

The Role of Monkhood in Contemporary Myanmar Society

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September 2008,
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Introduction

Recent events in Myanmar, particularly the “Saffron Revolution” in 2007 and cyclone Nargis in 2008 placed Myanmar monks in the focus of the international community. Not for the first time in history, the Myanmar *sangha*¹ took a leading role in times of emergency, and was able to mobilise rapidly their forces in order to help and represent the people of Myanmar. In 1988 they went to the streets with other citizens to call for democratic and economic reforms in the country. Similarly, in 2007, monks participated in the nation-wide protests against rising fuel and commodity prices.² The visible and silent support of the monks provided encouragement and moral guidance for the predominantly Buddhist nation. Facing the post-Nargis devastation and indecisiveness related to access of international humanitarian aid, Myanmar monks became the only organised group able to respond promptly with aid for traumatised victims, providing them with shelter and distributing basic commodities in their communities.

The saffron revolution did not succeed. However, for some analysts it was not the end but rather the beginning of a new chapter in Myanmar’s contemporary history, marking the emergence of a new potential social and political force, nourishing hopes of the opposition and

for all who expect general changes in Myanmar. Monks, particularly the younger generation, became more aware of their strength and responsibility for the country. In Myanmar most independent activity is suppressed or under strict control of the state. The monkhood, in contrast, enjoys a high level of immunity and freedom, for instance, with regard to freedom of movement (within the country and abroad)³ or various social activities, mostly in the local area. The recent events showed that their role in the society is not limited to the preservation of religion and rituals.

Although there is a developed *sangha* administration, the dependence of an ordinary monk on the administrative hierarchy is minimal. The Sangha *Mahanayaka* State Committee, the highest administrative body of the Burmese *sangha*, is regarded by the new generation of monks rather as a care-taker of the government’s religious activities and maintenance of its *status quo*, than as the body of moral authority for ordinary monks. Most of the members of the Committee are elderly, traditional monks enjoying high privileges and material welfare. They have no real power on community matters, because this lies in hands of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

The Myanmar *sangha* is not homogenous and the scope of monks’ activities is complex. As a monk is perceived as a renouncer of the world, the question arises to what extent he should be engaged in the social and political life of the country? The purpose of this work is to introduce the reader to Myanmar Buddhist society and to give some ideas about the role of the monks in contemporary Myanmar.

¹ *Sangha* - community of monks.

² It is difficult to estimate the proportion of monks who participated in the protest. According to Government only 2 %, in opinion of my interlocutors, monks from Yangon - 60 %. About 2% were strictly against, due to religious conviction, or strong relations with the government. Both estimations seem to be not adequate, to get it more precisely one should know the approximate number of adult novices and monks, as sangha includes novices children as well the number of temporary monks. The media’s estimation is up to 30 thousand in Yangon.

³ Regarding monks’ opportunities, monastic connections in the whole country and abroad as well financial situation comparatively better than any average Myanmar layman.

1. Historical background of Buddhism in Myanmar

The first inhabitants of Myanmar belonged probably to Austro-Asiatic group but they have left no pursuable traces. They were replaced by Tibeto-Burman tribes, who came from eastern Tibet in the beginning of the Christian era. The oldest of them known by name were the Pyu, the Kanran, the Arakanese and the Thet, who may be the ancestors of the Chin. Other ethnic groups were Talaings (Mon) in the south-east of the country and the Karens in the east. The Shans appeared much later, in the 10th century.

The Pyus found empires of city-kingdoms in the Irrawaddy Valley. Similarly, like in other South-East Asian countries, the Pyus were under strong and wide influence of the Indian religion and culture, which came into the country through migration and trade. According to Harvey⁴ the cultural influence from India took root not earlier than A.D. 300. However, Hinduism could have come to the land long before. In Myanmar tradition, the Pyus are considered to be pious Buddhists but the excavations give evidence that both Hinduism and Buddhism coexisted. The oldest known Pyu cities carried names related to Hinduism (Sri Ksetra, Baitkhano – Visnu). The Hindu religion left its traces in royal ceremonies, arts, law and astrology. Some of the Hindu gods and goddesses eventually became members of the indigenous animistic religion and *nat*-spirits pantheon⁵. Although the Pyu are extinct, their civilisation is often regarded as a part of Myanmar heritage, as it absorbed Pyu culture.

According to Myanmar belief, Buddhism arrived into the country soon after Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of the religion, was enlightened and became Buddha. The story tells of two merchant brothers from Lower Burma, who went on a journey to pay homage to the Buddha and received eight strands of his hair to venerate. The merchants were the first lay followers of the Buddha and the first people who took refuge in him and the *Dhamma*, his teachings, before the

Sangha, the community of monks, began to exist. The offered strands were enshrined inside the Shwedagon pagoda by King Okalappa; and the place became the most precious treasure for all the people of Myanmar, a symbol of both religion and country. Traditionally, Myanmar historians mention four more advents of Buddhism in Myanmar, among them two visits of the Buddha during his lifetime. An Arakanese legend relates to his personal visit to the Arakan state, where he left his engraved image, later to be known as the Mahamuni statue. The other arrivals of Buddhism are connected with historically documented events. The first is related to the visit of the Indian king to the Asoka's missionaries, Sona and Uttara in the III A.D to Suvarnabhumi⁶ and another with the work of Buddhaghosa, one of the greatest Buddhist commentators (IV-V A.D.). The people of Myanmar believe that he was a native Mon from Thaton who brought the *Tipitaka*⁷, the Buddhist Pali canon, and other scriptures in Pali from Sri Lanka.⁸

