

**A LOOK AT THE BURMESE BUDDHIST SANGHA INVOLVEMENT IN
POLITICS: IS THE SANGHA A POLITICAL PARTY?**

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A Look at the Burmese Buddhist Sangha Involvement in Politics:
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**I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted
as an exercise for a degree at any other institution,
and that it is entirely my own work.**

Signed _____

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Calvin Theodore Baker

ABSTRACT

The persistent and enduring political involvement of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha in Burma (Myanmar) as a religion characterizes it as politically significant. Historically the Buddhist Sangha in Burma has not exhibited a hands-off attitude toward Burmese governments. Actions of the sangha have ranged from silent support to aggressive opposition. On the surface, this political involvement seems to contradict the basic soteriological path the historical Buddha presented. This work looks at the historical sangha and both its influence on governments within Burma and the influence the governments have had on the sangha. It critically compares and contrasts sangha involvement with Buddhist teachings and provides justification or criticism from within and external to Buddhist doctrine. A brief overview of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Burma is presented to study the Burmese Buddhist Sangha's functional political evolution in juxtaposition with secular Burma. Historical evidence elucidates the culturally amorphous nature of the sangha; it also shows a lack of any political position by the sangha other than to ensure the continued existence of Buddhism in Burma and a government committed to the preservation of Buddhism in Burma. Other than religious preservation and the existence of a placating government, until recently, Buddhist politics seemed concerned with little else. However, since the total annexation of Burma by the British to the present day rule by the Myanmar Junta, history shows an increased concern with more than religious survival. From the research, the resultant political picture opens the conversation to analysis and response to the questions: "Are the political behaviors and views of the modern day Burmese Buddhist Sangha consistent with Buddha's teachings and Buddhism?" "Is the Burmese Buddhist Sangha a political party?"

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DEDICATION

Dr. Kenneth A. Locke

(past on April 12, 2012)

who asked only to

“Show me the evidence.”

PART I
HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS
OF BURMA AND THE BURMESE BUDDHIST SANGHA

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

It was hardly an escapable experience to see the image of Buddhist monks sitting in front of military guards in protest of the government or running down a Myanmar street in flight for safety from a government attack, during the Saffron revolution of 2007.¹ It was these sights and others that cause one to pause and ask why members of the Buddhist Sangha, in Myanmar, blatantly challenged the brutally oppressive government in a manner that seemed non-violent yet created a situation contrary to the spirit of the peaceful teachings of the Buddha.

The event that led to the involvement of Buddhist monks confronting the Myanmar government was sparked by an economic issue, August and September of 2007, and began August 15, 2007 with a stark rise in the price of diesel oil and natural gas in the country, which was under the control of the government. The increase of 100% and 500% respectively, levied by the military junta generals, instantly translated into a rise in price for food staples, transportation and utilities across Myanmar. The 88 *Student Generation Group* immediately organized and led a protest on August 19 against the Myanmar government.

¹ Buncombe, Andrew, "Burma: Inside the saffron revolution."

Buddhist monks became immersed in the clamor and on September 5, hundreds of young monks from a Pakokku monastery² protested against the government. On September 6, monks took hostage government officials in retaliation for monks being injured by the government during a protest the day before. With the officials in the hands of monks, the All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA) demanded an apology from the government of generals, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), by a September 17 deadline, which was not forthcoming. Though the demand was issued on September 6, the ABMA was officially founded on September 9 by senior monks. Two of the monks, U Issariya and U Gambira had previously been involved in politically active organizations, namely the All Burma Sangha Union and the All Burma Youth Monks Union, respectively.³ Upon the passing of the deadline with no response from the military government; more monks took to the cause. It has been estimated that “30,000 to 50,000 monks were joined by the same number of civilians” in protest of the government.⁴ On September 25 thousands of monks and civilians marched on the government, with civilians forming a human shield around the monks.⁵

On September 26 the SPDC forcefully and violently cracked down on the protestors and demonstrations. Monks and civilians were killed and beaten. Monasteries throughout Myanmar were ransacked with thousands of monks beaten, abused and some even killed. Monks and civilians were chased and hunted down like animal prey. This behavior on the part of the government was not new, as in 1988 and 1990 similar brutal responses were performed. Since the takeover of the Myanmar government by the

² BBC News, “Q&A: Protests in Burma.”

³ The Best Friend International e. V., “What is the All Burma Monks Alliance.”

⁴ McCarthy, “Overturning the alms bowl.”

⁵ BBC News. “Burmese riot police attack monks.”

military Junta, the oppression of the Burmese people has drawn worldwide condemnation yet little or no progress in the area of human rights has been evidenced.⁶

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand the Burmese Buddhist Sangha's involvement and relationship with the Myanmar governments from pre-colonialism, colonialism to post-colonial Myanmar. Specifically, this study will investigate how the Burmese Buddhist Sangha has comported itself under different circumstances. This paper will then analyze recent positions and actions of the sangha with respect to Buddhist writings, doctrine and tradition with current thought. In the end, this work has the goal of characterizing the current evolution of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha's political involvement and proposing answers to the following two questions: "Are the political behaviors and views of the modern day Burmese Buddhist Sangha consistent with Buddha's teachings and Buddhism?" and "Is the Burmese Buddhist Sangha a political party?"

Significance of the Study

This study intends to look at Buddhism in Myanmar and better understand the political role it has and still plays in the country. By looking at historical accounts of how the various governments and the country's Buddhist culture have interacted, at times fought, this study attempts to better understand the origin of political involvement by the sangha in Burma and how the phenomena of Buddhist political activism (if indeed this is what it is) has evolved in Burma. It is intended to determine if the political behavior by the sangha is prescribed, evolved as a result of tradition or is an artifact of the interaction

⁶ McCarthy, "Overturning the alms bowl."; Human Rights Watch, "The resistance of the monks. "

between Buddhism and government. Additionally, this study looks within the applied philosophy of the Buddha, so vigorously accepted in Myanmar, for justification of sangha political activism and will ask difficult questions relating to Burmese Buddhism and what it has become, and why.

The controversial relationship between members of the sangha (monks) and the government of Myanmar is the basis of asking if this is merely the external trappings of a condition that runs deeper than the dissatisfaction of a group of monks, or is this a cultural hallmark of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha rooted in tradition. Additionally, this work contributes to the field of knowledge by investigating how the applied peaceful philosophy of the Buddha promoting the attainment of nibbāna, so vigorously accepted in Myanmar, can be interpreted to include overt activity toward government, frequently accompanied by violence, and be considered consistent with the dhamma as presented by the Buddha and regarded as the core foundation of Theravada Buddhism.

This work holds as significant the political influence of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha in Myanmar, and seeks to understand if it functions as a political party acting de facto as a shadow government of the country and if so is there justification for this in the teachings of the Buddha.

Methodology of the Study

This study does not involve field work or statistical measures of information. It is based upon a comprehensive literature review to include: academic journals, academic books, thesis and dissertations, researched works of authors, translated suttas from the Pali Cannon, news articles retrieved via the Internet and commentaries. Additionally, the information presented in this study includes conclusions the author has made after

discussions with members of different Buddhist Sanghas, practitioners, academicians and others. The author of this study is completely responsible for the literature researched and conclusions presented.

Definitions

The term ‘sangha’ can be a reference to the community of bhikkhus (monks), the community of bhikkhus and upasakas (laity who have taken precepts) or the community of bhikkhus, upasakas and the extended community of followers. In this work the term ‘sangha’ will be restricted to mean the community of bhikkhus who not only are bound by monastic precepts but also the monastic code or Vinaya. When the phrase ‘Early Buddhism’ is used, it refers to the Buddhism founded upon the writings and commentaries associated with the Pali Canon.

There is a continuing political debate regarding the use of “Burma” versus “Myanmar” as far as the name of the country is concerned. However, since 1989 the country’s official name is “Myanmar” and is the name used as a member of the United Nations. As this work does not assume the task of critiquing the government, but addresses the character change of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha across periods of different governments, a protocol has been adopted. Generally, the word “Myanmar” will be used for the period of time following the 1988 coup, when referencing the government or country at large and where deemed appropriate. The exception to this will be when quoted sources use one of the words. In this case the quoted reference will stay as quoted. This work also respectfully uses the expression “Burmese Buddhist Sangha” when referencing the Sangha of monks in Myanmar. Conscious effort has been made to avoid conflict and insensitivity.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND THE BURMESE BUDDHIST SANGHA FROM PRE-DYNASTIC TO COLONIZATION

Introduction

Burmese Buddhism is often thought of as a champion of Theravada Buddhism. The dedication of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha to engage in and promote meditation as the core of Buddhist practice is well known, worldwide. However, what has not been overtly obvious until recently, is the amount of political involvement the sangha exhibits toward its governments, historically.

Before investigating and analyzing the current state of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha involvement with government and its consistency with core Theravada doctrine, it is important to look at the cultural dynamics that have historically existed and defined the subsequent development of political involvement. The aspect of Burma history this work focuses on is the intersection of Buddhism with government and not what might be considered secular and distinct. The following historical sketch presented is brief and the background is not concerned with the daily affairs of the people, government, economics, agriculture and other nonreligious activities. Instead, the goal of this historical presentation is to establish the presence of the Burmese preoccupation with Buddhism and the extent thereof. Specifically, of interest are the actions and reactions that existed between the different Myanmar governments and the Buddhist Sangha as staged in

Burma, along with events that were obvious consequences of attitudes of the aforementioned participants.

This perspective, though not exhaustive, does present the historical thread which provides a documented overview of the origins behind the continued coupling of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha and government. A comprehensive history of Burma is more than adequately treated by: Phayre, A. P. "*History of Burma*"⁷, Harvey, G. E. "*History of Burma*"⁸ and Smith, D. E. "*Religion and Politics in Burma.*"⁹

Pre-Dynastic Burma

Burma is a land filled with natural beauty and lends itself to providing needed commodities a growing and expanding people need to develop a flourishing civilization. The original inhabitants that first initiated settlements in Burma were the Mon and the Tibeto-Burman, whose original home was most likely western China and eastern Tibet. The Mons was also known as the Talaings and the Tibeto-Burman populated the Pyu, Kanran, and Thet tribes. Though the racial roots of the Burmese are uniquely of Mongolian origin, due to immigrations, shifts in power and trade the cultural roots more closely resemble that of Indian ancestry.¹⁰

Burmese chronicles, oral tradition and legend indicate the Kshatriya of Northern India immigrated to the Upper Irrawaddy River, the main waterway in Burma in both ancient and modern times. The historical accuracy of oral tradition is open and much of early Burman history, in spite of archaeological research, is unknown or controversial. However, some experts consider it possible an Indian prince was ousted from his

⁷ Phayre, *History of Burma*.

