once awakened, they are ever-ready to assault the meditator and to destroy all efforts in meditation. Many aspects of Mara will appear in your consciousness. Some of these disturbances are necessary tests in the development of Insight. Defilements, often in the form of hatred, impatience and boredom, may rise sharply to test the power and endurance of the meditator. Anxiety, too, is a way of testing the strength of mindfulness. It is a pitched battle between that part of the mind wishing to continue practice and the opposing force tempting you to abandon training. The latter is giving you great feelings of anxiety. You have to be victorious over these temptations. Do you feel you can conquer your fears?

Student A: Sometimes I think I am not strong enough to face these difficulties . . .

Achan: Before you entered practice you made a commitment to follow the path of the Buddha—that is, you dedicated yourself to the quest for enlightenment. This is the one and only reason for entering Vipassana training. It is a serious commitment and not for the weak-hearted. You can be confident and put your heart at ease that the Buddha''s teachings can guide you, and the Dharma is protecting you from harm. If you have good intentions and are willing to place confidence in the truth of the Buddhist

teaching as the path to end all suffering, you need have no cause to fear.

To the best of my ability, I will help you solve any problems which may appear in your practice. I have even seen cases where meditators had nervous breakdowns. Fortunately, they were willing to cooperate—to make the effort to continue training. Working together, their problems were solved.

Although it is uncomfortable for you now, it is really a sign of your progress. Some meditators practise for an entire month and do not have problems of fear arise. These difficulties are not monumental. I, myself, have experienced them and many of my students, as well.

I asked you before to come and see me at once if you were afraid or shocked by some experience and could not resolve the problem yourself. You should have actually told me immediately, rather than spend needless time worrying. But it is all right. Don''t push too hard. Relax.

If you can pass through this particular period, you will not encounter these particular disturbances again. Resolve to go ahead with your practice. It is fear that is causing you to hesitate. It is fear that will keep you from progressing. There are many difficulties. The Future Buddha himself almost lost to Mara. Do you understand? Are you all right?

Student A: Yes. I am reassured. Thank you.

Thirteenth Day

Achan: I feel that your concentration and mindfulness are strong now, and that all the conditions have been prepared for both of you to make a special effort in your practice. This test is a natural part of the strengthening process, a natural development in ascertaining how well any skill is being developed. Do you both feel confident enough in your training to make this effort?

Student A: Yes.

Student B: Yes.

Achan: These are my instructions to you. Place focus, as accurately as possible, on acknowledging the rising and falling of phenomena. Using the analogy of the high jumper preparing to leap, the meditator similarly consolidates all his or her energies into a singular effort. The high jumper places his energy into his legs and body, establishes his will, makes a commitment and runs fast.

Just work naturally, in a relaxed manner. If a higher stage of awareness is born it will be a natural result of your practice; if it does not manifest at this time, it will do so in the future with continued practice. After the trainee begins to practise, there is no way of predicting when these experiences will begin. It may take five minutes, a few hours, or nothing may happen. Remember, if you wish for something to happen, it is an ego-play. Do not weaken your sati by wishing for an "experience." Other meditators feel so happy at this stage

they become careless. Be watchful. Use your intelligence. Stay as even-minded as possible.

It is best to forewarn you, however, that occurrences of an unexpected nature may well appear in your meditation at this time. The meditator, as with the athlete, may suddenly be distracted and find his mind pulling him back. You must be willing to stand firm. You must be willing to "die"; in fact, you should think of yourself as being dead. If you do not already think of yourself in these terms, a particular confrontation at this point may be devastating. You will find yourself running away. But if you feel your whole life is over—really over and empty—you will be able to face any situation. This mind, again, will often make an all-out attack, hoping to remove you from your place of meditation.

In order to prepare you for handling any problem which might occur, I will tell you what has happened to other meditators. I tell you these incidences not to frighten you, but to prepare you. Of course, do not think that you will experience exactly the same phenomena. Whatever happens, happens. Just be wide-awake and alert at all times. Do not lose mindfulness.

Many meditators report at this stage of practice the appearance of strange, even terrifying, phenomena. They report fearing their heart will stop beating; or their breath, as it becomes lighter and lighter, will disappear. Others have reported actually believing they were about to drown. Or they see a dead body begin to decay in front of their

eyes. Alarmed and losing control, meditators often leave practice abruptly.

If you experience fear or other emotions which cannot be controlled, stop practice immediately and see me for further instructions. If you feel you are going to "die," then let everything go. You will "die" for a time, and will then return to normal consciousness. When you return to your normal state you will experience a particular understanding and joy which will suffuse body and mind. It cannot be described . . . it will never be forgotten.

This "dying" is a normal condition of body-and-mind which appears when one focuses precisely on the rising and falling away of phenomena. As focusing becomes more powerful, the momentum quickens until rising and falling appear to "stop." One''s practice begins to mature at this stage.

This is a crucial stage in your training. Give up the idea, however, of gaining anything. Just work naturally. Stay in the middle path.

Fourteenth Day

Achan: I asked you both to make a special effort yesterday in your practice. Do you have anything to report?

Student A: I noticed a very bright, white light—as if someone had opened the door. It stayed for quite a while, and then gradually faded. Last night, faces of dying people flashed into my mind. This morning, I felt my body to be

extremely fragile, like glass, and a deep sense of dissolution appeared. The only other awareness is that I seem to have dropped naming everything: this is good; this is bad. I am just aware of seeing, or hearing, etc. Nothing else happened.

