

THE INFLUENCE OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM ON MYANMAR SOCIETY

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Buddhism and worship

Myanmar is a **Theravada**¹ Buddhist country with at least 80% of its population being born Buddhists. The other form of Buddhism is Mahayana. One of the main differences between Mahayana and Theravada is that in the former, the Buddha of the future Meitrya plays a significant role and not in the latter, which focuses on the teachings of Gautama Buddha.

As the Agga Mha Panditta Ashin Thittila said, "Theravada Buddhism is not a religion in the sense in which that word is commonly understood, it is not a system of faith or worship."² It is a path to follow for harmonious living and its essence is **Metta**³, loving kindness to all creature and self.

There is a difference between what the traditional Buddhists i.e., those born Buddhists, think of as Buddhism and what is stated in the texts. Traditional Buddhists usually do not feel the need to study the Buddhist texts since prayers and rituals have been handed down from one generation to the next. Over time, some superstitions have emerged that deviated from pure Theravada Buddhist belief which is, that Buddha is not a god of salvation.

Every Buddhist family which has the means have heard sermons when they offered food to monks in the **Soon kyway**⁴ ritual. Thus, they are well aware of the teaching of the Buddha

"To refrain from all evil
To do what is good,
To purify the mind"

They know that their lives should be governed by the three principles of Buddhism: **Thila**, **Dana**, and **B'wana**⁵: morality, charity and awareness. They believe that both loving kindness **Metta** and endurance **Khandi Parami**⁶, build moral character. They know it through the 550 Jataka Tales, of the Buddha's patience in enduring suffering and his **Metta** even towards enemies during his 550 reincarnations. They believe that having unstinting goodwill **Cedana**⁷ towards others in thought, word and deed brings merit, while malice lessens the collected merit. What is conveniently called luck or fate **Kan**⁸ is derived from the **Pali**⁹ word Action **Kamma**¹⁰, so they understand that what happens to them is directly caused by their own actions. There is no blind fate or random luck, for according to Buddhist belief transgressing against others brings similar suffering **Wut**¹¹ to the guilty, if not in this life then in the following ones. To the Buddhist, a lifetime is but one among the millions of rebirths that they could go through until they can cease this suffering by reaching

¹ ax&f&0g'

² Essential Themes of Buddhist Lecture given by Ashin Thittila, Published by the Department of Buddhist Affairs, Rangoon, Burma, 1987.

³ arWm

⁴ qGrf;auR;

⁵ oDv/ 'ge/ b0em

⁶ cMD yg&rD

⁷ Apwem

⁸ uH

⁹ yg-d

¹⁰ uR

¹¹ 0#f

Nirvana. This life cycle includes rebirth as animals, ghosts or celestials, the last comparable to angels of Christianity.

The amount of merit enables them to be reborn to a better life but one reaches Nirvana, the end of the cycle of rebirths only through *Vipasana*¹² meditation of striving to attain constant, conscious awareness, as well as purifying the mind by discarding attachments. The other type of meditation, called *Thamahta*¹³ is about gaining supernatural powers.

To discard attachments remains a hard path to follow even if one meditates, and it is for such attachments i.e., desire for a better life or wellbeing of self and loved ones that is the cause of the deviations between pure Theravada Buddhist belief and traditional Buddhism.

Buddha's last words were, "All things are subject to decay; strive with heedfulness," an admonition that nothing is permanent and that attachment to impermanent things can only bring suffering. He also forbade his disciples to erect monuments in his name or make his likeness and his disciples began to build pagodas or carve his image only 500 years after his passing.

Therefore, according to Theravada Buddhism, Buddha is not a god to be prayed to for favours or mercy, and salvation rests entirely on each person. However, humans beings having weaknesses and strengths as well as a need for succour in times of desperation and danger... or greed... the majority of the Buddhists have come to believe in the Buddha's glory, if not actually his persona, as having the 'power' to 'save' them or improve their lives.

To live by the Buddhist principles of being entirely responsible for one's own salvation is a hard path to follow, and people began to rely upon the perceived power of Buddha's persona represented by his image, or his glory, represented by sutras. Another factor is the people's belief in astrology and palmistry, fuelled by folklore and chronicles telling of ancient astrologers turning the path of history. Most fortune-tellers advise their clients to do certain rituals to ward off bad "luck" such as offering a certain number of flowers of a certain colour at the pagoda. Such practices also lead, if indirectly, to the belief that pagodas are magical places where wishes can be granted.

Also, myths rose about certain sutras that when recited many times over give protection from harm, or increase prosperity, or even keep one young. The sutras are usually in the old *Pali* language, and mostly the meanings are not even understood by the one who recites them.

