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Bloom: Buddhist Reflections on Serenity and Love

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AJAHN SONA, *Bloom: Buddhist Reflections on Serenity and Love*. Ottawa, Ontario: Sumeru Press Inc, 2020. 144 pp. CAN \$24.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-89655-960-5

This article reviews Ajahn Sona's book, *Bloom: Buddhist Insights on Serenity and Love* (hereafter *Bloom*) which focuses on key Buddhist teachings on breath meditation (*ānāpānasati*) as well as reflections on serenity and love. Ajahn Sona is an ordained Buddhist monk and the Abbot of the Birken Buddhist Monastery in Kamloops, Canada. He provides in-depth guidance on how to use breath meditation to achieve a level of awakening and thereby, liberation from suffering (*dukkha*). That said, Sona's work is recommended as a substantial and valuable introduction to breath meditation for a general readership who have some past experience with the practice. This work may also serve as a springboard for other similar projects and as a methodological framework to guide further research in Theravada breath meditation from both established and rising scholars alike. One will gain a clear grasp of breath meditation while also learning how to practice loving-kindness (*mettā*) and tranquility (*samatha*) from this work. The book has two parts, each having eight and nine chapters respectively, which will be briefly summarized.

Bloom's preface explains that it is comprised of teachings on breath meditation given by Ajahn Sona during a retreat at the monastery. In the first chapter, Sona introduces the subject of breath meditation by comparing it to a child's innocence. A well-fed child blissfully enjoys the present moment and the peacefulness of their environment. The author posits that to achieve emotional liberation, individuals should practice breath meditation with the innocence of a child. For example, he proposes the practice of whole-heartedness, in which one engages in everything without regard for the past or future, thereby enabling one to think more objectively as the mind is freed from its normal

confinements (20). In the second chapter, “Binoculars Clear and Focused,” the author Sona explains how to achieve clarity of mind through the mindfulness of breath. Sona argues that the word concentration (*samādhi*) carries an unsettling connotation and that mental focus is more akin to adjusting binoculars to achieve clarity (28). Accepting reality (*yathābhūta*) is the first step toward overcoming worries (*kukkucca*) and fears (*bhaya*), as it is important to understand that vigilance (*ap-pamāda*) does not prevent unpleasant things from happening. The next phase is to become fully absorbed in the present moment, without focusing on the length or shortness of the current breath (27). The author claims that by doing so, one will acquire clarity and perceive things as they are.

The third chapter, “What Benefit,” examines the benefits of breath mindfulness. Sona, alluding to the Buddha, argues that the best method to determine whether one is practicing correctly is to observe the result (31). He asserts that the mindfulness of breath will result in awakening, whereby burdens will be lifted and abundance will be manifested. If there are no results, then he advocates checking whether one is in the right environment, which is a prerequisite for practice. Sona continues to give a full explanation of the right environment for each type of personality. He adds that a seeker of serenity should seek out those who have an inclination for serenity, while those who are interested in insight practices should seek out those who engage in insight practices. Alternately, a scholarly practitioner should seek out similar circles (36).

In the fourth chapter, “Pleasant Abiding,” Sona emphasizes the pleasant abiding of serenity (*samādhi*), which can be attained by breath meditation. The author contends that there is no such thing as a negative *samādhi*, saying that it is only filled with pleasant (*sukha*) and unpleasant (*dukkha*) sensations (40). *Samādhi* alters an individual's percep-

tion of life. Sona details the procedures necessary to attain *samādhi* through breath mindfulness. The first step is to maintain sustained concentration, which then infuses the entire body with pleasurable sensations. According to the Buddha, to experience the virtuous emotions and bodily well-being connected with *samādhi*, the five hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇāni*)¹ must be removed (44).