⁸ Harvey, *History of Burma*.

⁹ Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*.

¹⁰ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 3-6.

kingdom and may have ended up in Burma. Notwithstanding this, Indian immigration existed and the settlers brought with them their culture which included Buddhism.¹¹

When, where and how Buddhism was introduced to Burma is not exactly known, however, tradition taken as fact by many Burmese, talks about the Buddha going to Burma (by air) with hundreds of monks in 536 B. C.¹² It is in this context that uncorroborated native folklore speaks of the founding of Tagaung, the oldest city of ancient Burma, and a subsequent stately Buddhist presence, along with a visitation by the Buddha:

Abhiraza with his Sakya clansmen came from Kapilavastu in India, founding Tagaung 850 B.C. and Kyaukpadaung in Arakan 825 B.C. Tagaung was overthrown by the Chinese about 600 B.C. and its people then founded Old Pagan; they went further south also, founding in 443 B.C. Prome, a glorious city which, under the great king Duttapaung 443-373 B.C. contained a splendid court and 3,000 Buddhist monks. Meanwhile Buddha himself had visited Legaing and Shwesettaw (in Minbu district), as is borne out by the existence of Kyaungdawya pagoda, and of his two footprints, each three cubits long, at Shwesettaw; on his way back he passed by Prome---witness the Po-u-daung pagoda there, and look at the very hill where he stopped, Tankyidaung (to be distinguished from its namesake opposite Pagan).¹³

Harvey criticizes the above based on the lack of solid archeological evidence and indicates that the mention of Buddha visiting is pure Shwesettaw legend. In fact the legend, according to Harvey, is a borrowed legend which is first told in the Mahavastu and does not refer to Burma but Konkan, located on the eastern side of India. Additionally, Harvey recounts two other persons linked to in the evolution of Burmese Buddhism as historical, namely that of King Asoka and Buddhaghosa.

Later, under Asoka 272-232 B.C., two missionaries, Sona and Uttara, were sent from the Council of Patna and evangelized Thaton where they had 60,000

¹¹ Phayre, *History of Burma*, 1-3.

¹² Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, 32.

¹³ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 307.

converts...In 403 the great apostle Buddhaghosa brought the scriptures from Ceylon to Thaton whence copies immediately spread to Pagan, Arakan, and the Shans.¹⁴

Though legend is that two missionaries were sent to the Burman capital city of the Thaton Kingdom, Thaton, there is no independent historical evidence to support this claim. However, there is also no historical evidence to deny the claim. Simply put, King Asoka never mentions the conversion of 60,000 people to Buddhism or sending the missionaries Sona and Uttara, to Burma, in *Rock Edicts*.¹⁵ With respect to the mentioning of Buddhaghosa, it is likely he existed about this time and has appropriately been adopted in the Burmese lineage of Buddhist teachers.

It should be noted that Buddhism was probably not of the pure Theravada type, as a copious amount of religious influence existed in Burma, during this time. There was the native worship of *Nats* (a form of animism), an Ari Mahayana influence, Hinduism brought from India and tantra.

Pre-Dynastic Pyu and Mon

The Pyu civilization was comprised of “eighteen states and nine walled towns” in the central plains and delta area of ancient Burma. It probably existed as an identifiable culture from about the 2nd century B. C. till the 11th century A. D., though politically it was finally overthrown by the Nanchao Kingdom (Burmans) in 832 A. D., and is now culturally extinct.¹⁶

Huxley says “The earliest evidence of **Buddhism** among the **Pyu** comes from the early 4th century.”¹⁷ This is consistent with the archeological find of Beikthano, the

¹⁴ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 308.

¹⁵ Ray, *Theravada Buddhism in Burma*, 10.

¹⁶ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 11-15.

¹⁷ Huxley, *Buddhism and Law*, 47-94.

earliest highly developed city in Pyu. Here a monastery was built with a high degree of construction “identical to the Buddhist monasteries of Nagarjunakonda, the great Buddhist center of southern India.”¹⁸

The Pyu were considered to be “good Buddhists” and had “over a hundred monasteries” for the education of children. A most Buddhist way of settling lawsuits was done by silent meditation.¹⁹ The belief that the Pyu was a peaceful culture to the point they “would not wear silk for fear of killing silkworms” permeates the Burman mind to this day.²⁰ Another example of the uniqueness of the Pyu civilization takes place about 94 A. D. when the Pyus and Kanyans were at war. They made the agreement that whichever side finished building a *pahto*, temple, first would be the winner of the war. The Pyus finished first and the Kanyans left defeated.²¹

It is thought that Theravada Buddhism was introduced to the Mon (the Talaings), in Lower Burma close to the coastline, based on 3rd century inscriptions in South India where it is listed among other countries visited by monks. This visitation may very possibly been more of a mission to cleanse the Buddhism of the region, as South India was still the patron of Buddhism.²²

The impact of the Mon Kingdom is that its influence roamed not only within the malleable boundaries of ancient Burma, but was widespread throughout the region beyond Lower Burma. The Khmer, Thailand, Laos and Upper Malaysia were subject to Mon influence both before and after its assimilation by the Khmer Empire. There were different Mon Kingdoms, however, the first recorded is the kingdom of Dvaravati, which

¹⁸ Bischoff, *Buddhism in Myanmar*.

¹⁹ Luce and Tin, *Burma down to the fall of Pagan*, 264-282.

²⁰ San, *The Impact of Burmese Buddhism*, 11.

²¹ Luce and Tin, *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*, 28.

²² Bischoff, *Buddhism in Myanmar*.

may have been subservient to Thanton.^{23,24} The extent to which the Buddhist dynamic manifested itself in the Mon culture is the blatant rivalry it had with Upper Burma. History records the two Theravada Buddhist kingdoms constantly warring, on-and-off, for at least a thousand years. But the competition and conflict does not end with politics, as the rivalry encompasses each side claiming the same visitation of Buddha and monk ordinations. The Mons seemingly trumps the rivalry with superior orthodoxy and purity of the Theravada Buddhist tradition by claiming Buddhaghosa of the 5th century A. D.²⁵

The Burmese Buddhist Sangha was not a mute element in all of this pre-dynastic power shuffle between the Mon, Pyu and other rivals. The monks were part of the political picture, even from the earliest of times. However history, archeology, tradition and Pali scripture all reinforce the influence and impact on both Upper and Lower Burma by Theravada Buddhism. Culturally, there was the protection of the dhamma, the expansion and preservation of the Indian religious culture of Buddhism, the extension of Buddhist and monastic architecture and the education of the people via the monastery. Politically, the monks were in a position to educate and influence future kings, give advice to kings and provide the so important link between the people and the kingdom.²⁶

An excerpt from the Chinese T'ang dynasty chronicle characterizes the power of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha and shows the strong symbolic connection that existed between the king, monk and people.

They are Buddhists and have a hundred monasteries, with bricks of glass ware embellished with gold and silver vermilion, gay colours and red kino. The floor is painted and is covered with ornamented carpets. The king's residence is in like

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Din, *The Golden Days*.

²⁵ Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, 31-36.

²⁶ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 378-382.

style. At seven years of age, the people cut their hair and enter a monastery; if at the age of twenty they have not grasped the doctrine, they return to lay estate.²⁷

In spite of Theravada Buddhism's strong sangha presence in Burma, during the first millennium, the region probably did not represent a purist form of Buddha's intention. The sangha was constantly being pulled between royalty, laity and the other indigenous religions of the area, including Hinduism. The sangha increasingly postured itself in the political arena even if not fully engaged in the politics of the time. It is within this divided religious socio-political environment that unification of Burma began via the first of three Burmese dynasties.

Dynastic Burma

Three dynasties successively surface as a unifying force in Burma. These were the Pagan Dynasty (849 – 1298 A. D.), Toungoo Dynasty (1510 – 1752 A. D.) and the Konbaung Dynasty (1752 – 1885 A. D.). The Konbaung Dynasty finally succumbed to British rule in 1886 when it was made a province of India.

The Pagan Dynasty (849 – 1298 A. D.)

Though the dating of this period starts with 849 A. D. (remarkably close to the overthrow of the Pyu, by the Nanchao Kingdom in 832 A. D.) with numerous kings mentioned²⁸, it is the reign of King Anawarahta beginning in 1044 A.D. and lasting till 1077 A. D., which defines our historical understanding of the Pagan Dynasty. It is under Anawarahta's reign Burma was noticeably unified. He was an adept administrator and

²⁷ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 12-13.

²⁸ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 364-365.

was an ambitious warrior who conquered and subjugated surrounding principalities and kingdoms.²⁹

King Anawarahta, with this character, is the man who defined a turning point in the structure of the sangha. His zealous piety was fueled by Shin Araham, a Mon monk of Thaton origins, and led to the suppression of non-Theravada religious groups throughout his reign. Under the countenance of Shin Araham, Anawarahta sought to transform Burma into a kingdom under dhamma. His zealotry extended itself to destroying the Mon city of Thaton in order to procure the Pali Tripitaka and making captive 30,000 monks along with Buddhist objects of worship. It is not possible to separate the reign of Anawarahta from the influence of the monk Shin Araham, who together propagated Theravada Buddhism throughout Pagan and built numerous pagodas and temples.

Shin Araham became the ecclesiastical advisor to the king, and this position established a chain of successors called *Mahasangharaja* or the *thathanabaing*. This position created a powerful place within the government, as the *thathanabaing* was appointed by the king. The religious hierarchy's chain of command went from the king to the *thathanabaing* to the sangha. The *thathanabaings* significance was so great that the only authority that could supersede it was the king. In fact, the kings of Pagan preferred to please this Theravada Buddhist pontiff in recognition of his power to influence the kingdom.³⁰ By the end of Anawarathas reign, in spite of his ruthlessness as a conqueror, he had effectively defined the Burmese Theravada Buddhist view of a “righteous king” and the role of the government to serve and protect Buddhism.³¹

²⁹ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 23-34.

³⁰ Smith, *Religion and Politics*, 12-24.

³¹ Wifield, *Buddhism and Insurrection in Burma*, 346-349.

The Pagan Dynasty finally succumbed to the Great Khan in 1297 and its conquest acknowledged in 1298. For the next two to three centuries Burmese culture languished. Buddhist scripture and the building of pagodas never matched that of the Pagan Dynastic era.³²

The Toungoo Dynasty (1510 – 1752 A. D.)

