

# **BUDDISM IN MYANMAR**

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The modern state of Myanmar, also known as Burma, is geographically the largest and westernmost country of mainland Southeast Asia. Its population of approximately forty-seven million as of the year 2000 is comprised of more than one hundred nationalities, the largest of which include the majority Bamar or ethnic Burmans, the Rakhine (Arakanese), the Shan, the Kayin (Karen), and the Mon. As a convention in English, members of all of these nationalities receive the designation Burmese as citizens of the country. The vast majority of the Burmese people, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, subscribe to Theravada Buddhism as their traditional faith. So pervasive is the influence of this religion on the people of Myanmar that it is often said that to be Burmese is to be Buddhist. Indeed, historically it was Theravada Buddhism more than any other force that drew the many peoples of Myanmar together into a single civilization, so much so that even non-Buddhist citizens of the country acknowledge the centrality of Theravada ethical, social, and political conceptions to the fabric of Burmese life.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Burmese chroniclers trace the origin of Theravada Buddhism in their country to the Buddha himself, who they assert personally converted the inhabitants of Lower and Upper Myanmar. These regions are the respective homelands of the Mon and the ancient Pyu people, precursors of the modern Bamar and the nationalities most closely associated with the evolution of Burmese Buddhism. Burmese sources further equate the Mon homeland with Suvannabhumi and the Pyu Bamar homeland with Aparanta, identifications that allow them to claim for their country two missions from King Asoka (ca. 300-232 B.C.E.). Reflecting a long-standing cultural rivalry with Sri Lanka, the same sources emphasize that the two missions restored an already established Theravada tradition in Myanmar, whereas the simultaneous single Asokan mission to Sri Lanka merely established Theravada Buddhism on the island for the first time. As a final claim to primacy, the Mon identifies the great Pali commentator Buddhaghosa as a native son.

Although Theravada Buddhism has a long history in Myanmar, there is little evidence of its presence in the country before the fourth century C.E. In addition, that which has been uncovered does not support the traditional portrayal of early Burmese Buddhism as uniformly Theravada. Rather it shows an eclectic mix of traditions that included multiple forms of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and indigenous animist cults. Excavations at the ancient Pyu capital of Sriksetra, for example, unearthed images of Visnu, Mahayana bodhisattvas, and Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist inscriptions. Seventh-century Chinese travelogues note that the city supported Sthaviravada (Theravada), Mahasamghika, Mulasarvastivada, and Sammatiya monks and that the Pyu observed the custom of ordaining all youths as novices in the Buddhist religion.

During this early period Myanmar absorbed cultural influences chiefly from South India, though important contacts were also maintained with Sri Lanka. Beginning in the ninth century, by which time the Bamar had begun to replace the Pyu in Upper Myanmar, Bengal emerged as a major source of Indian influence in the region. Large numbers of Buddhist votive tablets bearing Mahayana imagery and Sanskrit inscriptions written in north Indian script were imported and produced locally at this time. Bengali influence waned by the twelfth century as a consequence of the Muslim conquest of north India, a development that encouraged the expansion of Burmese ties with Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka connection facilitated the introduction of new reformist strands of Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism that in time emerged as the majority Buddhist tradition of mainland Southeast Asia. This process proceeded incrementally and did not complete itself in Myanmar until the eighteenth century.

In 1057 C.E., the Bamar king of Pagan, Anawrahta (Pali, Anuruddha), conquered the Mon kingdom of Thaton in Lower Myanmar, inaugurating the first Burmese empire (1057-1287). Tradition states that he carried off to his capital Pali texts, relics, and orthodox monks, and that he adopted Theravada Buddhism as the sole religion of his domain. To prepare for this, Anawrahta suppressed an already established sect of heretical Buddhist monks known as the Ari, who, though notorious for their wickedness, had enjoyed the traditional support of his forefathers. Whatever the historical accuracy of the legend, epigraphic and archaeological evidence indicates that Anawrahta was more eclectic than portrayed. He assisted the Sinhalese king Vijayabahu I to reinstate a valid Theravadd ordination line in Sri Lanka; at the same time he circulated in his own kingdom votive tablets adorned with Maharani imagery. Anawrahta also supported a royal cult of nat or spirit propitiation dedicated to the very deities said to have been worshipped by the Ari monks.

