

To Light a Fire A Dhamma Discourse

by

The Venerable Webu Sayadaw

Translated from the Burmese by Roger Bischoff

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WEBU SAYADAW: You have taken the moral precepts, now practice them. Only when your practice of morality (sila) is perfect can you fulfill your aspirations for awakening. Having perfected yourselves in morality, you have to perform various other meritorious practices, and these can take you to the pinnacle and the fulfillment of your aspirations.

The teachings of the Buddha are enshrined in the Tipitaka. These teachings were not given by the Buddha just to be preached and studied. You are good people; you have to practice the teachings with unwavering effort from the time you obtain them in order to escape from this suffering.

Do not get confused about the teachings. We don't have to know many techniques, only one; but that we should know clearly. If we establish one technique with strong effort and get rid of all doubts then, without asking anyone else, we shall find the answers.

Choose one technique and practice it steadfastly. If you focus your mind at the small spot where the air touches when you breathe in and out, then there will be no wanting, no aversion or delusion, and as these three are absent, you are immediately out of suffering.

So, for a short moment Your mind is pure. Now, if your last mind-moment came up at this time and you died, would there be anything to be worried about or to be afraid of?

The benefits accruing to you from this practice don't last for just a short moment or one life-time. This short moment of purity will bring benefits for the remainder of the cycle of birth and death. And why can you accomplish this? Because the time is right, your form of existence is right, and you are putting forth right effort.

The disciples of the Buddha took the practice from the Teacher and worked with unwavering perseverance. Therefore, they achieved the awakening they had aspired for.

How did they work? In the same way as a man who wants to light a fire with a fire stick, as in the olden days. They rubbed two pieces of wood together, and heat was produced. Eventually the wood started to glow, and then they could light a fire. So, if a man wants to start a fire in this way, and rubs two pieces of wood together, does he count: "One rub, two rubs, three rubs..."?

DISCIPLE: No, sir, that wouldn't work very well.

SAYADAW: How would he have to do it then?

D: He would have to rub continuously until he got a flame.

S: Yes, when they wanted to start a fire in those days, this was the only way to do it. They had to rub with strong determination and without taking breaks. Now, if one were to rub two pieces of wood together in this way, how long would it take for the fire to start?

D: When it gets hot enough, the fire will start, sir.

S: Will that take long?

D: Not very long, sir.

S: No, if this man works with determination, it doesn't take long. It is just the same with this practice here. You want fire. You know that if you rub these two pieces of wood together you can have it. Now, if you count, "One rub, two rubs..." it will become a little bit hot. And then you take a rest for a while. Will you start a fire?

D: No, sir.

S: OK, so you start again, once, twice, three times... and again heat is produced. Then you lay back again and take a bit of rest. Will you start a fire?

D: No, sir. .

S: And if you continue in this way for a whole month?

D: We won't get fire.

S: And if you continue for a whole year?

D: It will just get warm, sir, but there will be no fire.

S: Now, what if you were to work like this for one hundred years?

D: It will just become warm, sir.

S: In that case, there is no fire in these two pieces of wood?

D: There is fire, sir, but effort and perseverance are not sufficient.

S: It is just the same with our work. You have to work as the fire maker does, without taking rest. Soon it will become hot and then, before long, a fire will start. Only then will you be able to use the fire in the way you want. You should all make effort to fulfill your aspiration for awakening. You have received the teachings of the Buddha. Now you have to work so that your efforts are equal to those of the wise of old who attained their goal. The teachings of the Buddha are the only path out of suffering, and you can practice them only when a Buddha has arisen and as long as his teachings are available. When no teachings of a Buddha are available, you cannot fulfill your aspiration for Nibbana.

When a Buddha arises in the world, right conduct (carana) and understanding (vijja) that lead out of suffering are expounded. If you use the opportunity and put them into practice, you will become perfect. Right conduct can also be practiced when there are no teachings of a Buddha, but insight or understanding is not available.

What exactly does right conduct mean? Now that the teachings of a Buddha are available, all of you untiringly give the four requisites of food, robes, shelter and medicine to the monks. When you give, you offer the best you can afford. But still you are not satisfied yet; you want to do more and more. This is good conduct (carana).

To practice the teachings of the Buddha to the point of being able to escape from all suffering we have to be aware of one single object continuously, without break or interruption. If we are thus aware, we are practicing understanding (vijja).

Practicing both together and being perfect in effort, the wise of old attained to the awakening to which they had aspired.