The fifth chapter, “Breathing in the Noble Path,” emphasizes the Noble Eightfold Path's mindfulness of breath. Sona illustrates the relationship between right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), and right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), all of which are necessary for attaining and maintaining right concentration (*sammā samādhi*). He contends that the relationship between these three facets is analogous to the feedback loop that occurs during the dependent origination of *dukkha* (47). Attaining right concentration or mental bliss also results in awakening (*bodhi*). Sona recognizes the critical aspect of cultivating right concentration in accessing breath concentration (*ānāpānasati samādhi*). For instance, he discusses the possibilities of establishing breath concentration through expanding one's mindfulness of the seven awakening factors (62-65). Continuing, the author describes how to obtain detachment from the world via *samādhi* in the sixth chapter, “Abandoning the World.” According to Sona, breath meditation is a technique for locating oneself within the restless mind (56-57). He thinks that while restlessness of the mind (*uddhacca*) occurs to everyone, when people can focus their minds, they create an attachment. In Buddhism, it is considered acceptable to admit that attachment to anything can result in suffering. Sona, on the other hand, adds a contentious dimension to this well-

¹ The Five Hindrances are sensory desire (*kāmacchanda*), ill-will (*vyāpāda*), sloth-and-torpor (*thīna-middha*), restlessness-and-worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*) and doubt (*vicikicchā*).

known Buddhist concept. He argues that attaching to a *jhāna* is not a bad thing (71). This, however, contradicts a Buddha's teaching in the *Mahāsāropamasutta*, which confirms that serenity alone is not the end objective of the Buddhist path.² Sona believes that one must plunge confidently into *samādhi*, renounce the five hindrances, and develop the five components of *jhāna*. Among these are applied thought (*vitakka*), sustained thought (*vicāra*), joy (*pīti*), bliss (*sukha*), and one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) (61). With this way, one can discover the beautiful, achieving *samādhi* through unwavering determination.

Sona addresses the four types of absorptions (*jhāna*) that can be attained through mindful breath awareness in Chapter Seven, “*Jhāna Bodies*” (70-73). The first *jhāna* arises from prolonged and applied attention that is pleasant resulting from the mind's concentration. The second *jhāna* is characterized by a joyful experience in the body that occurs without effort. Sona then moves on to the third *jhāna*, which he characterizes as a state in which one is fully conscious while still experiencing bodily pleasure. Finally, the fourth *jhāna* is a condition in which an individual has abandoned joy and grief and hence no longer experiences pain or pleasure. Individuals can deal with many hindrances in this state, but Sona urges them to return to *jhāna* when hindrances emerge.

In the eighth and last chapter on serenity, “*Due Season*,” the author describes what it is like to be in *samādhi*. According to Sona, *samādhi* satisfies all seven factors of awakening (*satta bojjhaṅgā*): mindfulness (*sati*), contemplating *dhamma* (*dhamma vicaya*), energy (*virīya*), joy (*pīti*),

² M PTS I 198: *Mahāsāropamasutta* notes that achievements like worldly gains (*lābha*), moral virtue (*sīlasampadā*), serenity (*samādhisampadā*), knowledge and vision (*ñāṇadasana*) are not the end of the spiritual path. That is to say; it is unwavering mental freedom (*akuppā cetovimutti*) that leads to the conclusion of the spiritual path.

tranquility (*passaddhi*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) (75). Sona emphasizes that this state occurs spontaneously. To attain *samādhi*, one should just attend the preliminaries and practice breath meditation. These preliminaries include virtue training (*sīla*), listening to the *dhamma* (*paratoghosa*), association with wise people (*kalyāṇamittatā*), and being in a favourable environment for practicing the *dhamma* (*patirūpadesavāsa*) (96).

In the book's second part, Sona has nine chapters explaining love. The first chapter of the second section, "Dive In," implores us to understand the deeper levels of being, yet he does not define them in specific terms. Although the author does not identify these deeper levels, readers are left to assume that they represent the steady growth of *samādhi* as a result of achieving eight absorptions (*jhānas*).³ Sona argues that we must apprehend and practice what the Buddha referred to as the right effort in order to attain this understanding. He also discusses a problematic aspect of extra effort that can result in tension. The primary reason for practicing right effort is to maintain a healthy balance of effort that is neither too light nor too heavy. By experiencing the deeper levels of mind, one experiences the freedom of the higher mind (89-90). Sona's elaboration on freedom does not allude to the lofty liberation (*vimutti*), but rather to the renunciation of unwanted sensual desires (*nekkhamma*) that may aid us in becoming less worldly and in seeking a more inner peace-filled life. In light of changing circumstances, Sona continues by noting that the freedom gained from renunciation is impermanent and individuals can reclaim it by cultivating loving-kindness (*mettā*).