However, before the Theravada school, one of the South Indian schools of Buddhism, came into existence as the religion of the court and spread its influence over the people, there existed different schools of Buddhism. Among them some obscure Buddhist Mahayana cults were practiced, similar to those known in Bengal and the Malay Archipelago. The most powerful one was the order of Ari monks, which was remarkably different from the Theravada school. Ari monks were not celibate; were well skilled in martial arts, were known for indulgence, and corrupted the doctrine. They practiced *tantra* cults and magic, selling spells and absolution from sins.

Since the 11th century, with the beginning of the Bagan dynasty, Theravada started to prevail, the Ari cult was eradicated and Buddhism infiltrated many aspects of the Myanmar culture.

⁴ G.E. Harvey, History of Burma, From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824 The Beginning of the English Conquest, ed. Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, London and Edinburgh 1967:4.

⁵ Nat – from Pali *natha* – protector, saviour, lord. In Burma: spirits of ancestors, heroes, persons who died of violent and sudden death or deities. They can be malicious and capricious but while venerated can fulfill the wishes of worshipers. Nat worship co-exists with Buddhism, which is considered as religion concerned with life here after, whereas nat worship is the way for the material success and protection in the present life.

⁶ Suvarnabhumi according to Burmese scholars was the Mon kingdom with the port capital Thaton. Thai scholars place Suvarnabhumi on Thai territory. G. E. Harvey in his History of Burma rather doubts that this visit had ever took place because it is not documented in Asoka's rock edicts but mentioned only in *Mahavamsa*, the Ceylon Chronicle compiled in VI AD. [Harvey:309]

⁷ *Tipitaka* – The Buddhist canon, Three Baskets comprising: *Suttapitaka* – basket of discursive or narrative Buddhist scriptures, *Vinayapitaka* – basket of monastic discipline and *Abhidhammapitaka* – basket of the theory of the doctrine or philosophy.

⁸ The ethnic origin of Buddhaghosa is not certain and the huge amount of literature written under this name suggests that there possibly were more than one Buddhaghosa.

King Anawrahta (AD 1044-77) and his religious guide Shin Arahan, a monk from Thaton, undertook many endeavours in order to purify the existing religion and establish the Theravada order. Having been refused *Tipitaka* from Mon Kingdom (with the capital in Thaton), Anawrahta organised a military expedition in 1057 and consequently brought home not only the Canon but also learned monks, artists and the Mon king Manuha himself. As a result, the Bagan kingdom assimilated the Mon culture and soon became a centre of religious learning. Pali, the language of the Buddhist canon, became the sacred language of learning and literature and enriched the indigenous languages. Anawrahta's successors continued his tasks; most of them were pious Buddhists, such as Kyanzittha [A.D. 1084-1112], who was well-known for his religious reforms and the promotion of Buddhism in the region.

Bagan's political power waned after the 12th century. Due to the weakness of the central power, the country broke into fragmentary principalities, but incipient dynasties, in spite of periods of unrest, strove to be the patrons and propagators of religion, with very few exemptions. Myanmar's kings traced their origin back to Buddha's *Sakya* dynasty. The Buddhist doctrine of *kamma* placed the king in the highest position, as one could only become a ruler after the accumulation of the greatest merit in former lives. The King was believed to be the *cakkavatī*, a righteous, universal ruler, who rested his rule on the principle of *dhamma*, whose duty was to disseminate and support the religion and to protect his people. The King was also believed to be the Bodhisattva, the incarnation of future Buddhas.

Scholar Khin Maung Nyunt comments: *All Myanmar Kings whether noble or tyrant, tried to be noble patron of religion, promoter and supporter of Buddhism and defender of faith by building religious monuments for enshrining sacred relics and objects, by building residences for monks, rest houses for sheltering travellers and pilgrims, by digging wells, tanks, dams and canals for supply of water for public use and cultivation and by doing many other meritorious deeds.*⁹

The role of the king was to perpetuate the *sasana*, the Buddha's teachings, and to protect them from corruption and dispersion. This could only be done by enforcing the rules of a monk's moral code by means of control. The king ap-

pointed the head of the *sangha*, the so-called *sasanabaing*, and ensured the rule of order through ecclesiastical hierarchy. At the same time, he ruled with the support of the Buddhist order and its prestige.

2. Monkhoo – from meditative mendicants and renouncers to active members of the civil society

Buddha taught renunciation of the material world by means of spiritual practice in order to attain salvation (*nibbana*).¹⁰ He advised his disciples to cultivate a walk of life that strikes a balance, the middle way – the avoidance of two extremes, such as uncontrolled indulgence in sensual pleasures on the one hand, and on the other, unnecessary self-mortification leading to exhaustion of the body and mind. The cultivation of *sila* (morality), *panna* (wisdom) and *bhavana* (meditation) leads to the cessation of *tanha* (craving, thirst or desire), which he considered to be the cause of suffering, endless rebirths and infinite entanglement in the worldly matters. The Buddha and his first disciples were wandering mendicants, living in the forest, eating "what was given", wearing rags found in a cemetery, with neither a permanent place to live nor any possessions.