Certain sutras recited combined with the telling a few hundred rounds of the 108 holy beads are believed to ward off some danger or bring forth health or wealth¹⁴. Some images made with elephants or other animals under the throne, or with the right palm turned upwards, are believed

¹² **Odyóem**

Vipasana meditation in its basic concept is based on practicing to be aware of every movement of the body and change of mind, so that one gets accustomed to being constantly conscious of one's actions and thoughts. In this way one is aware of one's emotions at the very onset of their birth and with this awareness be able to control them, emotions such as anger, pain, hurt, jealousy or greed. In a world where you cannot control Fate, at least you can control how you react to it.

¹³ **orx**

¹⁴ Several years ago, it became a frantic race for some devotees of Yangon to tell a certain number of rounds of the beads at nine pagodas scattered all over town that are deemed powerful, and this to be done in a certain order and before noon. This ritual of racing from pagoda to pagoda has passed into the annals of "religious" superstition.

to be possessed of certain powers. Devotees flock to these images or take turns having them 'reside' in their homes for a few days.

A few pagodas have earned the fame of full-filling wishes. To these shrines or images people offer expensive flowers, food or even the **Kadaw Pwe**¹⁵ homage offerings usually seen in Spirit ceremonies. In spite of knowing that one's **Kan** or "fate" is the result of one's actions of the past, some could not but hope that perhaps it could be improved by some means, through sutras, telling of beads or other rituals.

Thus, it should be understood that everyday Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar has by now accumulated superstitious overtones, although many among such devotees insist that it is only to the great glory of Buddha's teachings that they pray for favours and not to the images which are only representations of him. The blessings they ask after praying are not, they say, asking favours but specifying the returns they want for the merits they have gained.

Even with such beliefs growing within Buddhist practice, these devotees seeking salvation know that greater sins such as taking a life, doing harm to others, disrespect or ingratitude toward parents could not be erased by any number of offerings they make to images. A few of the Buddhists go even further, to worship Spirits in their hope to improve their lifestyle, for the main reason for the existence of Spirit worship is that they grant favours. It is however not an off-shoot of Buddhism as many believe but a separate practice.

Many spirits already exist in Buddhist lore as celestials, somewhat like angels, while Spirits of Animist worship are ghosts. The idea of many westerners¹⁶ that all Buddhists are Spirit worshippers might have emerged from the confusion that celestials and Spirits are the same, for both are called **Nat**¹⁷. In Buddhist belief there exist Guardian Spirits who protect Buddhism called **Tha-thana Saunt Nat**¹⁸ and an off-shoot from that belief are the Spirits who guard mountains, towns, rivers, villages, fields, forests etc. These bodies are not be confused with the pantheon of Spirits of animist worship although the mediums, in order to ease any conflict with true Buddhists, insist that their wilful Lords and Ladies are devout Buddhists¹⁹.

Contrary to popular belief, it is greed and not poverty that turns people to Spirit worship.

When Myanmar changed from stagnant Socialist economy to the open market system in 1989, many private businesses emerged and the often desperate attempts for higher profits drove people to rely on the Spirits. Indeed one could say that the Animist community profited as much from the open economy as other businesses. Spirit worship involves the expense of ceremonies or offerings to the gods, and the truly poor would not be able to afford the gifts demanded by mediums on behalf of their unseen masters.

¹⁵ This **Kadaw Pwe uefawmhyGJ** is a blemish-free green coconut with its stem, surrounded by three hands of green bananas. Since the past five years or so, sellers of these **Kadaw Pwe** have even gilded the entire coconut, if only with plastic gold leaf, and they can be seen on Buddhist shrines everywhere especially in the cities.

¹⁶ Notably Sir Richard Temple who wrote "The Thirty-seven Nats" in 1906

¹⁷ **ewf**

¹⁸ **omoemapmifhewf**

¹⁹ In the biggest Spirit festival of the country held annually in **Taung-pyone awmifjyHK**; Village near Mandalay, the shrine officials on 'behalf' of the two Spirit brothers **Min Gy**; and **Min Lay rif;juD; /rif;av**; offer food to monks in a **Soon kyway** ritual on the last day of the 10 days' celebrations. After that, they say, the two Spirits 'enter the state of fasting' (**U-bote hsaung win Oykofaqmif0if**) and keep the eight precepts of Buddhism until the next festival, in spite of the fact that the two Spirits are famous for the violence of their tempers.

At the same time although superstitions relating to Buddhism flourished, there has been a marked increase of meditation disciples. Mostly people practise *Vipassana* meditation but there are a few centres devoted only to *Thamatha* meditation while some combine both: i.e., somewhat *Thamatha* in practice but aimed at attaining self-awareness and not supernatural powers.

Before the mid 1980s, it was usual just to keep the eight or nine precepts during Buddhist holidays but now, the new meditation disciples who enter centres for days range from the retired elderly to housewives and working professional men, to students and even young teenagers. They are the type of Buddhist who are not and perhaps never were, interested in making rich offerings to pagodas or placing gilded coconuts in front of shrines. Or, if they had been, they came to realise the futility of hoping for a saviour.