You may think, "Well, we make offerings to the teachings by giving food, clothing, shelter and medicine to the monks. To realize the teachings for ourselves we would have to practice insight. We shall do that if we have some free time after preparing our offerings." Now if you work like this, are you practicing right conduct or insight?

D: It is right conduct, sir.

S: When you have fulfilled your duties and keep your mind steadfastly focused on one single object, what are you practicing then?

D: Wisdom, sir.

S: So, what happened to right conduct? When you keep your attention focused on the spot, are you still practicing right conduct?

D: Yes, sir, then we are practicing right conduct and understanding at the same time.

S: Yes, you can practice the two jointly. First you prepare food and then you meditate. Thus we have to perfect ourselves in both practices, in right conduct and understanding. But you practice first only right conduct and then only understanding. Is it not possible to practice these emancipating teachings of the Buddha simultaneously? Is it not possible to be aware of in-breath and out-breath even while preparing food or while building a monastery?

D: It's possible, sir.

S: You see, this is the way the wise disciples of the Buddha used to practice. They had the ability to accept good advice and instructions. Do you think they might have thought, "Our parents, who are our highest possessions and to whom we owe an infinite debt of gratitude, are getting old. We have to spend day and night serving them, therefore we can't meditate"?

D: Sir, some must have thought in this way.

S: Is the fulfillment of one's duties towards parents comprised in right conduct or in understanding?

D: It is right conduct, sir.

S: Isn't it possible to be aware of mind and matter while you look after your parents?

D: It's possible, sir.

S: Now that you know that the wise of old practiced right conduct and understanding simultaneously, do you still consider it impossible to practice understanding while serving your children and grandchildren? Can't you train your mind in the awareness of mind and matter at the same time as you are fulfilling all your duties? Wherever you are, whatever you do, you can practice right conduct and meditation at the same time. When your children are good, you can be aware of in-and-out-breath, and when they are naughty and you have to correct them, then too you can practice. Tell me, what is your correcting the children?

D: It is right conduct, sir.

S: So, if you practice awareness while you scold them, what are you practicing?

D: Understanding, sir.

S: If we practice awareness while we do what we have to do, will we suffer? Does it cost us anything? Does it disturb our work?

D: No, sir, if one works with awareness the work is completed more quickly.

S: If you don't allow yourselves to be distracted, you will work faster and you will earn more money. Your aspiration to Nibbana too will be fulfilled more quickly. All the beings who practice in this way can fulfill their aspirations. There is not a single second in which it isn't possible to fulfill your aspiration. How about those human

beings, Devas and Brahmans who don't practice the teachings of Buddha, though the time is good? Do they attain the fulfillment of their aspirations?

D: Those who don't make effort can't fulfill their aspirations, sir.

S: Why? Is it because they aren't reborn in the right plane of existence or because it isn't the right time?

D: No, sir, but without effort nothing can be accomplished.

S: Maybe they don't have sufficient parami (spiritual perfections)?

D: Maybe some can't grasp the teachings because they haven't completed their perfections sufficiently in the past, sir.

S: But if you don't put forth effort, can you still claim that you don't understand because of missing parami?

D: Those who have accumulated perfections in the past attain the stages of Nibbana when they listen to the teachings. But we, sir, because we have no perfections, we listen to the Dhamma again and again and we remain just the same.

S: The wise of old were just like thirsty people. They were thirsty, so they looked for water. And when they found it, what did they do? Did they look up at the sky and say, "Well, we don't want to drink this water yet"? No, they were people who were really thirsty. What about you? You have Buddha's teachings; do you drink them right away?

D: Sir, we linger and wait.

S: In that case it isn't true that you don't have any parami. If you don't drink, your thirst will not be quenched. What will you do if you find yourselves sitting right next to the water pot?

D: Because we don't have a sufficient amount of parami, we just sit there, sir.

S: What will you do if you walk into a lake full of water?

D: When we walk down into the water we stretch out our neck and turn our face up towards the sky, sir. And if we should dive, sir, we shall keep our mouth firmly shut.

S: Now, are you still telling me that you are thirsty, but that you don't have the necessary understanding to be able to drink?

D: Sir, because we don't have the necessary conditioning, we don't open our mouth in the water.

S: If you really wanted to drink, would you still keep your mouth shut?

D: If one really wanted to drink, one wouldn't, of course.

S: So you are saying, "Though I do want to drink, I do not want to drink"! Aren't you contradicting yourselves?

D: It is as if we pretended not to want to drink, sir.

S: Tell me then, if you are thirsty and just bear it, are you happy or unhappy?

D: Unhappy, sir.

S: So, if you are unhappy, will you keep sitting near the water pot without drinking?