Student B: I had a strange meditation lasting about an hour. At first I felt engulfed in absolute silence, and then I found myself encased in clouds. There was a sensation of movement, and I seemed to forget my body. Colours changed from brown to grey to white. I felt as if I was in a space found inside an arena, not that I could see one . . . and then, suddenly, a battle started in my head . . . I could feel my face going through all kinds of contortions. My head began swinging around, being pulled in every direction, as though two adversaries were fighting for control. I could not stop the battle or the movement. A few times I felt as though I was going to die. My eyes suddenly switched shut and then . . . a flash of light . . . and I would be back again in the battleground. The flash occurred again . . . and then everything finally died away. After that episode, I was completely exhausted. I could not focus sati. Samadhi was impossible . . . nothing worked. I felt very tired and only now am I regaining my strength.

Achan (to Student B): You are not moving through the entire stage. If all the factors of energy, confidence, samādhi, sati and wisdom were concentrated into one force, it would have carried you through to the next level. You were exhausted because the power of sati was not sufficiently developed at this time. This experiment has been a useful

test of your sati. It serves to demonstrate what still remains to be done in your practice. Be confident that if you continue to practise as diligently and single-mindedly as you have done, you will accomplish this stage.

The flash of light you experienced—and the immediate return to the battleground—suggests that you hit something, and it prevented you from going to the next stage. If you continue to practise, these flashes of light will occur more frequently. As I mentioned previously, when sati is powerful, you will feel that suddenly something "turns off." At first this experience may last for only a few seconds. Some meditators who practise constantly may be in this state for twenty-four hours, or even longer. It is as if one died and then returned to life. The longer one "dies" the more profound the understanding of this particular experience when you return to normal consciousness.

Practising Insight meditation is like walking in the dark. The meaning of darkness here signifies being surrounded by greed, hatred and confusion. One often feels during practice that no good exits in the world at all. All the defilements seem to engulf the meditator. When these flashes first occur, and remain only an instant, nothing can be "seen" or understood very clearly. But if you continue your training, the flashing becomes brighter. As your mind brightens you will be able to reach out of the darkness. And when the mind begins to brighten, you will begin to understand, and begin to see things as they truly are. You will start making your ascent to higher levels of Insight.

Student A: I recall seeing bright flashes of light during an illness. It was accompanied by a high fever and I was semi-conscious . . . I really thought I was dying. Other people, too, have recounted similar experiences during a moment of great pain. People who have been clinically dead for a time report seeing a great light.

Achan: Yes. Any time when a person feels utterly helpless, during serious illness, for example, when death seems imminent, sati is automatically focused on that experience.

There is a story which illustrates such an experience. The young son of a wealthy merchant was desperately ill. The father, being more concerned about his wealth, barred all visitors from seeing his son inside the mansion, for he did not want strangers to see his great estate. He placed the boy''s bed on the balcony. His son slowly grew worse. The lad lay on the balcony, his face turned toward the wall, and resigned himself to death. Day after day passed, but he did not die. One day the Buddha came near the mansion on his almsround. Seeing one enduring such suffering, the Buddha focused all his compassion towards the dying youth. The boy noticed a very bright light cast on the wall and wondered if the sun was shining. He turned around and saw the radiant form of the Enlightened One. In that very moment he placed his faith in the Buddha and, smiling, died peacefully. Some see the light and end their life; others see the light but recover from illness.

Now that this intensive period of meditation is drawing to a

close, I want you to continue with your training as much as possible. Do not depend on the special circumstances and environment found in a meditation centre, but try to practise everywhere. Be ever-mindful. Test yourself daily, all the time. Make mindfulness first in your life—everything will naturally follow.

Mindfulness is the only protection in the world. Insight is the special understanding which will transform your life. It is the end of birth and death. It is the end of craving. It is the emancipation from all attachments, from all bondage, and is the realisation of the highest happiness.

It is the end of the journey.

Biography of Achan Sobin S. Namto

The Venerable Phra Maha Sobin S. Namto was born in Thailand in 1931. At sixteen, he became a novice at Wat Mahadhatu temple in Bangkok and was ordained a bhikkhu (monk) in 1953. While still a novice, he completed his training in both Dharma and Pali studies, and then chose to pursue studies in Abhidharma and Vipassana meditation. Over a twelve-year period he had four Dharma teachers, six Pali professors, three Abhidharma teachers and five Vipassana instructors. He studied in Burma with three meditation masters, as well as training at the temple of the famed meditation master, Mahasi Sayadaw.

In order to cultivate his own practice of meditation preparatory to teaching, he then entered into periods of retreat, living in total seclusion for seven, three and four months, respectively. He then became an instructor in Dharma, Abhidharma and Vipassana meditation at Wat Mahadhatu, as well as teaching in other temples.

Achan Sobin was invited by the Sangha of Laos to be an instructor in Vipassana meditation from 1960 to 1962. Returning to Thailand, he became the founder-principal and

instructor in Abhidharma and Vipassana meditation at Abhidhamma Vidyakorn School in Phuket Province.

In 1972, the Venerable Phra Dhammakosacharn, head of the First Division of Missionary Activities, with the approval of the Sangha Council of Thailand, selected him to be Chief Incumbent of Wat Thai, the first Thai temple in America. The Sangha, sensing the growing interest in Buddhism and meditation in America, confirmed his appointment as a monk highly competent in both knowledge and ability to effectively represent Buddha-Dharma in the United States.

Achan Sobin is the author of a number of books on Vipassana meditation, Abhidharma psychology, and devotional and ceremonial literature.

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