The growing popularity of Buddha's teachings, which increased the number of followers and highlighted the necessity for a retreat during the rainy season, were the main reasons for the disciples to settle down and found monasticism. Soon the need for the establishment of basic rules and regulations for the new community emerged, with the aim to avoid corruption and abuse of the original teachings and to regulate the discipline of monks. The moral code of a monk is called *vinaya*. There are 227 rules that a monk should respect. The offences are devised in seven categories, and only four of them, called *parajjika*, involve the so-called defeat, which consequently implies the exclusion from the *sangha* order without possibility of expiation. They include unchastity, including sexual intercourse even with animals, stealing, murder and false claiming of supernatural activities. The other offences are said to be curable, but this procedure entails a formal meeting of the order

⁹ Khin Maung Nyunt. 2003. An Anthology of Conference Papers: Religion in Myanmar Culture and History. Department of History, University of Yangon: 177.

¹⁰ Nibbāna – cessation, extinction, liberation. The ultimate goal for a Buddhist, the Absolute, the realisation of the Truth; the state is usually described by negative terms as extinction of craving, uncompound, unconditioned and in fact, an experience, which cannot be expressed in words. A person who achieved the *nibbana* is free from future rebirths and consequently from suffering.

or, in the case of the less grave ones, involve forfeiture, eventually only confession. All of these rules are not only precisely elaborated, but they also cover all aspects of a monk's life and conduct, his relationship with the lay community, his way of dressing, taking food or acquiring and keeping properties. Respecting the rules is indeed the only way to make extinct desire (*tanha*) and to follow the way leading to salvation.

In the handbook „How to Live as a Good Buddhist“, edited by the Department for the Promotion and Propagation of Sasana, the duties of the order are defined as follows: „*The community of ariya-sangha¹¹ serves mankind by constantly practicing morality and highest purity. They serve as Noble Ideal to follow, deserving respect, devotion and veneration from devotees. The bhikku-sangha by learning original scriptures, by practicing and by realization of highest truths, serve others by example, precept and teaching. Since they alone preserve the original sasana handed down from teacher to pupil, the devotees pay them due respect and support. They serve both sasana and people by teaching the scriptures, learning, practicing and reaching the goal of nibbana are the three aspect of the task of the bhikku sangha, past and present.*“¹²

At present, about 90 percent of Myanmar's population are Buddhist and an estimated 500 000 inhabitants are practicing monkhood. The first encounter with Myanmar monasticism may be somehow astonishing and raise the question of contemporary monkhood and the renunciation of the material world. The most striking are certainly the monks' obvious liberties. In the big cities, the monks sitting in the coffee shops, smoking, chewing betel, watching television and roaming around without obvious purpose is quite a common sight. Another fact is that they enjoy a visibly better material status than most of their followers. The first impression would of course be different, if the first encounter was taking place in a meditation centre, where the way of life is strictly regulated and most of the monks are meditating, or in any of the Buddhist academic centres, where monks specialise in Pali language and Tipitaka. In the villages, a monk is under stronger surveillance of the community and is mostly concerned with traditional rites

and services. However, regardless of the place they live and their intellectual level, monks enjoy the highest respect from society.

It must also be stressed that the general respect they enjoy is not directed to an individual monk but to the robe he wears, which is the symbol of the Buddha. Monks might not be ideal, but they strive for an ideal and that is important. In Myanmar's culture, there are three kinds of people worthy of being worshipped: monks are the first, before parents and teachers. According to Buddhist belief, to become a human being in the circle of uncountable lives is very difficult, what more about becoming a monk, who is the closest to liberation?

What must be understood is the notion that monks differ and among them there are representatives from the whole spectrum of society. The motivation to join the order may vary. E.M. Spiro, in his research, points out five main motives for becoming a monk, such as disgust with the world and its misery, to avoid labour, to have an easy life, to achieve the state of *nibbana*, to acquire merit and good *kamma*¹³ or to promote and teach Buddhism.¹⁴ The wish for education as the main motive to become a monk should be added here. The majority of monks are villagers, who have no other opportunity to study or raise their status. The village monk is also the highest authority known to them and whom they follow. In case of the monks, who were raised in the monastery from a very early age, they are not able to contemplate on their motivation in childhood and they just learned to like the life in the monastery. When they reach the age of twenty, that way of life is the only one they have known and they do not see any other opportunity or reason to quit.

To leave the order is easy in theory, as it only requires the recitation of a special formula in the presence of one witness. However, taking this kind of decision after many years of monkhood usually involves strong resistance and disappointment from the monk's family, due to the prestige the family enjoyed, thanks to having a monk among its members. Supposedly, the years of material support might also have a negative impact and often cause a hysterical reaction.

¹¹ Ariya (pali)– noble, right, good, ideal; ariya-sangha – order or community of noble ones” synonym with „bhikkhu sangha” – order of monks.