D: Sir, we see this kind of suffering as happiness.

S: Did the Buddha teach that this thirst is happiness?

D: No, sir, he said it was suffering.

S: Now, tell me, what do you think is true: What the Buddha said or what you think?

D: Our view, that this is happiness, is wrong, sir.

S: Do you want to be happy or unhappy?

D: Though we would like to be happy, we continue to create unhappiness for ourselves.

S: What is better: to listen to the Buddha or not to listen to the Buddha?

D: Sir, we know that we should follow the word of the Buddha, but still we continue to create suffering for ourselves.

S: In that case it seems as if you knew your own good, but that you are simply lazy.

D: Because our parami are weak, we have to suffer under our own ignorance, sir.

S: Now, if there is water and you don't quench your thirst with it, is that because you have not perfected your parami?

D: Because of the lack of perfections the power of ignorance is so overwhelming, sir.

S: Tell me, what is more powerful, understanding (vijja) or ignorance (avijja)?

D: Sir, understanding is more powerful for human beings.

S: Then you know that the understanding the Buddha taught is powerful.

D: Sir, we know that understanding is a good thing.

S: So, just associate yourselves with understanding. Whether you think that the power of ignorance is strong or whatever... You have learned now to distinguish

between mind and matter. While you are aware of mind and matter in the way the Buddha taught, is there still ignorance prevailing?

D: While we are aware, sir, there is no ignorance.

S: Now, let us concentrate at the spot below the nose above the upper lip with the awareness of mind and matter (namárupa), just as the Buddha taught. When we anchor our attention thus, can ignorance stay? If you look out for it, will you be able to find it?

D: It will be completely gone, sir.

S: Are you still aware where it has gone?

D: Sir, it has disappeared completely.

S: In that case, is the power of understanding greater or that of ignorance?

D: The power of ignorance is great, sir.

S: Oh dear, how is it great? The poor thing just ran as fast as it could; you couldn't even see it anymore.

D: But it comes back again and again, sir.

S: This is so because you allow it back in. If you allow only understanding and knowledge in, ignorance can't come back. But if you allow it back, then slowly your understanding will break up and ignorance takes over once more. It is as with the electric lights in here. What do you need to switch on the lights?

D: Switches, sir.

S: What happens inside the switches that we get light?

D: Electricity flows through them, sir.

S: What happens if the flow is interrupted?

D: It will become dark, sir.

S: What do you have to do to turn the darkness into light?

D: We have to feed electricity to the bulbs, sir.

S: And where does the darkness go when the lights are lit?

D: It disappears, sir.

S: Is any of the darkness left behind?

D: No, sir.

S: When understanding shines, is there any ignorance left?

D: No, sir.

S: In that case, is the power of ignorance great?

D: No, sir, it isn't.

S: Is it difficult to do what we did just now?

D: Not very difficult, sir.

S: Don't we see the reality when light suddenly comes?

D: We do, sir.

S: Will you still be able to go wrong?

D: No, sir.

S: It is so easy! What did the wise disciples of the Buddha connect? If you want to switch on the light, you have to switch on the wires so that electricity flows. So, gently keep your attention at the spot; it will connect. Do you understand?

D: We would like to give this up, sir.

S: Just concentrate your attention there. Gently. Do you become tired if you focus your mind in this way?

D: No, sir.

S: Does it cost you anything?

D: No, sir.

S: Do you have to stop your work?

D: No, sir.

S: Isn't this wonderful? You can practice in all the four postures: sitting, standing, walking and lying down. Can you keep your attention at the spot with the awareness of the in-and-out-breath even while you are eating, drinking and working?

D: Please, sir, teach us how to be aware of the breath while we are moving about and working.

S: You know about many different techniques, but you don't have to practice them all. Choose one and work with it. If you keep your mind steadfastly focused on one object, you will immediately be aware of what you have not been aware of before,

just as you see light as soon as you turn on the switch. Can there still be wrong view and delusion in your mind while you are thus aware?

D: No, sir, but as we don't know where the light switches are, we have to remain sitting in the dark.

S: Oh dear, you've got so many switches! Whichever you turn, the light will come.

D: Sir, because there are so many switches, I don't know which one to turn.

S: Any one will do; the results will be immediate.

D: When I press that switch, sir, the light bulb immediately burns up. That's why I thought it was the wrong switch.

S: It doesn't burn up; it will light the bulb. Even if it shots out one day, when you try again, it will certainly burn.

D: But I don't know where to press the switch, sir.

S: You know the switches; you have been taught so many techniques by the monks who have compassion for you. Now, do not try them all. Select one only.

