

Trend of Sangha's Administration in the Union of Myanmar in the Next Decade

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Abstract

This research is to analyze trend of *Sangha's* administration in the Union of Myanmar in the next decade and to study the *Sangha* administration system of the country. Furthermore, it also supposed to examine the social evidences to understand how importance monks' role is in Buddhist society which is based on observation research methodology and documentary research method also would apply as necessarily. It also supposes to study the main reason of setting up *Sangha* administration, *Sanghamahanayaka* Committee, in Myanmar and how this administration system is affected to the *Sangha* and its relation to the state from the ancient to the present time. Correspondents have often asked what has been the influence of Buddhism on the people of this country. To really evaluate the effect of Buddhism on the people of Burma, one would have to turn back to its historical emerge of Buddhism. It also would be useful to concern the pre-Buddhist culture of the country to exactly know the affection of Buddhism.

Keywords: Sangha's Administration, Myanmar, Next Decade

Introduction

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 or various social actives, 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 *SanghaMahanayaka* 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.

Historical background of Buddhism in Myanmar

According to Myanmar belief, Buddhism arrived into the country soon after Siddhatha Gautama, 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 these hairs 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 teaching, 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 statues. 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 3 BC to Suvannabhumi and another with the work of Buddhaghosa, one of the greatest Buddhist commentators. The people of Myanmar believe he was a native Mon from Thaton who brought the *Tipitaka*, the Buddhist Pali canon, and other scriptures in Pali from Sri Lanka.

However, before the Theravada school one of the south Indian schools of Buddhism, came into existence as the religion of the country 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 11 AD, with the beginning of the Pagan dynasty, Theravada started to prevail, the Ari cult was eradicated and Buddhism infiltrated many aspects of the Myanmar culture. King Anowrahta and his religious guide Shin Arahan, a monk from Thaton, undertook many endeavors in order to purify the existing religion and establish the Theravada order. Having been refused Tipitaka from Mon Kingdom, Anawrahta organized 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 Pagan 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 (1084-1112), who was well known for his religious reforms and the promotion of Buddhism in the region.

Pagan's political power waned after the 12 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 formatives. The King was believed to be the *cakkavattin*, 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 Buddha.

Monkhood-from meditative mendicants and renounces to activate member of the civil society

As present, about 90 percent of Myanmar's population is Buddhist and 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 first impression would of course be different, if the first encounter was taking place in a meditation center, where the way of life is strictly regulated and most of the monks are meditating, or in any of the Buddhist academic centers, where monks specialties in Pali language and Tipitaka. In the villages, 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.

In Myanmar's culture, there are three kinds of people worthy of being worshiped; monks are the first, before parents and teachers. According to Buddhist belief, to become of human being in the circle of uncountable lives is very difficult, what more about becoming a monks 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. There are 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* or to promote and teach Buddhism. 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 of raise their status. The village monk is also the highest authority known to them and who 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.

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. This ceremony is compulsory for all Buddhist boys, usually from the age of 7 to 13 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 for 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 confirmable 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 a 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.

Some of the monks, according to their own interests and inclination, may also undertake some kind of specialization. Those interested in studies and propagation of Buddha's teachings, can undertake studies up to the academic level. They later become abbots or teacher in monastic schools. 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 centers.

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 counselors 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 way generalizations concerning the *Sangha* should be avoided.

A person can become 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 Myan-

mar. 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.

Organization of the Buddhist *Sangha* in Myanmar

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 for state Pali examinations and Buddhist places of worship. *Sangha* enjoyed the king's protection and served him with religious instructions,

Some of the traditions and customary practices were preventive measures against despotism and tyranny. 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 states.

In 1906, the Young Men's Buddhist Association was established with the objective to promote: national spirit, national language and literature, 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 the University Act perceived to be restrictive for Burmese Buddhists. A monk 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 organized the Sixth Buddhist Council and invited the most learned Buddhist monks from all Theravada countries to recite and edit the *Tipitaka* and commentaries.

At present, Myanmar authorities follow the example of the past regarding the support and control over the order, still being aware of the 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 *Vinayarules*. Free from the direct administration of the government. In 1980, nine Myanmar Buddhist sects 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 organize the Executive Committee- the State *SanghaMahanayaka* Committee. One hundred *Sayadaws* from different parts of the county are organized in the State *Ovadacariya* Committee, the advisory board supervising the different levels of *Sangha* organization.

Under the leadership of the State *SanghaMahanayaka* Committee there are different levels of organizations: 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 basis one *PathamabyanPali* 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 *SasanadhajaDhammacariya*. There is also a Honorary *Dhammacariya* examination, which confers students the title of *SasanadhajaSripavaraDhammacariya*. For especially talented candidates, there are *Tipitadhara* (the bearer of Three Baskets) Examinations. A candidate must be able to memories 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*, *Tiphitakakovida* 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. *Pitakadharas* 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.

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*, with donations from lay devotees.

The titles of *Abhidhajamaharatthgura* and *Aggamahapandita* 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 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 hosting the Pagoda umbrella, ceremonies to honor the relics of the Buddha and *Arahants*.

Conclusion

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.

Quite a few younger monks, who have traveled, 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 realize the impact of overwhelming poverty on their people. They are more open toward working for the benefit of others.

In Myanmar, it is often emphasized that monks are powerful. They have real power to positively influence the society they live in. The question

is it the present revival can develop into a more organized and representative movement, where the engaged *Sangha* would be able to formulate postulates and define their area of activity. That depends on the participation of prominent and respected teachers, with authority in the *Sangha* and among the followers.

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