¹² *How to Live as a Good Buddhist*. 2000. Vol. I. Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana, published by U Tun Mya Aung, Director of D.P.P.S., Yangon, Myanmar: 58.

¹³ *Kamma* – (more common in literature under the sanskrit term- *karma*) the acquisition of good or bad deeds which brings the fruits in the next life.

¹⁴ Melford E. Spiro. 1984. *Buddhism and Society, A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*, University of California Press: 137.

Traditional monks start as novices while still in their childhood, between 7 and 14 years of age. They might stay in the monastery since their initiation ceremony (*shin-byu*). This ceremony is compulsory for all Buddhist boys, usually from the age of 7 to 12 years. However, it often depends on the financial situation of the family whether the ceremony takes place, since the performance involves serious expenses. The family has to cover the costs of a set of robes and other requisites, donations to the monastery as well as food for the invited guests. The ceremony symbolically reflects the renouncement of the material world by the Buddha, who abandoned his comfortable life of a prince and became a homeless mendicant. So does a boy, wearing the costume of a prince, who is carried to the monastery on a white horse or on a litter. There he has his head shaved; he puts on the robe and is instructed by the senior teacher. He stays in the monastery for at least a week, during which he is taught the basic principles of Buddhism. This performance is the most important stage in a boy's life, because only then he formally becomes a part of the Buddhist community and society. He, as it is stressed, becomes "a human being"

The monks brought up in the monastery enjoy generally a higher degree of respect than the ones who become a monk at an older age, as they are considered to be "pure": they neither had any sexual experience, nor experienced the burden of family life. But this might also depend on personal qualities, skills and motivations of a person who joins the order.

Some of the monks, according to their own interests and inclination, may also undertake some kind of specialisation. Those interested in studies and propagation of Buddha's teachings, can undertake studies up to the academic level. They later become abbots or teachers in monastic schools, the so-called *phongyi kyaung*; they may also perform some missionary tasks in distant regions of the country. Those interested in any particular school of meditation can be trained as meditation teachers and serve the community in meditation centres.

Monks who do not pursue higher degrees of studies usually stay in a monastery and serve the community with religious, daily life services or those related to Buddhist festivals. In fact, any important enterprise in the lifespan of a lay devotee should be accompanied by religious rites such as, for instance, recitation of prayers and offerings to the monastery. Monks living in a village serve also as teachers and counsellors

for their followers, not only concerning religious matters but also as part of a monk's engagement in other village activities.

It is fairly easy to become a monk in Burma and the way to liberation is open to all. One can become a monk at any age, regardless of life circumstances. That is why generalisations concerning the *sangha* should be avoided.

A person can become a "a temporary monk", coming to the monastery for a limited period of time to regain clarity of mind, which is strongly advised and appreciated by the society, as the monastery is a refuge from daily turmoil and meditation is the highest remedy for the people of Myanmar. It is common that the head of the family stays in the monastery for some time and the rest of the family supports him with food. It is also believed that meditation and temporary seclusion are auspicious for future undertakings, because it helps one attain the highest merit. It is common that the whole department of an administration unit joins a monastery for a few weeks, in order to work better.

Although the *vinaya* rules strictly prohibit any additional occupation in the areas of medicine, magic, alchemy, fortune telling, choosing lucky lottery numbers, exorcism etc., these additional activities are quite common for a monk and they are not really despised by the majority of lay supporters. On the contrary: if a monk is successful, he can become quite popular and rich. But whatever is outside of the realm of formality and religious dogma often happens to be the most expressive aspect of human nature and represents the true needs of religious followers. However, this kind of performance may not be accepted or ignored by educated monks.

The easy access to the monastic life, in consequence, makes the monastery a place open to all sort of bogus monks, people who avoid responsibility or hardship and who just want to enjoy the privileges of monkhood. Unless they do not commit any serious offence, they will not be driven away from the order. One can also often hear about infiltration of monasteries by intelligence officers ordained as monks.

In conclusion, the modest and austere life of the *sangha* is rather a rare ideal. Contemporary monks asked about their strivings for liberation and becoming an *arahant* (a Buddhist saint) usually answers that it is difficult, and they doubt if it is still possible in the present life. They

often claim that the *parami* (the perfections¹⁵) are also important on the way to *nibbana*, so first they should fulfil them. They try to explain that they are just human beings and they should be perceived as such. Educated monks stress their duty as religious teachers. A monk may live in a comfortable monastery, using computer and mobile phone, but he still is a renouncer as long as he does not break any of the four *parajjikas*. On the other hand, monks are in the middle of mundane life and they do participate in it. The most active and educated monks believe that they should adapt to the times, they are no relics and as teachers and moral guides they have the right to represent the community they live in and to work on behalf of their people.

3. Mutual exchange between *sangha* and lay society

The formally organised and numerous *sangha* certainly cannot exist without the material support of the lay people in the field of basic needs such as food, habitat or clothing. This obvious material dependence on the lay society from the very beginning seems to have created a need for a religious option for the lay supporters, since the Buddha's doctrine was based on the renunciation of the material world. The moral code for laity is simple and embodied in five precepts, also known as *pancasila*: not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie and not to use intoxicants. There are also a few Buddhist *suttas* concerned with the life of a layman and the most important of them is the *Mingala-sutta* (*Sutta* of Blessings). It is composed of 38 so-called "blessings" or moral guidance notes related to various aspects of life, for instance social association, good living, education and skills, meditation practice, avoidance of sin, nobility, mental maturity, achievement of *nibbana*.