The Burmese psyche had been molded during the Pagan eras and during the Toungoo Dynasty took a form more akin to expansion than definition. The majority of notable history during this era is secular in nature. However, according to the Sasanavamsa (the History of Buddhism in Burma) the sangha began to show signs of fatigue in that it was divided over minor issues of Vinaya. An example of one of the major problems within the sangha was whether when begging in a village the monk should cover the left shoulder or cover both shoulders. This particular issue lasted over a hundred years and was finally resolved during the Konbaung Dynasty during the reign of King Bodawpaya by royal decree. Issues like this one were extremely divisive to the sangha.³³

However, one notable story speaks of the enduring influence the Burmese Buddhist Sangha still maintained. A Shan king of the 16th century said “Monks surround themselves with followers and could rebel if they like. They ought to be killed” after which he turned around and killed 360 monks.³⁴

³² Harvey, *History of Burma*, 73.

³³ Bapat, *2500 Years of Buddhism*, 137.

³⁴ Smith, *Religion and Politics*, 35.

The Konbaung Dynasty (1752 – 1885 A. D.)

The expansion of Buddhism that began during the Toungoo Dynasty continued. King Alaungpaya, the founder of the dynasty, had killed 3,000 monks for helping Pegu oppose invasion.³⁵ In 1781 the powerful King Bodawpaya ascended the throne. Burma was a unified country and he wanted to unify the sangha as well. After the reign of Bodawpaya, till the annexation of Burma, the country saw the sangha increasingly become divided and sectarian, which was accompanied by purification movements. King Thibaw took over the throne of Burma, after King Mindon died in 1878, and it was under his realm the last remnant of an independent Burma ceased to exist in 1885.³⁶ After three wars with the British, the first of which conquered Rangoon in 1824, the Konbaung Dynasty fell and was annexed in 1886.³⁷

Colonial Burma and the Burmese Buddhist Sangha

The colonization of Burma by the British had an overwhelming impact on the Burmese culture. As previously detailed, Buddhism was the culture of Burma; in fact if Buddhism was somehow surgically extracted from Burma a void and absence of culture would exist. This is exemplified by the Burmese saying “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist”. The attitude of deference toward Buddhism was more than insult, for the Burmese it created a vacuum in the universal order and destroyed the cosmological framework of Buddhism.

Before presenting the reactions the Burmese Buddhist Sangha had toward the uninvited intrusion by the British, it is relevant to remember the condition of the sangha

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Mendelson, *State and Sangha*, 66-118.

³⁷ Smith, *Religion and Politics*, 42.

during the last hundred years of the Konbaung Dynasty. As mentioned, the sangha had progressively fractured into sectarianism. This divide generally had taken place not over doctrine but over interpretation and implementation of Vinaya. It was further fueled by intentional manipulation of the sangha by the kings and a partisan attitude toward different sects within the sangha.³⁸

British Policy toward Burma

British annexation changed the dynamics of Burmese culture and impacted Buddhism in unforeseen ways. This era in the history of Burma represents not only a period of time where Burma did not govern itself, but the world at large had and was rapidly changing. This presented challenges to a sangha that it never had to deal with in its past. In dynastic Burma the sangha was virtually in charge of its own fate, as the King-Sangha-Laity hierarchy effectively made the sangha a political power broker. Under British rule, the sangha lost its ecclesiastical power and was told to abide by British law.

To the Burmese, there was no religion absent a “defender of the faith.” The British had conquered Burma, region by region and early in its piecemeal occupation of Burma, Britain had taken the position of neutrality with respect to religion. It refused to take the responsibility of a monarch and be a “defender of the faith.” Secondly, the British introduced its own educational system, which did not include religious education (a function the sangha had traditionally filled). Thirdly, it left the sangha without a *thathanabaing*, which left the indigenous religious legal system in disarray. In spite of meager attempts to cooperate with the indigenous religious hierarchy, the remaining

³⁸ Mendelson, *State and Sangha*, 66-118.

authority manifest by the *thathanabaing* and ecclesiastical Order was eroded and undermined by British law.³⁹

The Sangha's Reaction to British Rule

The Burmese Buddhist Sangha's response to British intrusion was a stark contrast to sectarian behavior of the final days of the Konbaung Dynasty. Winfield, J. C. provides an excellent presentation of the reaction and resistance of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha to British annexation.⁴⁰ It has already been shown how Burmese nationalism mirrored and identified with Buddhism and the particular cosmological framework presented by Burmese Buddhism. It was the threat of the dissolution of this framework that ignited fires of resistance by the sangha.

Just as war was to begin in 1885 the Hlutdaw (the primary executive arm of the king) appealed to “faith before notions of country or race” in an outcry claiming the British was trying to destroy the countries religion. After the defeat of Burma and the deportation of King Thibaw, in February 1886, Lord Dufferin became Governor of Burma. With the institution of a Governor, and not a king as “defender of the faith,” resistance was immediate and profound with the sangha taking the lead.

The *pongyi*, monk, Sayadaw U Ottama began his resistance in February of 1886. He attacked and burned towns, led men, killed British and was supported by villagers.⁴¹ Ottama said it was his duty to aggressively resist and attack the British aggressor in order to “reinstale a Buddhist ruler.” Ottawa's resistance continued till capture on July 20, 1889.⁴²

³⁹ Smith, *Religion and Politics*, 38-51.

⁴⁰ Winfield, *Buddhism and Insurrection*, 346-366.

⁴¹ Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma*, 27-29.

⁴² Winfield, *Buddhism and Insurrection*, 364-366.

Konbaung princes had proclaimed their need to reclaim the throne for the sake of religion, laity and clerics. The senior monk of a monastery in Mandalay hid the princes and others recruited insurgents. The monk, U Thumana hatched plots and when the conspiracy was broken his monastery searched, an “oath of allegiance” was found along with a communique stating 5,000 men ready to fight. U Thumana, like U Ottama, was heavily involved in the rebellion against the British and was also religiously motivated.⁴³

The Myinzaing prince planned an attack on the British, May 7 1886. Coordination of orders was done by four monks: U Dipa, U Einda, U Nandiya and U Rewata. A Shan monk said on King Thibaw orders he was to conquer Lower Burma and led a brief but influential rebellion from December 1885 to January 1886.⁴⁴ The British had renamed the royal palace Fort Dufferin, and U Kelatha, an older monk, claimed he was going to take the throne and chase the British out of Burma. He and his group besieged the fort and failed in the attack during which he was killed.⁴⁵ The history of colonial Burma is replete with accounts of resistance, rebellion and violence performed by different *pongyi* of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha during British occupation of Burma.

Conclusion

Beginning with the Pagan Dynasty and even till the time of British conquest in 1886, the sangha received more than special treatment from the government. To gain the favor of the sangha, the kings financially rewarded monks with a monthly allotment, building monasteries, sanctuary, and tax free status for relatives among other gifts of privilege. Buddhism had effectively become a state religion.

⁴³ Winfield, *Buddhism and Insurrection*, 360-361.

⁴⁴ Winfield, *Buddhism and Insurrection*, 362.

⁴⁵ Winfield, *Buddhism and Insurrection*, 364.

Theoretically the sangha was apolitical; however, it served the government not only as an advisor of edicts, dhamma and emissaries but as an instrumental buffer between the people and the government. The sanghas persuasiveness with the people extended from convincing them to be subservient to the government, helping subjects see the sensibleness of paying taxes, using monasteries to educate the people among other social functions. This reciprocal relationship between government and sangha legitimized the King as the highest member of the laity, protector and defender of Buddhism. It also created a legal entitlement for the sangha that defined its material welfare and firmly positioned itself as a political power to be dealt with accordingly.⁴⁶

Upon entering the colonial period the appointment of the *thathanabaings* was predominantly focused on members of the sangha from established large monasteries. An overwhelming majority of the sangha were small enterprises, with small monasteries associated with villages. This along with a loosely organized sangha at large made for an amorphous organization spread throughout the country with little centralization visible, other than the ecclesiastical hierarchy with select control over the smaller monasteries. In spite of this, the condition led to a patron-monk model where the laity was able to participate in nurtured relationships with the monks in a one-on-one manner, probably closer to the Buddha's idea of the relationship between the sangha and laity.⁴⁷

British rule did not understand or see that religious diversity was effectively nonexistent in Burma and secondly, it did not realize the position and power of the ecclesiastical hierarchy led by the *thathanabaings*. Buddhism was Burma and it had effectively integrated itself in the culture and successfully filled a systemic role vital to

⁴⁶ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 380.

⁴⁷ Mendelson, *State and Sangha*, 117-118.

the psyche of the country and people. It had done this by “(1) recognition and support from the political authority, (2) an effective ecclesiastical hierarchy, and (3) the development of an integrative role in the social and cultural life of the country.”⁴⁸ The British effectively derailed this religious socio-political structure, which was synonymous with Burmese culture and national identity.

The sangha and populace with a culture connecting the entire country, functioning government and a national identity did not standby idly while the intruders effectively subjugated them. However, the above mentioned participation in violence by the sangha urges one to recall that non-violence is at the core of Buddhism and monks are the trustees of that heritage. Father Vincenzo Sangermano commented on pre-colonial Burma as follows:

Indeed, under the predecessors of the present king, a capital punishment was a rare occurrence; for no sooner did the Talapoin hear that a criminal was being led to execution, than they issued from their convents in great numbers, with heavy sticks concealed under their habits, with which they furiously attacked the ministers of justice, put them to flight and, unbinding the culprit, conducted him to their Bao. ...In thus saving the lives of criminals, they believe that they are doing an act of piety; for as their law forbids them to kill any living thing, even though it be hurtful to man, such as serpents, or mad dogs,...⁴⁹

As previously stated, it is the goal of this work to investigate and characterize the Burmese Buddhist Sangha's involvement with modern politics. The sanghas involvement with the modern independent Burmese state needs and will be considered next.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Religion and Politics*, 20.

⁴⁹ Sangermano, *The Burmese Empire a Hundred Years ago*, 122.

CHAPTER III

PRESENT DAY INVOLVEMENT WITH POLITICS BY THE BURMESE BUDDHIST SANGHA

Introduction

At this juncture there are four important present day timeframes to consider with respect to the political involvement of the sangha toward the Myanmar government: 1) the period from Burma's independence from Britain in 1948 to 1962, 2) from the military coup by General Ne Win in 1962 to the 1988, 3) from 1988 power grab by General Saw Maung to 2007 and 4) the 2007 Saffron Revolution. The significance of 1948 to 2007 is that it shows a continued conscious evolution on the part of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha to not only influence but control the government. A fifth important period, namely the current disposition of Myanmar and the Burmese Buddhist Sangha since the Saffron Revolution, is developing continuously and is left for a future project.