In 1165 the Sinhalese king Parakkamabahu I reformed the Theravada sangha of Sri Lanka by abolishing the Abhayagiri and Jetavana monasteries and compelling all worthy monks to be reordained in the Mahavihara fraternity. Within two decades, this reformed Sinhalese tradition was established at Pagan and elsewhere in the Burmese empire. The Burmese monarch extended patronage to the imported Sinhalese order but did not compel the native sangha to unite with it. As a consequence, the Burmese monastic community split into two groups, an indigenous unreformed faction called the Myanma sangha, and the reformed Sinhalese faction called the Sihala sangha. The Sihala sangha was revered for its discipline and scholarship, though it fractured repeatedly, giving rise to a pattern of sangha disunity that has been characteristic of Burmese monasticism ever since.

In the thirteenth century a powerful community of forest-dwelling monks emerged from the Myanma sangha, whose discipline was lax when viewed by Sinhalese standards. Modern scholarship has identified these as the Ari monks of the chronicles. Ruins of their headquarters at Minnanthu near Pagan include temples decorated with Mahayana and tantric imagery, suggesting that the forest dwellers were votaries of these traditions. The Tibetan historian Taranatha (1575-1634) states that Buddhist Tantra was introduced to Pagan from Bengal by this time and inscriptions indicate that as late as the fifteenth century the Myanma sangha received, along with Pali scriptures and commentaries, Mahayana and tantric works as donations to its libraries.

### **Ascendancy of Sinhalese orthodoxy**

Toward the end of the thirteenth century the Pagan empire began to disintegrate. The Mon broke away and established the kingdom of Ramanna in Lower Myanmar, while the Bamar divided Upper Myanmar into several smaller states, chief of which was the kingdom of Ava. The monastic community remained divided throughout the region. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, new waves of reformed Theravada Buddhism emanating from Sri Lanka were introduced into Southeast Asia via Lower Myanmar. In 1476 Dhammazedī, the Mon king of Ramanna, adopted these reforms, compelling all monks in his realm to be reordained in the new more stringent Sinhalese order and to be educated according to a standardized curriculum.

Dhammazedī's reformed sangha was favored by two succeeding Burmese empires, the Taungoo (1531-1752) and the Konbaung (1752-1885), though rival monastic fraternities were allowed to flourish unmolested. It was during this period of relative stability that the village monastery became the basic institutional unit of the Burmese sangha and assumed its traditional role as village center and school for village youth. It was principally through this institution, which facilitated literacy and the propagation of a standardized Buddhist ethos, that the cultural integration characteristic of Burmese civilization was achieved. In 1791 the Burmese monarchy ordered Dhammazedī's reforms imposed uniformly throughout the empire, thus unifying the Burmese sangha for the first time. Although monastic unity was short lived and did not survive the demise of the Konbaung dynasty, all contemporary monastic fraternities in Myanmar trace their lineages back to Dhammazedī's reforms and share a common interpretation of the monastic code. Buddhism was disestablished as the state religion under the British colonial government (1885-1947) to the detri-

ment of sangha discipline. State oversight of religious affairs was restored at Burmese independence in 1947, and has remained in place under both the original democratic government and the subsequent military junta that has ruled the country since 1962.

In addition to overseeing monastic affairs, Burmese kings devoted themselves to the acquisition of Buddha relics (Pali, dhatu; Burmese, dat-daw) and to the preservation of Buddhist texts. These three together (relics, texts, and monks) are the physical embodiments of the Buddha, the dhamma (Sanskrit, dharma; teachings), and the sangha--the three jewels (Pali, tiratana) at the center of Buddhist devotional practice. Within the precincts of every capital were grand pagodas (Burmese, zedi) housing relics that functioned as palladia of the state, and during periods of imperial unity, the shrines of subjugated territories were often restored and embellished as signs of the emperor's piety and magnanimity. Myanmar's most magnificent shrine, the gilded Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon (Rangoon), reached its present monumental dimensions through a process of repeated expansion at the hands of rival monarchs. Since Pagan times Burmese kings took upon themselves the task of promoting monastic learning and preserving accurate copies of the Theravada Canon—the Pali tipitaka. The most recent recensions of the tipitaka in Myanmar were produced during two Buddhist councils; the first convened by King Mindon in 1871 and the second convened by Prime Minister U Nu in 1954. Since at least the fifteenth century, officially edited tipitakas have formed the core curriculum of state administered monastic examinations.