But the main religious offer for the laity is the cultivation of the *dana*: donations for the monks and worship of sacred relics. Through the act of donation lay followers can acquire the highest religious merit, which accumulates and brings fruits in one of their next lives and will eventually bring them closer to salvation. They can also achieve the so-called "five great benefits" in present life by offering alms food, such as longevity, beauty, happiness in mind and body, bodily strength, great wisdom and insight.

¹⁵ The ten perfections include: generosity, morality, freedom from lust, wisdom, effort, peace, truthfulness, resolution, universal love, equanimity. The Buddha had to fulfill all of them in his various, previous lives, before he had become enlightened.

Without practicing *dana* one is not able to make any religious progress. That is why important events in the life of a layman cannot be celebrated without the act of donation. Monks are the vessel through which laity can aspire to the better here and after. The most generous donors deserve also the highest respect and prestige in society. Monkhood, due to the vows, is also a kind of sacrum. In this way, both sides are living in symbiosis and depend on each other, materially and spiritually.

4. The monastery as the centre of cultural and social life in the village

The monastery in a village is a centre of social life. It is supported through the joint effort of the whole village community. Monasteries in Burma have always been centres for education for the people. In pre-colonial times, Burmese society was, like few other Asian societies, literate. During colonial rule (1886- 1948), the role of monasteries was partly weakened due to Christian missionary schools and educational reform, but since independence in 1948 and through the turbulent modern history of an independent state, they are still fulfilling the educational role. In contemporary Myanmar, the state is not able to guarantee access to free education for all and rather tries to adapt existing monastic centres. If they can secure the basic standards, they are registered as self-reliance schools within the state education system and their pupils can sit for state examinations. Monastic schools not only educate a new generation of novices, but they also widen the curriculum for other children. They usually accept all village children who cannot afford to go to a state school or who have difficult access regarding distance. The education in a monastic school is free, often accompanied by free meals and lodging.

Myanmar monasteries are also a place for preservation and transmission of Myanmar cultural heritage. The children are taught basic morals and civics, social rights and duties towards the others.

What is also stunning is that Myanmar's temples are a place of rest and enjoyment. It is indeed a place of refuge for villagers. People come to the monastery to take a rest after work, to give offerings to the monks, meditate or seek for religious or mundane advice. Monastery buildings are usually of better quality and provided with better equipment than any of the village houses. It is possible that the monastery is the only place in the village with electricity, and, what is more,

radio or television is available. It is the first place where all the news is received and distributed.

5. Organisation of the Buddhist *sangha* in Myanmar and its relation to the state

In Myanmar's history the ruler was always the main supporter and propagator of religion, responsible for its maintenance and purity. The king was the sponsor of state Pali examinations and Buddhist places of worship. *Sangha* enjoyed the king's protection and served him with religious instructions.

According to Khin Maung Nyunt, *sangha* had a sort of constitutional check upon the ruler. Some of the traditions and customary practices were preventive measures against despotism and tyranny.¹⁶ The monks were forbidden to be involved in secular matters and politics, but they could act as advisers. The head of the order appointed by the king, the *Thathanabaing*, or other distinguished teachers could even admonish the king, demand to pardon a condemned person and stand up for the subjects in times of natural disasters, to lessen their obligations towards the state. Sometimes kings entrusted political missions to monks, as in the case of the Mongol invasion and occupation of the country in the 14th century, to settle the conflict peacefully. One case is known where a monk became king (Dhammazedi – 1453-1472), chosen for his wisdom by queen Shin Saw Pu (1453-1472) as her successor to the throne. Generally, kings and *sangha* were dependent on each other, cooperating and balancing each other with mutual respect.

Without the king's strong central support, the ecclesiastical hierarchy the order easily divided and declined. During colonial times, the secularisation of Burma caused a weakening of the order. Prominent Buddhist teachers appealed to the British to assume religious duties of the former rulers as patrons. But due to the policy of non-interference in religious matters, the British response was rather superficial and not effective. This negligence, in effect, was one of the reasons for growing nationalism with a strong Buddhist religious background and the beginning of the resistance movement.

In 1906, the Young Men's Buddhist Association was established with the objective to promote: national spirit, national language and literature,

¹⁶ Khin Maung Nyunt. 2003. *An Anthology of Conference Papers: Religion in Myanmar Culture and History*. Department of History, University of Yangon: 181-182.

Buddhist doctrine and education in general. The YMBA developed in 1920 into the General Council of Burmese Associations, which advocated constitutional reforms and staged a strike at Rangoon University against University Act perceived to be restrictive for Burmese. Buddhist clergy took an active part in national resistance movement. The most prominent among them were U Wisara and U Ottama who applied a *non-violent* strategy in the struggle. In 1930-1932 Saya San, a Buddhist monk initiated the first armed resistance, which turned into national revolt.