Burma's Independence in 1948 to 1962

“Seeking the most democratically representative form of government and the moral high ground, the first prime minister, U Nu, attempted to establish an explicitly Buddhist state.”⁵⁰ Deep Buddhist commitments and the millenniums old religious-political culture of Burma motivated U Nu's attempt to establish a Buddhist state. His deep religious involvement and dedication, which can be traced back to his youth, may be

⁵⁰ Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 173.

said to have precedent over his political aspirations. This being said, it was politically a stroke of brilliance on the part of U Nu to attempt to establish a Buddhist state. Given that Burma and its culture had been in a state of internal diaspora since the British colonization, this move on the part of U Nu held the promise of reestablishing a modern version of the traditional relationship between King-Sangha-Laity.⁵¹ It is this very religiosity instituted within a modern government which sowed the seeds of the downfall of his government.

However, preeminence of the sangha which had been denigrated during British rule was now turned around. The sangha enjoyed a revival of its previous position, however, in a modern aspect. Pagodas were repaired and new ones built. The sangha performed Buddhist ceremonies publicly and with the government's participation, tradition was encouraged and reestablished. In terms of influence upon the government, the *sayadaws* had regained their previous power. This was demonstrated when U Nu attempted to place religious education in regular schools which was to include Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. These revered and influential *sayadaws* strongly opposed this proposal. This opposition was strong enough to require U Nu and his chief justice to consult with the monks, who numbered 8,000 in protest. Their demands were that only Buddhism should be taught in regular schools and if it required a constitutional change then, so be it. The government capitulated to the sangha.

It was during the term of U Nu that the Burmese Buddhist Sangha made remarkable missionary inroads. By 1959 tens of thousands of converts were reported. At the helm of this effort within the sangha was the Buddha Sasana Council. The revival of

⁵¹ Smith, *Religion and Politics*, 140-143.

Buddhism was in full swing with the Burmese Buddhist Sangha rapidly seeing the resurrection of a Government-Sangha-Laity relationship. The Sixth Great Buddhist Council was convened on the full-moon day in May, 1954 which continued for two years in Rangoon, Burma.⁵²

With the reissuance of power the sangha experienced a decline in discipline. This took the form of involvement with worldly concerns, defiance of the government disputes within and between monasteries, violence between sangha factions resulting in the death of monks, lawlessness and monastic immorality. Traditionally Buddhism had the secular government as a substitute for the Buddha to exercise responsibility to maintain the purity of the sangha. As late as 1961, U Nu and Buddhist ecclesiastical organizations contended with the issue of sangha purity. One problem that existed was the sensitivity of the sangha to any criticism of itself or its members. It wanted control over monks who did wrong if the government could not purify the sangha. On this issue the government was not successful in its purification efforts. One reason was that the sangha was again divided in its response to the effort of the government. Factions existed and some supported the government and others violently opposed government action.⁵³

One is reminded of the Emperor Asoka and his efforts to establish Buddhism when looking at how U Nu's tenure as prime minister promoted Buddhism. Smith, D. E. says there are basically five reasons why this position, not limited to U Nu, exists. 1) It has been the function of the Burmese government to promote Buddhism. 2) The government had a responsibility to revive Buddhism after colonial rule. 3) The government's involvement was needed to end the disorder that resulted due to foreign

⁵² Smith, *Religion and Politics*, 157-180.

⁵³ Smith, *Religion and Politics*, 205-217.

occupation. 4) The government had a duty to individuals present and future lives. 5) Buddhism was the best way to prevent communism from taking over the country.⁵⁴ The Burmese government under U Nu existed until the military coup and General Ne Win replaced it in 1962.

Military Coup and Ne Win in 1962 to 1988

Looking at the historical relationship between government, sangha and laity, one might expect U Nu's regime as prime minister to be a picture of unity and cooperation on the part of all parties within Burma. This is not to be completely refuted as U Nu was prime minister for the vast majority of time from 1948 to 1962. Furthermore, by the time General Ne Win and the military took over the government in 1962, the economics of Burma had vastly improved. For example, "Rice exports reached an all-time postwar high of almost 2.1 million tons for 1959-60"⁵⁵ even though the following year was lower, along with other measures of economic measures noting improvement.

However, issues lurked below the economic turnaround. The politics of a religious state were taxing on U Nu's ability to juggle both religion and secular responsibilities. Trager iterates these issues as "These factors were dissension and division in U Nu's Union Party; the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion; the rise of insurrectionary activity," plus national security issues increased accompanied with a sense of discontent and concern that the government was falling apart. On March 2, 1962 General NeWin led a military coup and U Nu along with other leaders was jailed.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Smith, *Religion and Politics*, 140.

⁵⁵ Trager, *Burma from Kingdom to Republic*, 191.

⁵⁶ Trager, *Burma from Kingdom to Republic*, 191-198.

This military coup issued in a military government which immediately reversed the role of the sangha influence upon government. The new government of U Ne Win initiated a “socialist-materialist philosophy” and Buddhism was “excluded from the affairs of state” where the state refused to be the patron of Buddhism. In response to this Jordt states, “...a mass lay meditation movement with new institutional features arose among the majority Buddhist population to compensate for the role of the state or king in the classical triple order of sangha, state, and laity.” As the chemistry between the sangha and laity increased the government took up the task of “Buddhist revitalization” starting with purification of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha.⁵⁷

The military government attempted to secularize the sangha by nullifying Buddhist legislation, the Buddha Sāsana Council and closely scrutinizing the ecclesiastical courts along with state sponsorship removed from many Buddhist institutions. The economic sector was nationalized and when the government was put under the control of the Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) (i.e. the military), the economy plummeted and food was scarce. U Ne Win’s efforts were to rid the government of all undesirable Burmese Buddhist Sangha elements and then remake and regulate the polity. In 1980 what was called the Congregation of the Sangha of All Orders for Purification, Perpetuation, and Propagation of the Sāsana identified nine Buddhist sects to be recognized while at the same time registering all monks with the government. The sangha was placed under government control to the point of having the sangha’s education evaluated and examined along with requiring abbots and sangha members participate in government instituted training. In spite of the heavy handed

⁵⁷ Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 173-174.

control and manipulation, U Ne Win realized that his secular government had to appease the sangha if he was to be legitimized as a ruler of Burma. With this realization, by 1988 the government was constantly contributing to sāsana.⁵⁸

This regime's oppression came to a halt in 1988 with U Ne Win's appointed successor General Sein Lwin. General Sein Lwin was not a loved or respected by the Burmese people. He was known "for carrying out the Rangoon University massacre in 1962" and was the power behind "the purification and unification of the sanghas movement."⁵⁹ The Burmese Buddhist Sangha involved itself with the public to protest this appointment. On August 20, 1988 *The Economist* reported:

At least 3,000 people died in the five day rioting that broke out in Rangoon and other parts of the country on August 8th. Accurate information is scanty: Burma had been virtually sealed off from the outside world by the socialist-cum-nationalist regime of General Ne Win, who seized power in 1962. The mounting unrest the government faces has largely been caused by its disastrous economic mismanagement. This has even brought acute rice shortages-to a luxuriantly fertile country that used to be a big exporter of the stuff.

General Ne Win's decision in July to hand over the leadership to Brigadier-General Sein Lwin only made things worse. This second general was a particularly unhappy choice because he had been held responsible for the brutal treatment of demonstrators earlier this year. By August 12th the new demonstrations, in which Buddhist monks as well as students were prominent, had forced him to resign.⁶⁰

1988 Power Grab to 2007

The impact of monks protesting against the new leadership of General Sein Lwin was not a random loosely organized reaction to the appointment. Significant planning and resistance had existed for years. The *Yahanpyu Aphwe*, also known as the All Burma Young Monks Union which was active since 1948 and even banned later and repressed

⁵⁸ Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 179-183.

⁵⁹ Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 185-186.

⁶⁰ Gravers, *Monks, Military, and Power*, 11.

by Sein Lwin in the 1970's was at the forefront of what can only properly be viewed as a revolution. This organization included the "Federation of All Burma Monks Union, Rangoon Young Monks Union and the Sangha Duta Council of Burma" all of which had been banned in 1990 as organizations which were "extra-Sangha."⁶¹

The extent to which members of the sangha were involved is stark. The Human Rights Watch of September 2009 quotes the anthropologist Ward Keeler:

It's the monks' role in all this that's truly remarkable. They have taken it upon themselves to fill the void created by the removal of all other forms of authority in the city. The government simply doesn't exist anymore here: every township office in the city is shut tight, and a fair number of big wigs of the Party-cum-government (the BSPP) are probably in hiding. What one sees instead is sometimes quite hilarious. I would love to take a picture of one of the traffic police gazebos full of monks standing there with long sticks in their hands and whistles in their mouths. The cross road at the clock tower [a Mandalay landmark, located in front of the central market, Zeigyo] is now controlled by monks who brook far fewer infractions of traffic laws than the traffic police used to: no right turn on red in Mandalay's traffic theocracy. More improbably still are the monk commandos careening around town. Jeeps, trucks, private cars all are filled with monks traveling about town looking important, and usually with a couple of monks hanging on the side or sitting on the roof blowing their whistles furiously so that everyone will get out of their way. Demonstrations are usually policed in part by monks, who stride alongside the demonstrators maintaining the lines. Public security has also been taken up as the monks' charge. That means that the equivalent of police stations have been set up in different parts of the city.⁶²

This continued till September 18, 1988 when the army stepped in and gunned down protestors be they civilian or monk. The government was taken over by General Saw Maung and the new junta called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The new government's announcement that elections would be held was followed by the formation of political parties of which the major one formed by Aung San Suu Kyi was the National League for Democracy (NLD). The events surrounding

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Human Rights Watch, *The Resistance of the Monks*, 45-46 (Keeler 50, cited in HRW).

the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and other activists can be read elsewhere; however of import with respect to this work is that the monks continued to resist and rebel against the government. The Radical Buddhist Monks United Front (RBMUF) was formed and controlled by U Zawana in Mandalay.⁶³