Many new monasteries are being built by public or individual donations, as well as some nunneries. The biggest increase is in the number of new meditation centres which opened all over the country. People donated millions towards the construction, upkeep and the feeding of simple meals to the disciples. It has become normal for people of both sexes to take a course of ten days or more at these places.

Before the 1980s there were very few publications on meditation that are not peppered with difficult *Pali* terms and complex passages from the Buddhist scriptures, but a decade later secular-system educated and open-minded monks began to write books in simple and straightforward Burmese.

Their view is that while meditation leads the way to Nirvana it also helps people in the daily struggle with frustrations or anger. Devotees tape their sermons and sell them cheaply or distribute them free. So even the young people who before had no patience to read complex sermons in the old style became interested, which in turn led them to actually joining meditation classes. The most respected monks are often invited abroad to open such centres for the expatriate Myanmar Buddhist communities in many countries²⁰. The various meditation centres in Myanmar also became popular with foreigners who come to meditate after obtaining special visas which allow them to stay for several months.

Buddhism and society

Social behaviour

The nature of the Myanmar people in general rarely include tragic overtones however hard their lives, or the neurosis of guilt of self-doubt. Belief in the Buddhist principles of hardship being the result of past defilements and transgressions, in the previous life if not in this one, saves them from question why such a fate has befallen them or why an All Powerful Being has chosen to punish them so. Even in matters of extreme tragedy such as a violent and sudden death of a family member, they believe that it is past misdeeds that have caught up with the deceased.

If they have transgressed against others, they know they will pay for it one day even if not in this life. This belief keeps most people from doing cold-blooded bodily harm to others and perhaps this is the reason for the lack of violent street crime: in the country: it is not the police they fear but

²⁰ The International Theravada Buddhist University of Yangon gives lectures in English and many young monks study to become missionaries.

the afterlife. Thus they have a fatality of facing what they know is inevitable and a resilience born out of the other belief that they could lessen the 'punishment' by doing good deeds.

There is no questioning without answers as to why certain terrible things happen to them, which goes a long way towards lessening self-pity or a sense of injustice. In times of despair they pray harder, do more good deeds and try to have a better attitude towards others. In desperation, they might go to fortune-tellers who prescribe certain rituals to be done at the pagoda and their faith in the glory of Buddha's persona is so strong that at least their fears are calmed after performing them.

Such beliefs also influence the behaviour of individuals, for example alcoholics who 'donate' their addiction to Buddha and swore in his 'presence' (i.e. in front of a shrine) never to drink again, or for a new couple to vow eternal faithfulness to each other. Superstition or not, these beliefs help people to control their emotions that otherwise might lead to a breakdown of their lives and mental well-being. This is not to say that everyone is a saint; there are those who by nature are violent and who would rob or steal and in the process, kill. There are those whose anger and frustration erupts into violence.

Overall, daily life is generally filled with merits done or lost. One great merit is to be respectful and caring of elders, especially towards parents and teachers. Nothing is more disdained than ungratefulness to parents even when some parents might be too demanding of their children. Being respectful of teachers or elders at times mean that unfortunately they are never questioned. In the case of superiors, this can lead to mismanagement out of ignorance when they are not told the facts or corrected when they are wrong. This vertical system exists and will continue to exist until the deeply devout people come to realise that correcting someone or pointing out mistakes especially when it involves an elder and superior, is done not out of treachery or hatred but of honesty.

Daily Buddhism

The majority of the population lives in the countryside as farmers and their daily lives are infused at all levels by Buddhist beliefs, of both the somewhat superstitious kind and the purist texts. The urban dwellers find it harder to complete these daily rituals for office work has fixed hours unlike farm work.

Their days begin with attending to the household shrine with its Buddha image, cleaning the small cups of water and refilling them, replacing flowers in the vases, and offering **Soon**²¹, small plates of the first scoops of rice from the pot. In the poorest homes, there would be a print of a Buddha image stuck on a wall as a shrine while wealthy families like to have a separate room and luxuriously decorated shrine. Those who have the time would spend long minutes if not hours in prayer but at least the family members will pay obeisance in front of it before they leave for work.

Most households will donate food to the monks who go with bare feet on their or **Soon** food rounds and stand silently in front of each house with eyes downcast. Unlike nuns, monks do not call out to the household for alms. If no one comes out or someone respectfully informs the monk that they could not offer anything, they leave. Usually they stop only in front of the houses of regular donors. Some devotees have their own regular monks who are invited to come into the house while the bowl is filled, Many prefer to stand in front of their houses with a large pot of rice

²¹ qGrf;

and curry to donate to all monks that passes by. If they could not do it on a daily basis, they donate once a week.