After independence, the new authorities were aware of the role of Buddhism for national identity in the new state. Prime Minister U Nu organised the Sixth Buddhist Synod and invited the most learned Buddhist monks from all Theravada countries to recite and edit the *Tipitaka* and commentaries. However his achievement to declare Buddhism as the official state religion in 1961 created mistrust among Karen and Kachin Christian ethnic minorities and strengthen animosity in the already weak union.

At present, Myanmar authorities follow the example of the past regarding the support and control over the order, still being aware of the potential strength of the Buddhist *sangha* and its moral impact on the nation. However, the former balance and respect seems to have declined.

As stated in the Brochure of "The Department for the Promotion and Propagation of *Sasana*" of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, monks and novices in Myanmar live inside the system of hierarchy and according to the *Vinaya* rules¹⁷, free from the direct administration of the government. In 1980, nine Myanmar Buddhist sects¹⁸ were united in one body of monks and novices. After having elected one thousand, three hundred were appointed to the *Sangha* Central Working Committee and then forty seven of their members were chosen to organise the Executive Committee – the State *Sangha Mahanayaka* Committee. One hundred *sayadaws*¹⁹ from different parts of the country are organised in the State *Ovadacariya* Committee, the advisory board supervising the different levels of *sangha* organisations.

¹⁷ They hierarchy is based on the years (*vasa*) spent in order, counted from the higher monk's ordination.

¹⁸ The nine sects (or schools): Sudhammā, Shwe Kying, Veluvan, Anout Chawing Dvāra, Mūladvāra, Mahādvāra, Catubhumika Hnget Twin, Gaḍavimutti Gatot, Maggarī. The schools differ mostly in their interpretation of *vinaya* rules.

¹⁹ *Sayadaw* is a teacher.

Under the leadership of the *State Sangha Mahanayaka* Committee there are different levels of organisations: State and Division, Township, Village and Wards Committees.

There are also three judicial levels of *Vinaya* Judicial Courts: Township *Vinicchaya* Courts State and Division *Vinicchaya* Courts and the Highest *Vinicchaya* Courts.

The government of Myanmar sponsors the state Pali examinations and confers the titles. The basic one - *Pathamabyan* Pali Examination – has four levels. To continue their education, students may sit for the *Dhammacariya* examinations, testing their knowledge of *Tipitaka* and conferring them the title of *Sasanadhaja Dhammacariya*. There is also a Honorary *Dhammacariya* examination, which confers students the title of *Sasanadhaja Siripavara Dhammacariya*. For especially talented candidates, there are *Tipitakadhara* (The Bearer of Three Baskets) Examinations. A candidate must be able to memorise at least one of the three baskets in the term of five years. If he passes all three examinations, he obtains the title of *Tipitakadhara*, *Tipitakakovida* or *Tipitakadhara Dhammabandagarika*. The successful candidates are held in highest respect in the country. The conferring of the title is accompanied by donations and convocation ceremonies. *Tipitakadharas* enjoy special facilities as free travel by air, water and road and they receive monthly cash donations by the government. All ceremonies are sponsored by the government and held annually.²⁰

Apart from the above mentioned examinations for monks and novices, there are also national Pali Examinations of different levels held for the members of the *sangha*, praised with donations from lay devotees.

The titles of *Abhidhajamahatattaguru* and *Agamahapandita* are annually conferred to prominent *sayadaws* by the government. These and twenty other new titles are annually announced on Independence Day, 4 January, and a titles' presentation ceremony is held in March. These *sayadaws* can also travel free by road, air and water and they receive financial donations by the government.

There are two State Pariyatti Sasana Universities (Religious Universities) in Yangon and Mandalay, with both traditional and modern systems of

teaching. Alongside them, there is also the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University. The government sponsors different ceremonies such as hoisting the Pagoda Umbrella, ceremonies to honour the relics of the Buddha and *arahants*.

The government supports many monastic schools, particularly in the cities, where up to one thousand novices and monks live together in one monastery, which could otherwise not survive without central support as well, is in charge of maintenance and preservation of Buddhist monuments. In 1991, a new body was established, the Department for the Promotion and Propagation of *Sasana*, with the aim to spread Buddhist teachings in the country and abroad.

The fact is that *sangha* cannot exist without the state, at least not in such numbers as at present. It depends on the central power materially and judicially in case of civil disputes for instance about the land or monastery property, criminal offences. Regarding the numbers of monks and the easy access to the monkhood there is no question about the need of the State *Sangha Mahanayaka* structure and controlling role. The problem is how to restore its moral authority, real representation of the community and executive power, so that it could be perceived as more than a puppet institution, exercising regulations of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

6. Myanmar monks and their recent socio-political engagement

In accordance with state directives, monks are prohibited from participating in secular affairs. *"The monks should stay away from forming, joining or supporting any illegal sangha organization that does not accept supervision and administration of sangha organizations at different levels."* [Directive no 83 of 13 July 1991]. *"Party politics is concerned only with lay persons. No matter which party comes to power, members of the sangha are to try to maintain the perpetuation of the Buddha Sasana under the administrative machinery of that party."* [83.5] *"All in all the members of the sangha residing in Myanmar are directed to avoid getting involved in party politics and instigation."* [83.6]"