D: Sir, please teach us this one technique!

S: Every technique the Buddha taught will work as a switch to turn on the light.

D: We would like to learn a technique by which we can perfect our conduct and train ourselves in understanding while we work, walk or sit, sir.

S: Well then, tell me, do not all of you, big and small, breathe?

D: Yes, sir, we do.

S: So, there is no one here who doesn't know how to breathe. Can you say sometimes, "Sorry, I am very busy now. I don't have time to breathe"?

D: No, sir.

S: So then, it is very easy for you to breathe, isn't it? Now just try to find out where the air comes out when you breathe out.

D: It comes out of the nose, sir.

S: Is there any other place where it comes out?

D: No, sir, there is only one place.

S: Yes, there is only one place. So, don't come and tell me that there are so many switches and that you don't know which one to press. You are all breathing, aren't you? Where does this air touch when you breathe out?

D: It touches at a point at the base of the nose, sir.

S: What happens when the air enters? Where does it touch?

D: It touches there again, at the same spot, sir.

S: So, this is quite obvious to you: The air brushes over a small spot at the base of the nose as you breathe in and out. You are aware of this, aren't you?

D: Yes, sir.

S: Don't allow the mind to wander away to other objects. Can you feel the spot where the air touches just as if you were touching it with your finger? Put your attention there and keep it there. Don't follow the breath outside the nostrils. Keep your attention quietly and calmly at the spot, and you will be able to know how the air goes in and out. The flow of air is continuous, isn't it?

D: Yes, sir, it is.

S: You can be aware of it without the slightest interruption. If you keep your attention there, there is only the awareness of mental properties and physical properties (namárupa). Now under which of the two come the nostrils, under mind or under matter?

D: Sir, as far as I know, the nostrils are matter (rupa).

S: What is the entity that knows the touch sensation?

D: Sir, that which knows is mind (nama).

S: So you are aware of mind and matter at the same time. If you are aware of mind and matter, are there still some other entities of which you aren't aware?

D: No, sir, there is nothing apart from mind and matter.

S: Is being aware of mind and matter ignorance or knowledge?

D: It is knowledge, sir.

S: If one has no awareness of mind and matter, what do we call that?

D: That we call ignorance, sir.

S: Can ignorance still influence us while we are training ourselves in understanding?

D: No, sir, it can't.

S: Is there still cause for worry and fear about the present and the future?

D: No, sir, there isn't.

S: Even if you are aware for just one short moment,.. you benefit. How much will you receive if you can keep up this awareness for a longer period?

D: The benefits must be many, sir.

S: Will there still be doubt in your mind about your own ability to attain the awakening to which you have aspired?

D: No, sir.

S: You can reach your goal even quicker than you thought. Of course you still have to fulfill your duties towards your teachers, parents and children. You have to support the teachings of the Buddha. You have to make a living. If you don't fulfill all these duties, is your morality perfect?

D: It isn't, sir.

S: If your moral conduct isn't perfect, can you attain your goal?

D: No, sir, it is impossible.

S: Tell me, when or where is it not possible to practice right conduct and meditation simultaneously?

D: It is never too difficult, sir, even if one is ill.

S: If your insight develops through your practice, do you still need to tell others that you have become happy through the Buddha Dhamma?

D: It isn't necessary to tell others, sir.

S: And if you don't talk about it, does it mean that you don't know about your own happiness?

D: Even if we don't tell everyone, we still know for ourselves, sir.

S: In just the same way noble people know. You know for yourselves how much you have got now, and when you reach the goal, then you will know. If you write on a piece of paper that salt is salty and someone reads this, he knows that salt is salty, doesn't he?

D: Of course, sir.

S: And if you just tell someone that salt is salty, will he know?

D: Why, certainly, sir.

S: But tell me, will salt become salty just by your writing so or saying so?

D: No, sir, of course not.

S: If you read that salt is salty, do you actually know that this is so?

D: Though one understands that it is salty, one doesn't actually know how salt tastes. Only if we put some salt on our tongue and taste it, shall we actually know what "salty" means.

S: If you have tasted it and know it is salty, do you still have to read about it? Do you still have to make declarations about its taste?

D: No, sir.

S: If we tell our neighbor about its taste, will he know then?

D: He will just have heard about it, sir.

S: What do we have to do to make him know?

D: We have to give him some salt and make him taste. Otherwise, what he knows is just hearsay, sir.

S: Do you know for sure, that right conduct and insight and wisdom constitute the path to the release from suffering?

D: Yes, sir, we know.