### **The Burmese synthesis of traditions**

Buddhism in Myanmar combines several key elements from its variegated past to produce a unique form of Theravada orthodoxy. Occupying the center is the Pali textual tradition with its beliefs, practices, and institutions as interpreted by the Burmese Theravada sangha, and supported by the state and the general populace. There are, in addition, important rites and beliefs that derive from non-Pali sources but are regarded as wholly orthodox. Prominent among these is the shinpyu ceremony, the obligatory temporary ordination of boys as Buddhist novices, and the simultaneous ear-piercing ceremony for girls, rites of passage that can be traced back to the Buddhist initiation ceremonies of the ancient Pyu. The popular cult of Shin Upagot (Sanskrit, Upagupta), an immortal Arhat and remover of obstacles, and the cave-shrine of Alaung-daw Kathapa near the city of Monywa, which allegedly contains the sacred corpse of Mahakasyapa (Pali, Mahakassapa), both have their origins in Sanskrit Buddhist traditions. The famous water festival of Thin-gyan, which marks the Burmese New Year in April, was adapted from the Hindu New Year festival of Holi, with Buddhist elements taken from Pali scripture interpolated into the festival's legend.

For purely worldly concerns, Burmese seek the assistance of a host of nats or spirits. Considered morally ambiguous at best, nats may be nature deities or the ghosts of legendary persons who died violent deaths and whose energies can be tapped in exchange for veneration. At the national level the belief system is organized into the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords, which originally was a royally administered cult of spirit propitiation that tied pre-Buddhist regional deities and their human devotees into a hierarchical web of ritual obligation paralleling the political order. Nat worship often entails the offering of alcohol and blood sacrifice (chickens), for which reason it is regarded even by its votaries as falling outside of Buddhism. Nevertheless the nat pantheon is conceived of in entirely Buddhist terms and it is situated within the lower strata of the Buddhist cosmos as articulated by the normative tradition.

Burmese Buddhism as a salvific system can be divided into three general types or paths. The first and most traditional of these is the path of merit-making whereby one strives to accumulate merit (Pali, punna; Burmese, kuthol) through the observance of precepts (Pali, sila), the performance of meritorious deeds, and acts of Dana (giving) directed especially toward religious persons and objects, such as monks and pagodas. The goal of merit accumulation is repeated for happy rebirth as a human or god, with Nirvana (Pali, nibbana) or final liberation at most a very distant goal in the mind of the practitioner. The majority of Burmese Buddhists, both lay and

ordained, have happy rebirth as their preferred goal, an orientation that has been typical of Buddhists in Myanmar since at least the Pagan period.

The second system is the path of Vipassana or insight meditation. Vipassana meditation, when successfully practiced, leads to the attainment of Bodhi (Awakening), or enlightenment, and nirvana, either in this life or in a not-too-distant future life. Practitioners of vipassana in Myanmar typically meditate privately and join meditation centers (Burmese, wipathana yeiktha) during retreats. The observance of precepts and a general moral lifestyle is considered a necessary foundation for insight practice. Vipassana meditation was revived in Myanmar in the early eighteenth century and by the late twentieth century was widely popular among all classes throughout the country.

The third salvation system is called weikza-lam or the path of the Buddhist wizard. This is an esoteric system of powerful occult sciences requiring initiation by a master. The goal of this path is to become a weikza or weikza-do (from the Pali vijjadhara), which is a kind of semi-immortal magician or wonder-worker. The weikza vows to remain in the world for the benefit of the faithful until the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya (Pali, Metteyya), at which time the weikza will attain nirvana or take a vow to become a perfect buddha himself. As a service, he acts as teacher to human disciples, instructing them in the recitation of spells, the casting of runes, alchemy, and samatha or tranquility meditation. Weikza practitioners typically eschew vipassana meditation on the basis that it could potentially cut short their career by causing them to attain nirvana too quickly. In its methodology and goals, the weikza-lam shows striking similarities to the tantric Buddhist Mahasiddha tradition of medieval Bengal. Because it proposes an alternative soteriology to that contained in Pali sources, the weikza-lam is sometimes viewed with suspicion by the religious authorities.

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