In some neighbourhoods in a deeply "religious" one like Mandalay, they put up signs asking the monks to come for alms on a certain day of the week, staggering the days with those chosen by other neighbourhoods to ensure **Soon** for every day of the week. Mandalay is also the place where in respect to the first precept of not taking life, they used to put up signs saying "be kind to animals by not eating them."

Neighbourhoods in the cities usually have a prayer pavilion **Dhamma Yone**²², or a rest house **Zayat**²³ on the grounds of the local monastery or pagoda where they can meet. For meetings, hold classes for children, listen to sermons by famous monks, hold rituals for special days or feasts or just for the elderly to gather in the evenings to talk. Some organisations meet regularly at the bigger pagodas to sweep the platform, fill drinking water pots or clean the pavilions.

Anniversaries of marriage or death, birthdays and house warming are also commemorated with a **Soon Kyway**. Community celebrations or "religious" ones like **Shin Pyu** initiations means food and gifts offered to the monks. Every month of the Myanmar lunar calendar²⁴ has a holiday and the majority are "religious" in nature. People come together willingly and are more selfless and united when it is a "religious" occasion.

Buddhism and men

In old Europe, if a man had three sons, one would inherit his estate or profession, one would become a soldier and the third would join the clergy. In the Burmese family²⁵ inheritance is equal although in the past the eldest son received more. A son is seldom forced to join the **Sangha**²⁶ for life but if he so wishes, nothing could please the parents more. The parents can be honoured officially if not in daily usage with the terms **Mai-daw** and **Khamei-daw**²⁷, meaning Royal Mother and Royal Father. These terms are used with pride in obituaries and a mother with a son as a monk can hold her head high in her community, however poor she may be. A woman without a son can fund the expenses of a man who wants to become a monk and be called **Yahan A-ma**²⁸, Elder Sister of a Monk or for a man, **Yahan Da-gar**, Donator of a Monk. The Royal parents, Elder Sister and Donator has the right to have golden umbrellas (although not opened), over their bodies at their funerals.

People say they want sons because it would give them the honour of holding a **Shin Pyu**²⁹, literally meaning 'to make a monk' ceremony, of initiating them into the Order as novices, who must follow 75 rules of conduct. During the festivities and the parade around town the richly costumed novices-to-be are shaded with opened gold umbrellas. They stay a few days or weeks at the monastery but in the countryside, it is normal for them to stay several months or a few years. When they are twenty, they can join as monks who follow 227 rules of conduct. Then, it is

²² "r@m&Hk

²³ Z&yf

²⁴ 1369 ME from 17 April 2007 to 16 April 2008

²⁵ There are some different customs among other races

²⁶ oHCm

²⁷ r,fawmf / crnf;awmf

²⁸ &[ef;tr / &[ef;'um

²⁹ &SifjyK

the privilege of the parents to **Kadaw**³⁰ or pay homage to their sons and not the other way around.

A **Shin Pyu** ceremony can be as elaborate or not as could be afforded. A boy can become a novice or a man a monk by having the requisite eight utensils of monk hood, and if he could not afford them, a donor could be found. However, it is not unusual for a family to get into debt for holding one with the ostentation they could not afford. The daughters of the family join their brothers not to become nuns but usually to have their ears pierced. A Myanmar Buddhist boy growing up without once entering the Order, usually due to poverty, is a mark for ridicule from his peers. Wealthy individuals or the public usually funds such ceremonies for a large group. In some regions, it is a tradition for ethnic tribes of various villages to participate in a communal **Shin Pyu** for an even thousand, if not more, boys.

The basic Five Precepts of Buddhism **Ngar Bar Thila**³¹ are to refrain from taking life, stealing, lying, committing adultery and drinking intoxicants. They should be it is advised by the Buddhist texts, "worn as firmly as one wears his waist garment." Although prestige and wealth are impressive it is also the upright morality of a man that decides his standing in the community.

A monk who became one in his childhood and stayed in the Sangha until old is called **Ngai Hpyu**³², meaning 'someone who is pure since childhood.' However, one who leaves the Order after many years is derisively called **Hponrgyi Lu Htwet**³³, a term also used to describe men who has no social graces.

Buddhism and women

Lay women

Through the ages, at the result of discriminative writing by some monks, and secular writers it become widely accepted that in Buddhist belief women are inferior to man³⁴.

It is not true for both in social and Buddhist traditions, mothers are esteemed and respected, even more so than fathers so womanhood is not disdained.

The Buddha spoke about the nobility that can exist in a man or woman, and the malice that can turn either of them evil and he never stated women were inferior. It was perhaps due to the Buddhist belief that only man could become enlightened, that was misconstrued to mean women are inferior.