The moral dilemma about monks' participation in socio-political affairs arises for both the monks and the state. According to U. Acara and U. Parami, *vinaya* teachers at International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon, in *vinaya* code there are no direct restrictions regarding monk's activities in politics. Undoubt-

²⁰ Buddha Sāsana and Myanmar, The Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Union of Myanmar.

edly, according to the rule, the best for the monk is to keep far from all social or political affairs, even from the modern education, regarded as to being mundane for the attainment of gain and fame in the world. There are few vinaya rules related to the subject:

1. Monks should not go to watch the soldiers' parade,
2. One who is giving a service to a king must not be ordained without the king's royal permission,
3. Monks are allowed to follow the ruling kings if the rulers are righteous.

But there are also a few examples of the Buddha's engagement in social affairs or²¹ even acting as a negotiator. There is compromise that if anything good could be done for the welfare of many without serious transgression of *vinaya*, it should be done.

Usually, where there is no direct restriction in the church rule, and special circumstances arise, there is a space and need for interpretation. Buddhist community itself should elaborate the extent and area of monk's participation in socio-political life and the right and way of expressing general concerns. Particularly, given that monks' grassroots activity is already given.

The Myanmar monks' involvement in politics has a long tradition dating back to the colonial times. Similarly, in several other Buddhist countries there is a phenomenon known as "engaged Buddhism" or "liberation movement", concerned with monastic activities in social and political life. Regarding neighbouring Thailand, the most prominent Buddhist reformers are Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Ajaan Sulak Sivaraksa, founder of various non-governmental organisations that deal with issues of development, education, ecology etc. Ajaan Sulak Sivaraksa is also a co-founder of the "International Network of Engaged Buddhists".²² Another Buddhist plat-

²¹ Dispute of Sakyas and Koliyas on the share of waters from Rohini rivers, his effort to stop Vitadubha to kill Sakya people. One example is even devastating, regarding tolerance – when king Kosala allowed religious sect Tittiyas to build monastery near the Buddha's place, the Teacher appealed to the King to remove the building of neighbours. Sources: Commentary of Sahassabhikkhunisamgha-sutta, Mahavagga-samyutta, Samyutta-nikaya, Commentary of Kunala-jataka, Vitatubha-vatthu, Dhammapada-atthakatttha.

²² „INEB issues of interest revolve around integration of spirituality and social activities. Issues that INEB emphasised included peace reconciliation, ecology, women issue and empowerment, health, education, human rights, community building, alternative development, role of spiritual leaders in modern world context, etc.” <http://www.inebnetwork.org/>

form is the annual International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak, which this year took place in Hanoi and concluded with approval of the "Hanoi Declaration of the Fifth International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak". The declaration includes articles outlining the international Buddhist community's commitment to build a just, democratic and civilised society including urging international communities to strengthen efforts for world peace, advocating for social justice and solutions to social problems.²³

In September 2007, the so-called "Saffron Revolution" in Myanmar was a spontaneous act, without coordination and permission from the highest levels of monastic hierarchy. This sudden and courageous act was also quite unexpected for the opposition.

The monks tried to use their immunity to urge the authorities to consider the economic situation of Myanmar citizens and to protest against a sudden fuel price hike. After violent events in the town of Pakkoku²⁴ ended with the death of a monk, the protests spread over the whole country. The monks launched the *Pattaneik-kuzana*²⁵, an excommunicative boycott, the so-called "turning the bowls upside down", not accepting donation from the Buddhist offender. Ingrid Yords in her article "*Turning over the bowl in Burma*", comments: *The statement was a significant rebuke, but remained highly moral and anti-political. The language of kingship and refusal of donations remained within the traditional bounds available to the Sangha in desperate times.*²⁶

²³ <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/social/2008/05/783550/>

²⁴ Pakkoku – town in western central Myanmar, Magwe division.

²⁵ Any important decision in the monastery is taken by an announcement, repeated three times, if there are no opposed voices the decision takes effects. The excommunication announcement of 18-th September in unofficial translation was as follow: *Reverend fathers, may you lend ears to me! The evil, sadistic and pitiless military rulers who are robbing the nation's finances and indeed are large-scale thieves have murdered a monk in the City of Pakkoku. They also apprehended the reverend monks by lassoing. They beat up and tortured, swore and terrorised monks. Provided that monks be bestowed with four deserving attributes, they ought to boycott the evil, sadistic, tyrants, and immensely thieving military rulers. The monks ought not to associate with the tyrants, not to accept four material things donated by them and not to preach them. This much is informing, recommending or proposing.* [Burma Update by PDC 181- 18 September 2007].