³ The Eight Absorptions are first absorption (*paṭhama jhāna*), second absorption (*dutiya jhāna*), third absorption (*tatiya jhāna*), fourth absorption (*catuttha jhāna*), the sphere of infinite space (*ākāsānañcāyatana*), the sphere of infinite consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatana*), the sphere of nothingness (*ākīñcaññāyatana*) and the sphere of neither perception nor nonperception (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*).

In the second chapter, “Be Kind to Yourself,” Sona encourages meditators to be kind to themselves as they practice breath meditation. He suggests that kindness enables meditators to confront themselves and reality without fear, allowing them to enjoy mental freedom while the body and all its preoccupations fade into the background (97). The third chapter, “The Sun and the Moon,” instructs meditators to seek joy and happiness, and to refrain from rushing into silence and mental stillness. He establishes the necessity of treating everything with love, even to the point of watching and appreciating the moon and sun (100). The author references the Buddha thanking a tree for its shade (*animisa lōcana*), which he takes as a depiction of living with love.

Sona begins the fourth chapter, “Knocking From the Inside,” by exploring how to create a “home” from within, a metaphorical place in which one is accepted. He believes that all beings, including humans, possess a nesting or shelter instinct, which drives them to own a house (107). Sona refers to this as an illusion since there is no such thing as a home in the world, for we are simply passing through. By calling upon the Buddha, he elucidates the concept of having a loving-kindness-filled “home” where everyone is always welcome (108). Sona teaches that cultivating a loving-kindness-filled “home” is more necessary than possessing a physical home filled with worldly desires. Sona asserts that a home rooted in the emotion of loving-kindness is a sacred habitat free of fear, anxiety, and worry. Sona focuses on thriving in the emotional state of loving-kindness in the fifth chapter, “The Four Quarters,” claiming that it is crucial to maintain benevolent energies and to generate positive feelings such as joy and loving-kindness. He also establishes the concept of confronting realities. Sona cites the Buddha's advice about dealing with realities. For example, one must have the proper emotional frameworks in place to avoid acquiring negative emotions (115-117). By pondering impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and non-

self (*anatta*), as well as the Five Subjects of Frequent Recollection — aging (*jarā*), illness (*vyādhi*), death (*maraṇa*), loss (*vinābhāvo*), and action (*kamma*) — the proper emotional structure can be developed (118). Returning to wholesome emotions enables one to feel secure in the emotion of loving-kindness.

The sixth chapter, “Another Word For Trust,” examines loving-kindness as a parallel for trust, referring to a state of being without defenses (125). Sona adds that being filled with loving-kindness does not guarantee that unpleasant things will not happen to the individual, as even the Buddha, who was filled with loving-kindness, died of food poisoning. According to the author, the essence of loving-kindness is an attitude toward life and its difficulties that are free of animosity and hatred. In order to cultivate loving-kindness, constant effort is required, gradually enabling one to deal with difficult situations. In this regard, Sona provides meditators with a formula for a year of loving-kindness in the seventh chapter, “A Year of Metta.” He suggests that it begins each morning when people examine their minds for evidence of ill-will (*vyāpāda*). They then must cultivate good-heartedness, which is a sign of dwelling in loving-kindness and is frequently manifested by a pleasant countenance (134). The meditators are instructed to re-evaluate themselves throughout the day to ensure that their loving-kindness does not decrease. They will eventually achieve the goal of mindfulness, which liberates individuals from possible persistent hindrances. Finally, the author encourages meditators to cultivate pleasant emotions to offset negative attachments. They will thereafter attain the level of a *bhikkhu* (139).

The author concludes the practice of loving-kindness in the eighth chapter, “All I Ask of You,” by asserting that loving-kindness ought to be shared by letting others know and understand that they are

always loved. They are urged to disseminate acts of loving-kindness wherever they go. Finally, the ninth chapter, "Opening the Eye," elaborates on The Noble Eightfold Path to *samādhi* and loving-kindness. Sona highlights here that serenity is impossible without wisdom and that loving-kindness is the foundation of wisdom. According to the author, the Buddha identified the following three key obstacles to living a happy life: greed (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*), and ignorance (*moha*) (146-149). As a result, these should be avoided to practise loving-kindness and *samādhi* successfully. Aversion can be overcome or avoided by consistently moving away from the sources of hostility. Greed generates a sense of lack, impeding our ability to be happy. Ignorance should be addressed through the exploration of alternatives such as loving-kindness and *samādhi*. This enables the settlement of issues in one's life in a moral and loving manner.