Buddha himself was a man who by meditation became enlightened; he has stated that anyone with the right mindfulness and right attitude could with each rebirth reach a higher state of mind and to eventually attain Buddha-hood. To become a Buddha, one has to go through intense meditation sessions in isolation and he stated that it would be dangerous for women to be living alone and away from the community, and in his time, he had forbidden women to meditate alone in the forests.

³⁰ **uefawmh** by kneeling with clasped hand, touching them to the floor three times

³¹ **ig;yg; oDv**

³² **i,fjzL**

³³ **bkef;BuD;vlxGuf**

³⁴ It is said by misogynists that 'male dogs are more noble than human females.'

Cultural norms exist however, in relation to women's status within the Buddhist context such as women not being allowed on the upper terraces of pagodas. It was not Buddha's rule that made it so, for pagodas did not exist until about 500 years after his passing.

Buddhist women do not mind this 'discrimination' as some western feminists view it, for it is a part of accepted behaviour³⁵ according to cultural norms. In reality Myanmar women are a strong force behind the scenes, be it as mother or wife, even if in the eyes of westerners they lack rights: most of which in reality do not actively hamper everyday life³⁶.

Although Buddhist monks do not take part in weddings which is an entirely secular affair, the couple and their families usually commemorate the marriage with a **Soon kyway** food offering ritual. This is not to 'bless' the marriage but for the couple to take part for the first time as man and wife in one of the most important ceremonies of a Buddhist marriage to commemorate births, anniversaries, deaths, house warming, novitiations of sons into the **Sangha** Order etc.

Such feasts or ceremonies are usually arranged by the women of the family while the men see to hiring cars or fetching the monks. In Buddhist life, women are not considered chattels of husbands or mother-in-laws and it is up to the individual if she remains one or not. As it is socially acceptable for women to be educated, work or be in trade, as long as she behaves with decorum where the opposite sex is concerned, she has a respected role in society.

Neighbourhood organisations are formed mostly with women who gather for communal reciting of prayers, collecting funds for charity work or holding summer classes in Buddhist texts or ethics for children.

Lay women who could not become nuns for various reasons but who wanted to actively take part in monastic affairs, find it easier to go to nunneries and help out the whole day, for monks have strict rules concerning dealing with the opposite sex. However, in monasteries lay women earn merit by cooking for **Soon kyway** ceremonies that donors preferred to be held in the monastery halls and not in their homes for lack of space when the guests numbered in the hundreds such as for a wedding. The donors discuss the menu and pay the women in charge who shop, cook and serve first all the monks in the monastery and then the guests.

It has become fashionable in the cities for a bridal couple to combine the requisite **Soon kyway** on their marriage with a feast for guests instead of holding a more expensive reception at a hotel ballroom.

Also, in monastic schools with hundreds of young monks studying for State examinations the student body need not go out on alms rounds but are served food cooked on the premises by men or women volunteers out of funds donated by the disciples.

³⁵ Western feminists who visited Myanmar have railed against this rule, saying women should also be allowed to climb up on the upper terraces of pagodas, among other things such as the Myanmar women's right to take a more aggressive role in public especially in the company of their husbands. They are most likely unaware that Myanmar husbands are accorded the full respect of his wife in public, one important saving grace of marriages, and that at home he would willingly accept to his wife's views on household or family matters.

³⁶ One inequality is that married women are rarely promoted to high positions in government office, which in fact is not desired by married women as they would have to stay late at the office or attend official evening functions unaccompanied by their spouses, both situations not well-accepted by society or family.

Nuns

Myanmar Buddhist nuns observe 81 rules of conduct.

In the years before the 1980s, nunneries were not as many, and people tended to look down upon nuns as women who had no family or could not 'get' a husband.

A novel '*Ma Thudhamma Sari*'³⁷ by award-winning author Moe Moe (Inya) which was first published in 1982 changed this perception somewhat. In the novel, written from personal experience of living in a nunnery, the author said that some women entered the Order as a sanctuary from poverty, but that it was not the only reason. There are as many if not more who wanted to devote themselves to Buddhist studies, including young girls who willingly lived out their lives in the Order in spite of coming from well-to-do families.

The Abbesses of the nunneries also made sure that their places are run with strict discipline and the members well-versed in the Buddhists texts so that they pass various levels of State examinations³⁸. New members included many who had been well educated in the secular system and all these efforts gained them more respect, and patronage, from society.

With the increasing breakdown of the Socialist economy of the time, nunneries began to take in old people without family³⁹ and orphaned or abandoned girl children. When the public saw that the nuns were saving the girls from a life in street crime or worse, nuns became more respected than in earlier times⁴⁰.