²⁶ http://caribou.cc.trincoll.edu/depts_csrlp/RINVol10No3/turning%20over%20the%20bowl.htm

In the meantime four political demands were presented to the government by activated All Burma Monks Alliance Group:

1. The SPDC must apologise to the monks until they satisfy and can forgive and pardon them,
2. Reduce all commodity prices, fuel prices, rice and cooking oil prices immediately,
3. Release all political prisoners including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all detainees arrested in ongoing demonstrations over fuel price hike,
4. Enter a dialogue with democratic forces for national reconciliation immediately to resolve the crises and difficulty facing and suffering by the people.²⁷

The protest ended with a violent crackdown by the military, with many deaths, arrests and a clearout of the monasteries, which in only a few days became empty, as most of monks fled to the villages. The events were publicly considered by authorities as an attempt to destabilise the country by the opposition and foreign agents, which is more comfortable interpretation, than admit that that expression of concern had arisen originally from inside. That violent reaction brought a silent but permanent anger to many Myanmar people. The lack of respect towards the social sacrum had a very negative impact on the authorities' prestige. The government, which uses religious symbols in everyday rhetoric, reacting with violence against the *sangha*, lacks credibility. Moreover, regarding that the doctrine of "non-violence" is a foundation stone in the Buddhist religion. After the crackdown, the government forcefully tried to improve its image by providing huge donations to the *sangha* hierarchy and organised many Buddhist ceremonies and events, in which the main political players participated. There was also a notable side effect: the violent reaction brought about a revitalisation of religion in its social dimension but as well visible political activities of monks in the country and abroad.²⁸

In another example, after the cyclone Nargis' devastation of the Irrawaddy Delta in May 2008, with over one hundred thousand dead and missing and about 2 million homeless survivors, monks came into focus as a group with high mobilisation. In contrast to the tardiness and suspiciousness of the government, which

seemed to give more attention to their own image than to constructive actions, the monks took a leading role in giving assistance to the helpless people. The monasteries become shelters and aid centres for those left out from the government or international aid workers' relief efforts. The clergy particularly filled the lack of a sufficient number of effective organisations in the country, such as NGOs, reaching distant and forgotten areas, distributing aid, organising temporary hospitals and orphanages. As many noticed, the leading role of monks in these times of emergency certainly galvanised their ranks and gave them a way to express their political voices. Moreover the open critique of the government from inside the country became visible, as in the case of Sitagu Sayadaw U Nanissara²⁹. There is hope that this voice will be considered more seriously in the future.³⁰

7. Towards a more active role of monks in society

A monk's engagement and active participation in social or political life is controversial due to their religious purpose to search for spiritual liberation. But it seems that for many of the younger generation, involvement in social life is unavoidable because of their importance in a community and numerous duties they are in charge of. Moreover, in times of emergency it seems that there is no other group in the Myanmar society which is more fitted, flexible and accepted by the nation. Even if political activity might be more controversial, any peaceful action is acceptable as long as it is not contrary to the *vinaya* rules.

Quite a few younger monks, who have travelled, studied and preached abroad, are in closer contact with the outside world and have had an opportunity to widen their perspectives. They are more conscious about underdevelopment of their country caused by isolation, lack of access to the means of communication such as internet, mobile phones etc., and they realise the impact of overwhelming poverty on their people. They are more open towards working for the benefit of others. Although salvation in Bud-

²⁷ www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=8610 - 31k

²⁸ The foundation of Sasana Moli – International Burmese Monks Organization by Myanmar sayadaws abroad, strongly connected with the Myanmar opposition in exile and Monks Supporting Committee of the National Council of the Union of Burma.

²⁹ Sayadaw U Nanissara, born in 1937 in Thegon, founder of International Buddhist Academy in Sagaing Hills, prominent Buddhist teacher, known for his missionary work.

³⁰ Although the strict polarisation *sangha versus state* is an exaggeration. One should not forget that in a Burmese family it often happens that there is one monk and one soldier, being also quite common that a retired soldier becomes a monk. As is the case in many places monks and army cooperate in post-Nargis works.

dhism is not acquired through charitable work, one still accumulates merit. The Buddhist doctrine provides room for vivid interpretation in terms of social matters. Monks have access to the people and the subject of preaching is open. The "Saffron Revolution" brought more people to the monasteries to listen to "what is right". The present role of monks in the time of disaster certainly proves their importance as an active group, enjoying respect, being easy to mobilise and getting access to everyone. In Myanmar it is often emphasised that "monks are powerful". They are. They have real power to positively influence the society they live in. The question is if the present revival can develop into a more organised and representative movement, where the engaged *sangha* would be able to formulate postulates and define their area of activity.³¹ That depends on the participation of prominent and respected teachers, with authority in the *sangha* and among the followers.³²

One may argue that the traditional curriculum and lack of basic education in other fields such as economics or politics does not entitle monks to claim the position of advisers. Still, they are very close to the ordinary people and their hardship and, as illustrated above, they live in complete dependence and symbiosis with their supporters. In fact, in Burma it would be difficult to find better mediators and respected authorities than the members of the *sangha* and their voice could be valuable and beneficial for both the authorities and the people.

³¹ Probably the areas of activity of the monkhood should be defined wider than stressing the political postulates formulated by the opposition in exile, which is *ad hoc* labelled by the military government as being manipulated by hostile and foreign forces. The role and influence of the monks is quite incomparable on the grassroot level, as for example in the development of civil society, human and citizens' rights, education, ecology etc.

³² After the crackdown monks in Yangon claimed that there was no strong leadership in the movement, no plan, and that this was one of the reasons why the demonstrations were not successful.

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