We now turn to the strengths and weaknesses of Sona's priceless work on serenity and love. Without a surprise, this is one of the leading books I have read in terms of its lucid presentation, exegesis, explication, and application of Buddhist teachings on *samādhi* and loving-kindness, as taught and practiced in a contemporary Buddhist retreat. Despite the fact that the book does not introduce new knowledge, it improves the current understanding of breath meditation by focusing on achieving *samādhi* and loving-kindness. The book offers significant evidence supporting the author's views; but, unlike most works, the majority of the evidence is not cited. This is because the book is a transcription of audiotapes from a meditation retreat. Sona is an accomplished meditation instructor who vividly describes the events of a ten-day meditation retreat to the point where readers become absorbed in the discussions. Consequently, few in-text citations are expected from such a monograph. Regardless, the book makes numerous references to the Buddha's words, teachings, and biographical events, which contribute to the

book's validity and arguments. The book accomplishes this by conveying the Buddha's doctrinal teachings, especially on breath meditation. For instance, prominent authors such as Škof and Berndtson⁴ and the Buddhist Centre⁵ reaffirm the importance of mindfulness of the breath. Carter and Carter III⁶ also address several of the benefits of breath meditation identified by Sona in their work on using breath meditation to rehabilitate psychological functioning. Tejadhammo⁶ also agrees that practicing meditation while pondering the Buddha's teachings results in a better life marked by cultivating qualities such as loving-kindness and *samādhi*.

Bloom: Buddhist Insights on Serenity and Love contains an impeccable analysis of the Buddha's different teachings, with certain details that may seem extraneous to some readers. Sona uses humour and similes to create a work that is both fascinating and unforgettable. In a sample simile, he contrasts the type of *samādhi* required in a classroom to the type required in meditation, the latter which results in a beautiful emotion with an emphasis on being focused. He also compares the *samādhi* required for breath meditation to the allegory of adjusting the focus of binoculars or tuning a radio for a clear signal. In addition, the *jhānas*, *mettā*, *samādhi*, and other Buddhist concepts are explained in an accessible manner. Sona often references the Buddha's words or scenarios from his life that corresponds to the writings of various authors, including Bhikkhu Narada and Anālayo.⁷ For instance, Sona advocates the Buddha's

⁴ Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson, *Atmospheres of Breathing* (SUNY Press, 2018).

⁵ The Buddhist Centre, "The Mindfulness of Breathing | The Buddhist Centre," accessed 21 September 2021, <https://thebuddhistcentre.com/text/mindfulness-breathing>.

⁶ Bhante Tejadhammo, "Selling Water by the River," *The Humanistic Psychologist* 49, no. 1 (2021): 94–110, <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000233>.

⁷ Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Buddha and His Son," *Mindfulness* 12 (2021): 269–74; Venerable Narada Mahathera, *The Buddha and His Teachings* (BPS, 2021).

approach of purifying the emotional structure of life (13). The book's two-fold structure leads to a deeper understanding of *samādhi*, loving-kindness, and breath mindfulness.

The transcribing of the audiotapes provides readers with an insight into Sona's great mastery in conducting meditation retreats due to his fifteen years of teaching and his experience as a Buddhist monk who has associated with countless people. The strength of the work, however, is also its weakness. Given that the book is a transcription, it does not include a summary at the end of each chapter to assist readers in reprising the amount of content presented. Additionally, the opening chapter falls short of providing a synopsis of the entire work. In this way, the book's flaws are only attributed to the writing style and not to the subject, presentation, doctrine, or exegesis. Despite a few minor shortcomings in the writing style, the book is straightforward, enjoyable to read, and packed with thought-provoking information. It is a must-read for anyone interested in practicing breath mindfulness.

Notes on the Contributor(s)

Dr. Chandima Gangodawila is a Research Scholar at the Ronin Institute, USA. He received his doctorate in Sanskrit from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. In his exhaustive research as a visiting research fellow at the Center for Studies in Religion and Society of the University of Victoria, Canada, he has developed a distinct fascination for considering the intersection of how the perplexities of the *Suttas* have been resolved by the *Abhidhamma*. In addition to this primary research interest, his current research focuses upon the critical analysis of Theravada *Abhidhamma* and topics within Buddhist psychology, gender equality, human rights, and climate change.

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