The older nuns, according to their rules, go out two consecutive days a week to beg for dry goods⁴¹ which they share with the children. The nunneries sometimes get lump sum donations from the public. Under the rules of nunneries, the girls have to enter the Order if they are over seven, as do boys taken in by monasteries but a nun or monk could leave the Order whenever they wished. It is not a strict life-long commitment.

Although nuns have gained a more respected role in society with young girls increasingly entering nunneries for the summer holidays, it is mostly monks who are honoured in **Soon kyway** ceremonies. During the Buddha's time there were Bhikkhu (male) and Bhikkhunī (female) of equal rank and practice in the Order. Bhikkhunī followed 311 rules. After the fall of Bagan in the 13th century, the tradition of Bhikkhunī disappeared in Myanmar. Nuns are therefore not considered on the same level as monks who are still considered as Bhikkhu although the term is seldom used nowadays.

³⁷ rok"r@pm&D

³⁸ One of the most famous among them was Daw Nyarna Sari a':OmPpm&D with her nunnery in Sanchaung Township, Yangon.

³⁹ The earliest Buddhist Old People's Home was established at Mingun by a nun Daw Oo Zun a':OD;ZGef; of Mandalay in 1913.

⁴⁰ However it must be said that some poor families dress their young children as nuns or novices and send them out to beg for money, especially from tourists.

⁴¹ Two days preceding the Full Moon day, Complete Waning Moon day and the half-moon days in between which are designated **U-bote nay OykofaeU** or day of keeping the eight or nine or ten precepts for those lay people who wish to do so. Nuns are not allowed to go on alms rounds for cooked food like monks but must cook for themselves.

Buddhism and development

Community development

It is often stressed that the monks' lifestyle is for the sole purpose of realizing *Nibban*⁴²

Although it is not explicitly forbidden in the 227 rules of monks or the 81 of nuns, the Sangha does not encourage its members to be involved in secular community work. However each village has a monastery since ages past and the abbots have always been respected leaders of their community. If he does not actively take part in community work he would often be the decision-maker, the consultant and arbiter in community disputes together with the headman.

If there is a communal project to be done for the village such as digging a well or pond or building a bridge or road, a meeting held in the presence of the Abbot on the monastery grounds gives the project the required jump-start of the agreement if not an all-out support of the Abbot. Many monasteries have the pots and pans big enough to cook for hundreds of people and the lay servant *Kappiya*⁴³ and women from the community would easily cook a simple meal to feed the volunteers or *lote ar pay*⁴⁴ as the term goes. People were used to willingly and eagerly 'donating' their labour in the building of temples or pagodas, also to building roads, bridges etc. for their own small communities.

In this modern age of the increasing need for humanitarian aid monks and nuns are increasingly becoming involved in community work, the most common being accepting orphans or abandoned children, or children of poor parents into nunneries and monasteries.

Since ancient times it has been a tradition for monasteries to teach reading and writing to children of both sexes. Even sons of kings attended monastic schools. Each village has a monastery/school in the days when (or nowadays in places where) State Primary, Middle or High Schools⁴⁵ did not exist, and if the village is big there may be more than one. These schools are taught by the resident monks who at times vie with each other on how much they could teach their students or how well they do when they go on to Middle Schools in the nearest town. Most children in the country who have to help their parents on the farm usually do not attend past Fourth Grade. These monastic schools are the sole reason that the written Burmese language did not disappear.

In the cities, a few monasteries have turned to offering wholly secular education or free classes in foreign languages to those who could not afford the private school fees. At these monasteries even members of the diplomatic corps take turns holding classes in English, French, and Japanese etc. With the country opening up to tourism since the early 1980s there is an interest by young people to earn well as tour guides.

As people in the countryside must earn their livelihood with their hands, at some monasteries the abbot makes sure that the boys who leave school learn a trade if his family does not have a farm.

⁴² edAÜÁmef Nirvana

⁴³ uyÜd,

⁴⁴ vkyftm;ay; This volunteering of labour has existed in Myanmar since ancient times but the term and practice was formalized during the Socialist era of 1962 to 1988. Nowadays its misuse in some places into forced labour and the international outcry has limited its use apart from projects led by the village or neighbourhood monastery..

⁴⁵ A Primary School is from Kindergarten up to Grade Four. A Middle School incorporates primary grades and has classes up to Grade 7. High Schools include all grades from primary to Grade 10.

An increasing number of monks are taking part in community development in the countryside and remote areas especially in education or at times, health, when children's inoculation projects or health awareness talks are held on the monastery grounds.

For the very poor it is getting increasingly expensive to hold a proper funeral with all the rights as well as to send the body of a deceased family member from the house to the crematorium. Cemeteries are far in the outskirts and the hiring of a hearse often beyond their means. No normal car would agree to transport a body as it is considered very bad luck. A shoddily-arranged funeral is a great lost of face to the family; the more attendees, sometimes in hundreds, the more honour is done to the deceased and to the family.