S: If you read that salt is salty and consider this knowledge to be quite sufficient, then that is where you stop. But if you want to make sure, you have to taste for yourselves. Is it sufficient to read that salt is salty and then have this confirmed by me?

D: Sir, you wouldn't lie. If you tell me it is salty, that is quite sufficient for me.

S: Now you are going back on what you said earlier on. You know salt is salty from hearing and reading about it, but only if you really know for yourselves will you become happy. If you tell somebody that salt is salty and he blindly accepts what you say, then he won't even feel the desire to taste for himself.

After all, he thinks he knows. With this notion in mind, he won't see the need to taste it. It is not easy to know for oneself that salt is salty. Salt does exist. Take it, taste it. Then you will know for yourselves and there will be no need to ask others.

D: Sir, yesterday I did taste a little bit of salt.

S: Really? Why only a little? Did the salt run out?

D: No, sir, there is plenty of it.

S: Then take it! Don't just taste a little bit. Use as much as you need. Every single one of you has got some salt, haven't you?

D: Yes, sir. We haven't eaten our full yet, sir, but we are satisfied with tasting just a little.

S: But, of course, you are not thinking of leaving it at that, are you?

D: Well, sir, not actually, but as time goes by everything changes. We planned something last year and already a year has passed...

S: Now, this time, don't only think. How many "thinkers" were there at the time of the Buddha?

D: They were as numerous as grains of sand on the beach, sir.

S: You still have to make efforts and meditate. You still have to strive to understand the teachings of the Buddha. You are planning to do that, aren't you? Will you only think about putting forth effort in this life also?

D: If we only think about it, sir, we shall again be left behind in the cycle of birth and death.

S: Now, then, there is no problem. "In the past we missed out because we were only thinking about making effort, but now we know that there is fire in the two pieces of wood. We shall rub them together." Thinking in this way, there will be effort and also the desire to fight the battle... Have you got hold of the two pieces of wood? If I continue talking, you will think, "This monk is talking for a long time." I shall stop now. Only if you work can you make an end of it. If you have the desire to work, meditate, work hard, applying yourselves with the same effort and determination as did the Noble Ones of old.

About Webu Sayadaw

The Webu Sayadaw was born on the 17th of February 1896 in Ingyinbin, a small village near Shewbo in upper Burma. He was ordained as a novice at the age of nine and was given the name Shin Kumara. At the age of twenty he was ordained as a full member of the Sangha, now being addressed as U Kumara. ("Webu Sayadaw" is a title meaning "the holy teacher from Webu," given to him after he became an established teacher.)

U Kumara went to Mandalay to study at the famous Masoyein Monastery, the leading monastic university of the time. In his seventh year after full ordination he abandoned the study of the Pali scriptures and left the monastery to put into practice what he had learned about meditation.

After leaving the monastery, U Kumara spent four years in solitude. Then he went to his native village Ingyinbin for a brief visit. He taught his former teacher at the village monastery on request the technique of meditation he had adopted. He said: "This is the shortcut to Nibbana. Anyone can use it. It stands up to investigation and is in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha as observed in the scriptures. It is the straight path to Nibbana.

The Webu Sayadaw emphasized the practice of meditation as the only way to bring the teachings of the Buddha to fulfillment. The study of the scriptures, though helpful, is not essential for the realization of Nibbana. The technique of meditation taught by the Webu Sayadaw is anapana sati, "mindfulness of breathing," which requires one to be aware of breathing in while breathing in, of breathing out while breathing out, and of the spot or area which the stream of air touches while the breath is entering and leaving the nostrils. Though anapana sati is basically a way of developing samadhi, one-pointed concentration of mind, the Webu Sayadaw said that when concentration is developed to a sufficient degree, the meditator can gain insight into the three characteristics of nature — impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. The direct understanding of these three characteristics is called pañña, wisdom, which is the most essential quality required of a meditator to reach Nibbana.

The Webu Sayadaw was not a scholar and his discourses do not cater to the intellectual who prefers the study of Buddhist philosophy to the practice. His refreshing simplicity, his patience, his lovely sense of humor, and his humility, all revealed in his dialogue with his audience, illumine a side of Buddhism which cannot be perceived by reading treatises and texts. The statements of the people in the audience offer us a glimpse of how Buddhism is practiced in Burma today.

The Webu Sayadaw undertook pilgrimages to the Buddhist sites of India and Sri Lanka. He passed away on the 26th of June 1977 in the meditation center at his native village Ingyinbin. He was believed by many to have been an arahant, a person who has in practice fully understood the Four Noble Truths and attained the end of suffering.

— Roger Bischoff