What is pertinent to this work is the impact of the elections as it relates to the sangha's resistance to the government. The elections were held on May 27, 1990, the NLD overwhelmingly won a vast majority of seats, on July 27 the SLORC refused to hand power over to the newly elected government and on the anniversary of the 1988 protests and killings (August 8, 1990) the sangha reacted. Thousands of monks took to the streets in what was staged as an alms round with thousands more people giving food to the monks. Students joined and with what had obviously become a statement of protest the army began shooting. Monks were wounded, beaten and arrested and the government refused responsibility for the violence. A month later, in Mandalay, 7,000 monks boycotted the military by refusing their offerings as merit making and essentially refusing to accept them as Buddhists. The protest spread throughout upper Burma to other towns. On September 27, in Rangoon, 2,000 monks sent a letter to General Saw Maung telling him the military government had been excommunicated (*pahtani kozana-kan*). This excommunication was demonstrated by the turning of the alms bowls upside down. This saga, rooted in past conflicts between the sangha and the government, repeated itself in that monks were arrested, monasteries closed, the government identifying which part of the sangha it accepts and then turning around and contributing

⁶³ Human Rights Watch, *The Resistance of the Monks*, 47.

to the different monasteries and sangha efforts in order to appease the laity and garner legitimacy to rule the nation.⁶⁴

From the uprising of 1990 to 2007 the government made a concerted effort to influence the sangha and the Burmese Buddhists through a variety of methods. The government built pagodas and made donations to prominent members of the sangha. A pagoda called the *Sweltaw Myat* was built to house one of the teeth of the Buddha. This policy on the part of the government was implemented to gain favor with the Buddhist public and garner legitimacy as the government of the country. The extreme politics of trying to gain the favor and support of the sangha was somewhat effective; however the downside was that it created dissention among the ethnic religious groups and Buddhism. March 1997 marked both the citizenry and monks fighting Muslims over a rape issue. In October of 2003 more fighting took place between Buddhists and Muslims. Monks were arrested, 600 monks became involved, government used force and weapons again, monks were killed in the clash and more alms bowls were overturned.⁶⁵

2007 Saffron Revolution

This now brings the political involvement of the sangha round circle to the Saffron Revolution of 2007 mentioned at the beginning of Chapter I. A presentation of the many elements of the Saffron Revolution involving the Burmese Buddhist Sangha, beyond the opening statement of this work is enlightening with respect to the organizational details of the preparation involved. However, such an endeavor is more suited for another topic. Nonetheless it is fair to present different motives monks had for involvement in this event, as they are varied.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch, *The Resistance of the Monks*, 48-53.

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch, *The Resistance of the Monks*, 59-62.

The following quotes are taken from *The Resistance of Monks*⁶⁶ by the Human

Rights Watch:

But on September 5 when the Pakokku monks came out to chant the peaceful prayers of the ‘Metta Sutta,’ —the sutra of loving kindness to radiate the spirit of love to all beings—in sympathy with the suffering public, the local government militia brutally attacked the monks and tied them to electric poles, beat them with rifle butts, and arrested them. - A leading senior monk.

There are two main reasons. Most of the sangha have families, so they see the social problems. All monks have feelings for their families, and we didn’t have an opportunity to express this. Low living standards of the people affect the monks because we depend on the people to support us . . . Secondly; there was bloodshed against the monks in Pakokku. Even under the British we were not treated like this. - U Eitthariya’s reason to become politically active.

I heard people say in their house or on the bus that they had difficulties for the livelihoods. We got less food day by day after the price increase. - U Agga Pyindaya (fictitious name).

Traditionally, we monks are not supposed to be politically active. But the political and economic situation in the country was so bad that we couldn’t keep quiet. We could not stand to see the suffering of the people, that was why we decided to show them our support and sympathy. The military has ruled our country for more than 40 years, and they don’t care about the welfare of the people, they care only for themselves and their relatives, and vow to remain in power forever. That was why the people rose up against them. There are three powerful groups in Burma: the sit-tha (sons of war), that’s the military. The kyaung-tha (sons of the school), the students. The paya-tha (sons of the Buddha) That’s us, the monks. - U Pannacara (fictitious name).

Why are there so many poor people when the country is rich in resources? Why is the educational system so bad? I read many books about history, I talked to monks and others about what happened in 1988, and even earlier in our country’s history. I came to the conclusion that the main problem is in our country’s history. I came to the conclusion that the main problem the country is facing is the policy of the junta. I’m an activist and the junta knows that. - U Kosalla’s reason to become politically active.

I managed to get away and the movement has been suppressed. But if the regime doesn’t change its ways and continue to oppress the people, monks, and students, it will face more demonstrations in the future. – U Nat Saw a main organizer of the monks’ involvement.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch, *The Resistance of the Monks*, 64-79.

We wanted the government to apologize for what happened in Pakokku. And we wanted the junta to have a better policy considering the hardships people had to face. We wanted them to have a dialogue with the people. - U Manita a main protest organizer.

The actual reason was that we don't want this military government. We don't want systematic repression and corruption. We don't want the government to arrest or kill our senior monks! The people don't want this government either. I want it to be a revolution here in Burma, but a peaceful revolution. - U Sovanna (fictitious name).

Conclusion

With Burma's Independence in 1948 to 1962, the Burmese Buddhist Sangha enjoyed a welcome reprieve not visited since before the British colonized Burma in 1886. This preferential treatment, though conferred by the government, was mainly a result of the religiosity of U Nu. U Nu's wish was to establish a functional Buddhist State, if not a revival of the State-Sangha-Laity triad predating British control. Though this assisted the country in regaining its national pride and identity, the sangha was again plagued with a loss of discipline and U Nu was beset with a conflicted agenda when it came to the secular aspect of ruling the country. This surfaced visibly toward the end of his regime as political progress and cooperation slowly disintegrated and the government was vulnerable to collapse.

In 1962 General Ne Win and the military junta capitalized on the discontent and took over the country and instituted a new government. This immediately impacted the sangha in that Buddhist legislation and preferential treatment was reversed and the new military government went to lengths to purify the sangha. At some point General Win's government succumbed to the reality that in order to gain the traditional legitimacy bestowed the government by the sangha and laity, it would be needed to treat the sangha preferentially and so reversed policy and began to support the sangha.

With the appointment of General Sein Lwin the country, with the sangha in the forefront, erupted in protest and virtual revolution. General Saw Maung and yet a new military junta, called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), took control and became the new government in 1988, and promised Democratic elections. When the elections took place in 1990 and power was not turned over to the newly elected party, the NLD and monks took to the street in mass and more protest and violence spread throughout the country.

From 1990 to 2007 the government selectively accepted parts of the sangha and tried to gain legitimacy by building pagodas, donating to the sangha and sponsoring sangha related projects. In 2007 with the government's increase in the price of diesel oil and natural gas the sangha again took to the streets in protest and rebellion against the government, resulting in violence in the form of arrests, beating and killings by the government.

This chapter concludes, Part I, the historical treatment of the development of Buddhism and the sangha's evolutionary involvement in Burmese politics. Emphasis has been on the predominant disruptive component of the sangha as it is the actions and behavior of this element this work investigates for consistency with the Buddha's soteriological teachings. There have been segments of the sangha not secularly inclined who have shunned political involvement, protest and violence. However, as this work's historical treatment of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha demonstrates, they have been in the minority. Two important issues which have not been discussed is the purity of the sangha involved in the present day resistance and rebellion and the outright inhumane treatment the Myanmar government has applied to the citizens of the country. With respect to the

latter issue this work avoids an overt discussion of the military junta, as the topic is the Burmese Buddhist Sangha's reaction to such stimuli. However, it will delve far enough to consider if there is an ethical or moral responsibility, within Buddhism, for the sangha to resist a government which inflicts pain and suffering upon its citizenry. With respect to the former issue, which is also not a direct focus of this work, it must be mentioned that the sangha as perceived by other than the Buddhist world is not a homogeneous institution of renunciates. This position is voiced by Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin in *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times*:

...there exists marginalized 'outlaw' monasteries in Yangon and elsewhere whose monks do not belong to the official sangha. These 'humans in yellow robes'...have little or no serious commitment to a life of renunciation...⁶⁷

And because they still don the saffron robe and shave their heads, they are visually indistinguishable from genuine monks...That fact was manipulated during the so-called 'saffron revolution' of 2007 whereby members of the political opposition shaved their heads and donned saffron robes, and after infiltrating and usurping the leadership role, turned what had initially been a peaceful protest into a violent one.⁶⁸

Not only was it not a protest led by the leadership of the Myanmar Sangha, there was no identifiable leadership at all amongst the hodge-podge of demonstrators...⁶⁹

Despite the presentation of the above, the reader is encouraged to compare their position with the documented historical evidence provided within this work affirming the existence of the contrary.

⁶⁷ Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar*, 12.

⁶⁸ Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar*, 12-13 (*Aung-Thwin 3*, cited by Aung-Thwin).

⁶⁹ Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar*, 273.

PART II

RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING AND
REJECTING THE BURMESE BUDDHIST SANGHA INVOLVEMENT
IN POLITICS

CHAPTER IV

**BUDDHIST AND SOCIAL POSITIONS INTERPRETED AS
CRITICAL OF SANGHA INVOLVEMENT WITH POLITICS AND
VIOLENCE**

Introduction

At the outset of presenting criticisms of the sangha with respect to political involvement and violence associated with such participation, it is pertinent to emphasize who the Buddha spoke to and instructed, as represented in the suttas' and Vinaya. The Buddha spoke to and instructed lay disciples, as the *Dhammika Sutta*, *Dighajanu (Vyagghapajja) Sutta*, *Anana Sutta*⁷⁰ and other suttas demonstrate. However the vast majority of his instruction, as a reading of *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*⁷¹ demonstrates, targeted the inner circle, namely the monks of the sangha, who had left the householder life. The core teachings of the Buddha are: 1) The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, 2) Renunciation and 3) Harmlessness (*ahimsa*). Karma and Dependent Origination are also fundamental teachings of the Buddha, they are however supportive, and not prescriptive philosophically. These teachings were applicable to both the monks and the householders, however as stated by the Buddha in the *Dhammika Sutta*:

⁷⁰ Ireland, "*The Discourse Collection Selected Texts from the Sutta Nipata.*"

⁷¹ Bikkhu Bodhi, "*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha.*"

Now I will tell you the layman's duty... for it is not possible for one occupied with the household life to realize the complete bhikkhu practice (dhamma).⁷²

Householders had reached enlightenment during Buddha's tenure; however, he realized the laypersons implementation of his prescriptive soteriological teachings would be a practice not completely mirrored by the practice of the monks. That is, the sangha's practice was tighter and more stringent, by the Buddha's design. It is in this context the following sutta readings are to be taken.