An NGO, Free Funeral Services Society⁴⁶, was founded in 2001 by members of the performing arts / intelligentsia to transport the body to be cremated without charge and also to fund other costs of the funeral. Initially introduced in Yangon, by now the association has grown with branches in many towns. However enthusiastically the public supported this association, the parking of their hearses for the night created a big problem: some communities did not want such 'bad luck' vehicles to be parked in their neighbourhood. Monasteries came to the rescue of the association by giving them space for parking as well as room for offices and their min office is still situated in a monastery. Since then the organizing board has initiated Thukha, a free health care service.

A few monks and nuns are venturing into the field of caring for the terminally ill although their numbers are still too few and their resources still low. It remains to be seen however if the highest administrative levels of the **Sangha** would encourage their efforts in this direction.

Personal prosperity

In Buddhism the first of the three major defilements is Greed **Lawba** followed by Anger **Dawtha** and Delusion **Mawha**⁴⁷.

Greed manifests into selfishness which can grow into theft, corruption or injustice against others. Anger manifests into hatred which leads towards malice and injury to others. Delusion manifests into vanity or ignorance which leads towards not knowing good from evil. Devotees of Buddhism are warned to be on guard at the very onset of greed, anger or delusion through the practise of conscious awareness meditation, for they can easily lead an unwary person down evil paths. Thus, the first thing the Myanmar Buddhists learn to fear is Greed.

From this fear comes the mind-set of disdaining strong ambition as being materialistic: such a person displays unacceptable behaviour. Then there is the desire for peace and quiet, and not wanting stress or hassles. Hopes for a better future is often limited to "having enough not to worry in times of emergency, and to live in a comfortable house with a small garden."

This lack of greed brings contentment if not financial prosperity. The majority of the population, approximately 75%, live on farms. Theirs is a hard life with bulls to pull their ploughs and carts but they uncomplainingly and happily live and work hard under the sun. If their children finish high school they prefer to live in town but the majority, helping their parents on the farm, seldom leave their village. They have no inclination to live in towns, for the noise and crowds of urban life in however small a town is too stressful for them.

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The ugly side of contentment is that it often manifests itself as lack of discipline where production is concerned, for one can easily give excuses to oneself, if not to the client, that it was lack of greed that makes one fail to meet promised deadlines.

Through their eagerness to have goodwill **Cedana** towards all, good hospitality to friend or stranger has become a credo of gracious behaviour especially in the countryside. Offering hospitality in the form of as much food as they can spare to friend and stranger alike has become a custom. Urban dwellers find it increasing difficult to be as hospitable in the face of high inflation but to the farmer, a meal can easily be concocted from eggs and a freshly killed hen from his coop, vegetables picked from his garden and edible leaves plucked off wild vines on his fence.

It is said of the devout and good-hearted Shan race that if they have a cent they will donate a dime. It might not be true of most urbanites but country people when they come into some money, bank it for merit by donating to monasteries or pagodas. One inevitable but unfortunate side effect of the increased superstition in Buddhism is that people would rather donate gold to a pagoda than to an orphanage or hospital. However, since about five years ago, the tide is beginning to turn when people who have money to spare became more aware that the poor, especially orphanages and old people's homes are finding it hard to survive. **Sangha** hospitals however never lacked public donations.

According to the saying "A good tree can shelter a thousand birds", the Myanmar tradition of family closeness means that poor relations have the right to be dependent, up to a certain point, upon their more wealthy uncles or cousins. It also means that nepotism is commonplace and viewed as doing one's duty to family and not as corruption. In private business, nepotism can be disastrous, especially when the family member although trustworthy does not have the capability for his position. The 'boss' may know it but his hands are tied. This and the fear of being thought 'materialistic' means a business is seldom run in a very business-like way in Myanmar.

Buddhism and politics

Conflict and forgiveness

The Buddhist believes that and patiently suffering without complaint build moral character and having **Metta** Loving Kindness even towards enemies build moral character. Furthermore, anger is the second deadliest defilement to be avoided at all costs. A sense of duty towards one's family or country results in having a deep respect for self-sacrifice, even if one does not personally commit to it.

The combination of these factors means that a well-brought up "religious" Buddhist does not like or seek out conflict. In fact, decent social behaviour means calm in the face of catastrophe, and avoidance of public confrontations. There is no tradition of debate, or of critique for that could lead to arguments. The off-shoot of this is that the Myanmar also do not have a tradition of analysing situations or abstract ideas, for they know *how* they should live even if they do not follow the rules at times and *why* they exist in the first place is not a question that interests them. 'What life means' to them is about wearing the Five Precepts as firmly as they do their waist garments, even if they fail to keep all five.