Buddha's Comments to the Sangha Pertaining to Non-Involvement of a Political Nature

Often it is perceived that politics was something completely foreign to the Buddha's consciousness and the surroundings of the sangha. If a closer look at the suttas' and Vinaya is made it is obvious this is not the case. Furthermore, many who move their spiritual practices to include Buddhism fail to include the political dimension of Buddhism and its ramifications, though the criticisms on this issue exist.

The Buddha's comments relating to political discourse in the suttas'

In the *Maha-sunnata Sutta* the Buddha speaks in both the positive and the negative with respect to the behavior of a monk, which includes political or kingly interactions:

If, while he is dwelling by means of this dwelling, his mind inclines to speaking, he resolves that 'I will not engage in talk that is base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unbeneficial, that does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calm, direct knowledge, self-awakening, or Unbinding — i.e., talk about kings, robbers, & ministers of state; armies, alarms, & battles; food & drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, & scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women & heroes; the gossip of the street & the well; tales of the dead; tales of

⁷² Ireland, "Dhammika Sutta: Dhammika (excerpt)."

diversity, the creation of the world & of the sea; talk of whether things exist or not.' In this way he is alert there.⁷³

The above is commonly known as “Dethis Katha” or the ‘32 types of unskillful talks’ and the topic are indicative of the mode of effort Buddha recommended to the monks of the sangha. Included was the direct, prescriptive injunction by the Buddha that monk’s mental, verbal and even physical behavior toward political topics needed to be truncated. It is mental in that the Buddha had just previously made reference to a mental inclination on the part of the monk. It is verbal in that he indicated speech was the vehicle by which the monk revealed his mentality. Finally, it was physical in that the monk would achieve an alertness, which by definition requires an initial physical posturing.

The Buddha made clear what physical behavior was to accompany a political distraction of this sort when he said:

But there is this (mental) dwelling discovered by the Tathagata where, not attending to any themes, he enters & remains in internal emptiness. If, while he is dwelling there by means of this dwelling, he is visited by monks, nuns, lay men, lay women, kings, royal ministers, sectarians & their disciples, then — with his mind bent on seclusion, tending toward seclusion, inclined toward seclusion, aiming at seclusion, relishing renunciation, having destroyed those qualities that are the basis for mental fermentation — he converses with them only as much as is necessary for them to take their leave.⁷⁴

Buddha’s own dictate on maintaining the prescribed mental dwelling for the monks was to speak with them to the extent needed for them to leave.

It is conceivable that an objection to the above argument might be made on the grounds that the Buddha was possibly speaking to the monks about their being disturbed while in meditation. If that were the case it would make sense to hurry and get people to leave so as to return to a meditative state. However, in the *Kathavatthu Sutta* there is a

⁷³ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “*Maha-sunnata Sutta: The Greater Discourse on Emptiness.*”

⁷⁴ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “*Maha-sunnata Sutta: The Greater Discourse on Emptiness.*”

situation that extends the above behavior. Monks had just returned from an alms round and were talking after the meal, during which time the Buddha came and asked what they were talking about. The sutta refers to the topics of their conversation as “bestial” and something a monk as a member of the sangha should not engage in, and avoid. The Buddha said:

It isn't right, monks, that sons of good families, on having gone forth out of faith from home to the homeless life, should get engaged in such topics of conversation, i.e., conversation about kings, robbers, & ministers of state... talk of whether things exist or not.

There are these ten topics of [proper] conversation. Which ten? Talk on modesty, on contentment, on seclusion, on non-entanglement, on arousing persistence, on virtue, on concentration, on discernment, on release, and on the knowledge & vision of release. These are the ten topics of conversation. If you were to engage repeatedly in these ten topics of conversation, you would outshine even the sun & moon, so mighty, so powerful — to say nothing of the wanderers of other sects.⁷⁵

Again the Buddha spoke in both positive and negative prescriptive terms. It was improper for monks of the sangha to talk about politics (i.e. kings, robbers, ministers of state). It was proper for monks to talk about modesty, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, persistence, virtue, concentration, discernment, release, and knowledge of release.

Again, the Buddha speaks of not becoming involved in the affairs of the State in terms of what makes a monk virtuous in the *Samaññaphala Sutta*:

Whereas some brahmins and contemplatives, living off food given in faith, are addicted to running messages and errands for people such as these — kings, ministers of state, noble warriors, brahmins, householders, or youths [who say], 'Go here, go there, take this there, fetch that here' — he abstains from running messages and errands for people such as these. This, too, is part of his virtue.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “*Kathavatthu Sutta: Topics of Conversation.*”

⁷⁶ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “*Samannaphala Sutta: The Fruits of the Contemplative Life.*”

It is overtly obvious from the above passage that the physical interaction between political leaders and the sangha or be it interests of the layperson was not only discouraged by the Buddha, but considered not to be included as virtuous behavior, on the part of the monk.

The above passages are not meant to be the sum total of the Buddha's remarks on the behavior of the monk, or attitudes toward involvement with politics. Neither does this imply that the thread of this issue continues indefinitely, however, it does indicate Buddha's position on political meanderings. Specifically, he was very clear that political involvement including the mental, verbal or physical dimensions of the monk, as a member of the sangha, was prohibitive if the monk intended to representatively pursue the path to nibbāna and the Buddha's teachings. Though these suttas' do not show the Buddha using invective language or commandments telling the sangha to or not to do something; the soft, tactful and non-harsh language was indicative of what the sangha member was not to get involved.

The Vinaya-Pitaka

In the *Vinaya-Pitaka*, there is a list of expiations or redresses for transgressions contrary to the code of conduct the Buddha intended for the monks. Some of the material is also found in suttas' and was included in the *Vinaya-Pitaka* as important elements specifically for monks to follow as a part of their study of the moral foundation and particular rules of conduct congruent with the discipline of the *dhamma* the Buddha taught.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, xiii.

The *Vinaya-Pitaka* recounts an event which was initiated by monks going to a village at what is referred to as the “wrong time” (not the time monks were to go to the village for alms-round). Six monks went into a village, sat down and engaged in *tiracchānakathā* (worldly talk or gossip). Their conversation included “...talk of kings, talk of thieves, talk of great ministers, talk of armies, talk of fears, talk of battles...” The people of the village were offended and criticized the monks. This eventually made its way back to the Buddha and the six monks upon admitting their behavior to the Buddha were admonished by him as follows:

The enlightened one, the lord, rebuked them, saying: “How can you, foolish men, having entered a village at the wrong time, . . . talk a variety of worldly talk, that is to say . . . talk of becoming and not becoming thus or thus? It is not, foolish men, for pleasing those who are not (yet) pleased . . . And thus, monks, this rule of training should be set forth: [164] Whatever monk should enter a village at the wrong time, there is an offence of expiation.” And thus this rule of training for monks came to be laid down by the lord. ||1||⁷⁸

Two behaviors are chastised by the Buddha about this event. One, which is not the focus of this work, is the proper time and reason to go to a village. The second, which is related to the topic of this work, is the monks’ conversation while in the village, namely the discussion of matters which included those of a political nature which were considered worldly and foolish. So in the *Vinaya-Pitaka* the Buddha considered even talk of politics to be foolish and off limits for those members of the sangha who had left the householder life and representatively pursued Buddha’s soteriological path.

Dhammapada Verses Interpreted to Reference Issues of a Political Nature

James A. Stroble, University of Hawai’i at Manoa, discusses at length the issue of political authority and the Buddhist response juxtaposed with violence in his paper

⁷⁸ Ibid., 82-86.

*Buddhism and War: A Study of the Status of Violence in Early Buddhism.*⁷⁹ He presents a number of verses from the *Dhammapada* interpreted as indicative of the Buddha's position on political involvement and its companion, violence.

Political victory does not solve the problem of suffering: "The victor begets enmity. The vanquished dwells in sorrow. The tranquil lives happily, abandoning both victory and defeat." – *Dhammapada* vs. 201.

Political victory does not solve the underlying problem: "Not at any time, indeed, are enmities appeased through enmity. However, they are appeased through non-enmity. This is an ancient tradition." – *Dhammapada* vs. 5.

Stroble interprets the following verse as "Not responding with violence, far from being an act of altruism, is in one's own interest in the cessation of violence.": "One should not neglect one's own welfare through excessive altruism. Having understood one's own welfare, one should be devoted to true welfare." – *Dhammapada* vs. 166.

A person concerns oneself with their own problems and inadequacies, not another entity's faults: "Evil done by oneself does oneself defile. Evil left undone by one does one oneself purify. Purity and impurity belong individually to oneself; no one shall another purify." – *Dhammapada* vs. 165.

Stay away from invective political discourse: "Do not speak harsh to anyone. Those spoken to would perhaps answer you back. Painful is quarrelsome talk, lest retaliation affect you." – *Dhammapada* vs. 133.

⁷⁹ Stroble, "*Buddhism and War.*"

Conquer oppression with higher qualities of an enlightened relationship: “One should conquer anger with kindness, the wicked with goodness, the niggardly man with liberality and the liar with truth.” – Dhammapada vs. 223.

The superior person and follower of the Buddha’s path will always focus on himself and apply effort to conquering his conduct: “Whosoever were to conquer in battle a thousand times thousand men, and another were to conquer one, that is, oneself, he indeed is the greatest victor in battle. The conquest of oneself is indeed better than the conquest of these other people. Of a person who has tamed himself and who is always restrained in conduct, the victory of such a being, not even a deity, nor a gandhabba, nor Mara along with Brahma can turn into defeat.” – Dhammapada vs. 103-105.

The proper perspective toward the issues underlying a quarrelsome problem is most conducive to a resolution of differences: “Some do not know that we must die here. Should there be others who know it to be so, then conflicts come to be appeased.” – Dhammapada vs. 6.

Additional verses of the *Dhammapada* Stroble references are 125, 161 318 and 319.

Buddhist intelligentsia has often engaged in hair-splitting justifications for the advancement of a position or behavior. Certainly this could be done with the above quotes, as a direct verbal reference is not made to politics, protest or rebellion. However, it is not sophomoric and is minimally pedantic to see that the above verses have broad scope and are equally valid for personal as well as political relationships. Thus far, the evidence points to Buddha saying to stay out of politics and away from violence inducing activities socially. With the above arguments in tack, Stroble makes the following comment:

The early Buddhist attitude toward political authority, then, cannot be one of approval in the form in which it exists. No doubt this does not mean that Buddhists should engage in invective and harsh words toward political authority, which would result in a further increase in violence—directed at them.⁸⁰

Views by other Monks on the role of the Sangha and Politics

With the huge outpouring of monks of the sangha, not only in Myanmar but throughout Southeast Asia and elsewhere, to protest against government policies and actions one might think the whole of the Buddhist monks are of the same opinion. This is, however, not true and many monks consider overt activity to be prohibitive. Two examples are given below and range from simple social activities to full-blown involvement within politics and violence.

Phra Farang

Phra Farang, originally Peter Robinson, was an Englishman turned Thai Buddhist monk, for ten years. In an interview with Phra Farang, by Richard Barrow, the following question was asked and answered:

Q. Some abbots seem to be spending more money constructing bigger temple buildings or Buddha images rather than using the money to help people who really need it. Why is this?

This is a thorny issue, even within the sangha. The monk's only duty towards lay people is to practice well, thus becoming good examples to the lay people, and to teach the dhamma to them. They have no mandate to be actively socially-involved. There are monks who are socially-involved – in helping the poor, protecting forests from illegal logging, in environmental issues and even in one case by setting up an AIDS hospice in the monastery – but they come under great criticism, both from other monks and from lay people, who claim that is simply not the monks' job and that, anyway, monks are not trained in these issues.

Additionally, abbots must make a periodic report to the sangha to say what they have achieved at their monastery. Their advancement up the monastic ladder, and the gaining of monastic titles, may be based on what they have done or are seen to

⁸⁰ Ibid.

have done. It is easier to show some new temple building, or another installed Buddha image, than it is to show Compassion in a solid and quantifiable form.⁸¹

Thich Nhat Hanh

Though the Buddhist Monastic Code does not allow aggravating or inciting behavior, it does allow self-defense if killing is not involved. However, some monks are very in tune with how a situation can develop from non-violent to violent and result in killing. What stands out in the variety of positions is the commitment, by monks, to preserve the *dhamma* and its position on non-violence (*ahimsa*) even to the point of death.

Thich Nhat Hanh was once criticized by a Vietnam veteran in the following excerpt:

“You're a fool,” said the veteran, “what if someone had wiped out all the Buddhists in the world and you were the last one left? Would you not try to kill the person who was trying to kill you, and in doing so save Buddhism?” Thich Nhat Hanh answered patiently, “It would be better to let him kill me. If there is any truth to Buddhism and the Dharma, it will not disappear from the face of the earth, but will reappear when seekers of truth are ready to rediscover it. In killing, I would be betraying and abandoning the very teachings I would be seeking to preserve. So it would be better to let him kill me and remain true to the spirit of the Dharma.”⁸²

The above conversation is quoted to emphasize the comment by Thich Nhat Hanh “...I would be betraying and abandoning the very teachings I would be seeking to preserve...” Certainly it is appropriate at this juncture to ask the following: “Is the Burmese Buddhist Sangha seeking to preserve the teachings of the historical Buddha or Traditional Burmese Buddhism as evidenced historically?”

⁸¹ Barrow, “*An Interview with ‘Phra Farang’*.”

⁸² Khandro.net, “*Religion and Ethics*.” (cited BBCi, by Khandro.net).

A Secular Refrain to Sangha Political Involvement

Intrinsic to this work is an inquiry to determine if the Burmese Buddhist Sangha involvement in politics, by various means, is consistent with the original teachings of the Buddha. However, to access only Buddhist suttas or Monastic Code creates a closed system of thought which is either self-validating or self-indicting. Though this is sufficient to determine the consistency of Modern Buddhism with the teaching of the Buddha, it lacks an external arbitrator to independently criticize or support a position.

Professor P.V. Bapat

Professor P.V. Bapat in *2500 Years of Buddhism*⁸³ comments on a monk's involvement in politics as follows:

The monk, ...by virtue of the rules which, at the time of his ordination, he undertakes faithfully to observe, he is obliged to refrain from participation in practical politics. 'One path leads to worldly gains, quite another path leads to nibbāna. Let not the bhikkhu, the follower of the Buddha, yearn for honour, but let him on the contrary, develop dispassion' (Dhammapada vs. 75) ...the monk should not join, or support, or even vote for, any political organization. Neither should he participate in meetings or any other public functions of a political or quasi-political nature...For those members of the Sangha who feel, as some in Burma...have felt in recent times, that their duties as citizens have a stronger claim on them than their obligations as monk, the only honourable course is to leave the Sangha.⁸⁴

Groundviews located at the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Colombo, Sri Lanka

Kalana Senaratne, after writing honourific and praiseworthy remarks about the Buddha and his teaching in *Groundviews*, a Sri Lanka web publication, remarked about sangha behavior:

But how, one may wonder, could this noble message of a profound philosophical teacher go so wrong in the hands of those preaching that teaching? The seeds lie in the very notion that the Buddha had advised his followers to be extremely

⁸³ Bapat, *2500 Years of Buddhism*.

⁸⁴ Bapat, *2500 Years of Buddhism*, 456-457.

mindful of: excessive attachment. From that springs all problems, and when that clashes with other ulterior objectives and motives of various groups (reasons pertaining to history, tradition, race, ethnicity, nationhood, politics, culture, ideology, etc.), Buddhism ends up being another tool in the hands of the politically-motivated. Promoting Buddhism becomes political, and in the process, Buddhism ends up being another political language.

He continues,

Now, there is absolutely nothing wrong in the practice of preserving and promoting Buddhism. In fact, Buddhism should definitely be protected and promoted. What is problematic here, however, is the way in which it has been promoted and is sought to be promoted and preserved. The noble teaching of the Buddha becomes a problematic form of political-Buddhism when under the guise of promoting the teaching, various other ethnic, political and similar agendas begin to be nurtured and promoted to the detriment of those believing and following different other teachings or religions.⁸⁵

His comment was catalyzed by an event other than violence in Myanmar, however, Buddhist monks and lay people were involved in Buddhist political violence.

Conclusion

Buddha's teaching are a pristine path to personal salvation and the Buddha never instructed his followers to rule, participate or protest in a government. What is obvious is that his instructions were to stay as far away from mental, verbal and physical involvement with politics and violence. Some modern day monks have reinforced Buddha's teachings of non-involvement with politics of any type, as the monk's duty is to represent the dhamma in an exemplary fashion. Furthermore, being socially conscious or involved in human rights issues is not to be an activity of monks. Thich Nhat Hanh, a monk known worldwide for his support of Engaged Buddhism, did not support activity that would be antithetical to Buddhism and the dhamma it represents. Secular figures have expressly frowned on sangha involvement in politics, not only as violation of

⁸⁵ Senaratne, "*Mobs, Monks and the Problems of Political-Buddhism.*"

Buddha's teachings but as having negative impact on the laity. Further disregard for sangha involvement, on the part of secular opinion, is that by becoming politically active the sangha becomes a political arm of those who would rule. There are, however, arguments used to promote sangha involvement with or against governments, as has been and is being done in Southeast Asia. Some of those will next be considered.

CHAPTER V

**BUDDHIST AND SOCIAL POSITIONS INTERPRETED AS
SUPPORTIVE OF SANGHA INVOLVEMENT WITH POLITICS
AND VIOLENCE**

Introduction

In the search for a definition and justification of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha's involvement in politics there are two areas of concern to focus on: 1) consistency within the Buddhist Tripitaka regarding sangha verbal, mental and physical participation in politics to varying degrees and, 2) consistency between Buddha's teachings and the behavior of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha's involvement in politics. The former area mentioned is not the focus of this work and it is tacitly assumed, for the purpose of this investigation, consistency exists within the *dhamma* as preached by the Buddha and recorded by his followers. Any effort to dissect the Buddha's teaching lends itself to a completely different enterprise. However, the later concern is examined in light of modern day sangha arguments promoting political discourse or engagement.

Directed Comments to the Sangha Pertaining to Involvement of a Political Nature

Often it is perceived that political involvement was something the Buddha condoned and even promoted due to recorded encounters with rulers during his tenure. Some of these encounters are presented below along with modern monastic and secular opinions. This presentation opens a window to present day interpretations used to

validate political activities by the sangha. Furthermore, many who have adopted the spiritual practices of Buddhism have included these argument and others to level criticisms on those within the sangha who do not engage interactively with politics.

The Buddha's activities and discussions related to politics in the suttas and commentaries

There are numerous accounts of the Buddha conversing with kings and even speaking with them on issues related the affairs of state. Additionally, there are accounts of Buddha directly intervening within a situation. In the latter case a peace is brokered by the appearance of the Buddha, just before fighting was to breakout.

The calming of a quarrel between kinsmen

One of the most poignant examples of Buddha's involvement with politics and government officials is the story of his intervention between two cities. In the Buddhist Stories from the Dhammapada Commentary this is known as *The Calming of a Quarrel Between Kinsmen*.⁸⁶ The Sakyan city of Kapilavatthu and the Koliyan city of Koliya functioned as republics and were on opposite sides of a river called the Rohni, which they had dammed so as to use the water for their own individual crops.

The story develops for both sides along similar lines; essentially each side needed the water for their dehydrating crops, but there was not enough water for both sides. Negotiation was not taking place as each side was simply placing demands on the other, and refusing to concede. Eventually there was physical and verbal conflict and it was reported to the royalty of each republic. The rulers of each side then wanted to engage in retribution for injury and capture the water for their own city.

⁸⁶ Bhikkhu Khantipalo, "*Buddhist Stories from the Dhammapada*."

Both parties of laborers went and reported the quarrel to the ministers who had charge of the work, and the ministers reported the matter to the royal households. Thereupon the Sakiyas came forth armed for the battle and cried out, "We will show what strength and power belong to those who have cohabited with their sisters." Likewise the Koliyas came forth armed for battle and cried out, "We will show what strength and power belong to those who dwell in jujube-trees."

This story continues as the Buddha learns about the tribes on the brink of war and killing.

The Buddha

... beheld his kinsmen, he thought to himself, "If I refrain from going to them, these men will destroy each other. It is clearly my duty to go to them." Accordingly he flew through the air quite alone to the spot where his kinsmen were gathered together, and seated himself cross-legged in the air over the middle of the river Rohini...

The Buddha then negotiated a reprieve for the cities by comparing the worth of the water to the worth of the lives of the people, should fighting and killing commence.

The story concludes with the Buddha saying,

Great kings, why do you act in this manner? Were I not here present today, you would set flowing a river of blood. You have done what should not be done. You live in strife, I live free from strife. You live afflicted with the sickness of the evil passions, I live free from disease. You live in eager pursuit of the five kinds of sensual pleasure, but I live free from eager pursuit.