Out of respect, elders or superiors are never questioned. To do so or to show anger or be confrontational would be ill-bred. Forgiveness is a virtue that at times is taken to extraordinary

lengths⁴⁸. This does not mean that the Buddhist is able to endure anything in saintly silence. In fact, the frustrations of hiding deep emotions or locking away anger could break out in violence, as it happened in the 1988 uprising against the dire poverty caused by the mismanagement of Socialist economy. Several thousand demonstrators were shot down by troops brought in from remote regions where they had been fighting communist insurgents. They were told they were being sent to fight communists who had taken over the cities and therefore had no qualms about shooting down people they thought were their enemies. In the mob hysteria that followed, some people in the crowd were accused of heinous crimes and publicly beheaded by people in the mob, including a young middle-class educated woman who said she did not know what came over her⁴⁹.

Such outbursts of violence can and did happen but the anger or interest in conflict is not sustained over a long period. Buddhism is the way of harmonious living and its practitioners prefer to live in peace. Disliking stress and conflict, the people are generally not risk-takers or adventurers. All along history, the younger monks have participated in political uprisings beginning with the nationalist movement against the colonial British in the early 1930s. When the activists of the time advised women not to wear western-made fabrics but only homespun, the monks upbraided those who ignored this advice by pricking the shoulders of these fashion-conscious ladies with a pin attached to a long stick. It was due more to the shame of this "attack" than the pain that women stopped buying imported textiles.

In later years during the various uprisings against the Socialist regime, they usually took the role of giving a place for activist leaders in their monasteries and in keeping the peace among the crowds and different groups. By the time the beheadings took place, things were too chaotic for even monks to do effective crowd-control. During that period, elderly monks in the top levels of Sangha hierarchy gave sermons of peace and forgiveness over State television although in the heat of the moment few of the activists listened to them.

During the Socialist era the Burma Socialist Program Party government had little to do with the **Sangha**. Although highly superstitious and very dependent upon astrologers, the Chairman of BSPP U Ne Win did not support the Buddhist Order. When the State Law and Order Restoration Council (later renamed State Peace and Development Council) took over power in 1989, the **Sangha** as well as Buddhism has been well-supported.

Although U Ne Win of the previous Socialist regime did not support the **Sangha** much, the members of the military even during his era or before were and are mostly from very conservative backgrounds and as such, they are devout typically-traditional Buddhists. When in the present this factor is added the open and wide support of the SPDC towards the Order it translates into a united front between State and **Sangha**, which gives a positive political image to the conservative and devout faction of the population. There are sceptics who scorn their support as mere

⁴⁸ One story will illustrate this. In 2004, many members of the Military intelligence were arrested and sentenced for corruption. In Mandalay prison, there were already a large number of political prisoners arrested by one major of the MI. Naturally, he feared for his life at their hands when he was sent there to be incarcerated. However, they welcomed him, and in the first days when his family was still doing paperwork to send him food, they shared theirs with him.

⁴⁹ Known as Ma Chu, she was arrested and sentenced to death as were the others, but after a few amnesties she was released around 2002 and has since migrated to the United States. The woman she beheaded was mentally retarded and could not answer the mob when accused of poisoning the water tanks of the Children's Hospital.

propaganda but it is obvious, from their conservative family backgrounds, that propaganda is only a part of it.

Buddhism in the future

Myanmar society for the future seems overshadowed by stress at many levels, as the country moves from isolated Socialist economy to open-market globalisation. There are still many problems concerning the economy, health, education and politics that must be addressed, problems that are no harder or more numerous than in other developing countries. All countries have political, social or development problems as well as blessings in the same issues, which differ from one country to the other. One blessing of Myanmar is that the majority live within the boundaries of harmonious life with goodwill...or as much goodwill as possible...towards each other. If many cannot afford to be generous as much as they want to be, it is not its lack but their financial situation that is the cause. At times of a windfall, a part of it inevitably goes to charity.

Lack of aggression may also mean an unwillingness to be assertive but it also means lack of violent behaviour; Myanmar society in general is unwilling to do wilful harm to others. They believe in peace and contentment, and to face calamities with dignity. Although poor, they live with pride and no liking for materialism.

However, with the encroachment of sophisticated world views how would Buddhism fare in the future? Although superstitions have infiltrated pure Theravada Buddhism, there are still enough practitioners and enough belief in the true scriptures for this state of harmonious life to continue. There will be more who go the way of superstitions, and as many who try to relieve the stress of modern life through meditation.

I hope that the prosperity that comes with globalisation and the greed that comes with prosperity will not destroy this harmony and contentment of Buddhist society. Theravada Buddhism in the long run may become overwhelmed with increasing superstitions but the attitude by its devotees will remain one of reverence, reliance and love, unlike the worshipping of Spirits with reliance, awe and dread. As long as **Metta**, loving kindness, the essence of Buddha's teachings remains in their beliefs, harmony will prevail.