What is striking about this story is not that Buddha prevented bloodshed from happening, however noble that may be. What stands out is, 1) Buddha clearly felt the following, "It is clearly my duty to do to them." and, 2) Buddha did not make decisions, protest, rule in favor of one side or the other; but he simply presented a logical argument and allowed the parties to make a decision and then he ended his stay with a preaching of the *dhamma*. Duty and *dhamma* were the coupled motivating factors compelling him to make an appearance in the middle of the conflict.

The Buddha's conversations with and about kings and ruling

The Buddha had numerous conversations with King Pasenadi and King Bimbisara. The conversations he had with these heads of state ranged from comparatively minor affairs such as pleasures associated with food and the sensual side of life to deeper issues surrounding the affairs of government. The suttas are replete with the Buddha giving advice to these kings which indicates that the Buddha connected with the politicians of his time. He had unique skills in these areas as he was born a prince and trained in the ways of warfare and politics till he left that life and eventually became enlightened. This often is used to support sangha involvement in politics.

In the *Anguttara Nikaya* the Buddha commented on how if rulers and the government were good then the people and conditions would be good. In the *Cakkavatti Sihananda Sutta* he promoted the ideas of how to rule and not rule a country, the ideal ruler. The *Kutadanta Sutta* has Buddha addressing how to eliminate crime in a country by means of economic development. In the *Jataka* the Buddha gives the *Dasa Raja Dharma* or the 'Ten duties of a king' namely: **Dana** – be unselfish, **Sila** – have moral character, **Pariccaga** – put the good of the people first, **Ajjava** – be honest and have integrity, **Maddava** – have kindness and gentleness, **Tapa** – pursue simplicity, **Akkodha** – be free of ill-will, **Avihimsa** – practice non-violence, **Khanti** – practice patience, **Avirodha** -- rule in harmony with his people. The *Milinda Panha*, part of the Burmese Pali Canon, states that if a ruler is immoral or incompetent he should be punished by the people. These among other Buddhist scripture are justifications of political involvement

based upon either Buddha's advisory position or comments attributed to him, regarding kings and government.⁸⁷

Views by Monks Supportive on the role of the Sangha and Politics

When the term '*sangha*' is used when speaking of the inner circle of monks representing the core of Buddhism, it is frequently envisioned that there is a central homogeneous association in complete agreement. This is not the case and some members of a sangha have different views than other monks in the same or another sangha. The following excerpts represent monks of a particularly supportive role or attitude toward monks being involved in politics.

U Kusalasami

U Kusalasami (fictitious name) a 68 year old monk talks about the reasons to be involved in the 2007 political protests of Myanmar:

Some argue that monks should concern themselves only with religion and not get involved in politics. That's correct, in a way. At the same time, it's the duty of the monks to help the people whenever they can. There's no contradiction here. To go out in the streets and recite the Metta Sutta, or to boycott the regime, is not politics.⁸⁸

Walpola Rahula

Walpola Rahula, a renowned Buddhist monk of Sri Lanka, said:

According to Buddhism, politics is noble service for the wellbeing of others to be rendered in accordance with the "Ten Duties of the King." One who takes to politics should be endowed with the "Four Qualities of Benevolence." According to Buddhism, politics is a righteous deed.

Politics is connected with life. So is religion. The two can never be separated. What the mind is to the body, religion is to politics. Politics bereft of religion becomes sin and evil. What is meant by religion here is not external rites and ceremonies of established or institutionalized religion, but the development of

⁸⁷ Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda Maha Thera, "*What Buddhists Believe.*"

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch, "*The Resistance of the Monks.*"

moral and spiritual character through the cultivation of such qualities as love, compassion, and wisdom...⁸⁹

A Secular Support for Sangha Political Involvement

The Burmese Buddhist Sangha involvement in politics is not something hidden from the world at large, nor is it unnoticed by the intelligentsia of the planet. The following quotes and comments from non-Buddhist sources have weighed in on this controversy and it is now a worldwide issue.

Sylwia Gil, specialist on south east asia and Theravada Buddhism

Sylwia Gil, in *The Role of Monkhood in Contemporary Myanmar Society*, definitively speaks of the monks and sangha involvement in politics favorably, encouragingly and with a supportive view that it continues and develops:

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...⁹⁰

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 mobilize and getting access to everyone. In Myanmar it is often emphasized 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 organized and representative movement, where the engaged *sangha* would be able to formulate postulates and define their area of activity.⁹¹

Probably the areas of activity of the monkhood should be defined wider than stressing the political postulates formulated by the opposition in exile...⁹²

⁸⁹ Rahula, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*, 122-123.

⁹⁰ Gil, "The Role of Monkhood," 1.

⁹¹ Ibid., 11.

⁹² Ibid., 11, (footnote 31).

Aung San Suu Kyi, noble peace prize laureate and Myanmar democracy activist

Aung San Suu Kyi is a Myanmar political activist who has spent her life struggling for a democratic Myanmar. She has been a devote Buddhist since childhood and has close connections both religiously and politically with the Buddhist monks of Myanmar. The military Junta of Myanmar is a repressive *rule by force* government, led by generals, and uses killing, torture and economic restrictions against the people of Myanmar. San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy (NLD), secular politically active organizations in Myanmar and other political activist organizations supported by (and working with) parts of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha have been proactive in trying to institute a democratic government within Myanmar.

Alan Clements in his book, *Instinct for Freedom-Finding Liberation Through Living*, Aung San Suu Kyi is quoted as follows:

As spiritual and political beings we are all activists at heart, ...No one is outside of society. Not even the monks and the nuns in our country. Our revolution includes them. It is about our freedom. That means everybody. We must see that nothing and no one is separate from this freedom. No one is an island in this world.⁹³

Alan Clements

Clements, the first American to be ordained a Burmese Buddhist monk, ceased to be a monk and pursue an active human rights campaign to impact the oppression that exists in Myanmar. In an interview with Aung San Suu Kyi the following exchange takes place with an implicit approval on his part along with approval on the part of Aung San Suu Kyi:

Alan Clements: The Burmese monk U Wisara who died years ago while in prison, after 143 days of a hunger strike, was an outstanding example of

⁹³ Clements, *Instinct for Freedom*, " 79.

politically motivated non-violent protest. Indeed, Burma has a long history of monks and nuns being actively engaged in political areas when it concerns the welfare of the people. However, I wonder about today. With the crisis at such a critical moment, do you think that the Sangha—the order of monks and nuns—can play a greater role in supporting the democracy movement? After all, it's their freedom too.

Aung San Suu Kyi: Well, there are a lot of monks and nuns who have played a very courageous role in our movement for democracy. Of course, I would like to see everybody taking a much more significant role in the movement, not just monks and nuns. After all, there is nothing in democracy that any Buddhist could object to. I think that monks and nuns, like everybody else, have a duty to promote what is good and desirable. And I do think they could be more effective. In fact, they should help as far as they can. I do believe in “engaged Buddhism,” to use a modern term.⁹⁴

Gustaaf Houtman

Houtman analyzed the role Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy play in present day Burmese politics. He specifically identifies the relationship between Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese Buddhist Sangha. This relationship brings to the forefront the amount of power the sangha has over secular opinion and that opposition to the military Junta requires a dependence on the sangha for any qualitative measure of success. Houtman says:

Without a separate space for secular political opposition within Burma's political culture, this would explain why Aung San Suu Kyi has developed special relationships with the Sangha and its transcendental Buddhist idioms. Historically this has been the only autonomous institution mastering the only ideology and practices of freedom to operate in Burma that are capable of organizing opposition to the state. This legally independent space was legitimated by the Buddha himself. Immediately after his enlightenment, the Buddha instructed his five disciples at Isipatana, the deer sanctuary, saying: ‘I am free from all bondage and shackles; you all are free from bondage and shackles too. Go now, Bhikkhus, wander through the land as teachers out of compassion for the pain-ridden world, for the good of many, for the welfare and happiness of many, for the benefit of men and devas.’ This freedom transcends the grounded black

⁹⁴ Clements, *“The Voice of Hope.”*

squares of the spirit cults as much as it does the casual reach of the royal or military arm and the prison.⁹⁵

The above quote links the success of a politician to the relationship with the sangha, however, it does not fully justify the sangha's involvement with politics. The following quote sheds light on a codependent relationship between politician and sangha. More than the relationship exists a secular, political justification for Burmese Buddhist Sangha involvement in politics when Houtman says:

...The Sangha played a supportive role in the democracy movement as 'their monasteries have offered a haven for poor students and Burmese dissidents'. Once all the students and politicians opposing the regime had been silenced, the political arena shifted to the monkhood, the one element which the regime has never been able to establish full control over despite its attempts in the 1980s....This completely delegitimized the regime in the eyes of the majority of Burmese Buddhists and inflicted irreparable damage.

Buddhism was therefore more than a way of countering the accusation of communism; it proved to be the last possible form of opposition against the ruthless military regime once all other forms of protest had been silenced. In countering with Buddhist ideas, and with the army's subsequent behavior towards Buddhism, Aung San Suu Kyi evidently did much more than counter accusations of her as a communist—she gained the regime's high ground... With the regime now perceived as opposing Buddhism, however, it has left the defense of Buddhism to the NLD and has effectively delegitimized itself.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Arguments have been made using writings in the Pali Canon depicting the Buddha negotiating peace between opposing sides. Also, the Pali Canon relates instances of the Buddha speaking to kings of his time in an advisory role. A Burmese monk sees no conflict of interest for a monk to boycott or protest a government; he does not interpret this as being political. Walpola Rahula, a renowned Sri Lankan monk and scholar, sees sangha involvement in politics as being a duty as religion is a part of the human

⁹⁵ Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis*, 219-220.

⁹⁶ Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis*, 293.

experience called politics. Members of the intelligentsia and Burmese politically active parties have not only condoned sangha member involvement but see it as a positive political development. Aung San Suu Kyi, a democratic activist and Noble Laureate has aligned her movement for a free Burma with monks and nuns of the sangha. She has been politically legitimized by this connection, supports it and explicitly says “Our revolution includes them.” Gustaaf Houtman looks at the role the sangha has played in the politics and revolution in Myanmar as “the last possible form of opposition against the ruthless military regime.” He also quotes the sutta where the Buddha said “I am free from all bondage and shackles; you all are free from bondage and shackles too. Go now, Bhikkhus, wander through the land as teachers out of compassion for the pain-ridden world, for the good of many, for the welfare and happiness of many, for the benefit of men and devas” as a justification for sangha involvement in politics and its organized resistance to the government of Myanmar.

PART III

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS REGARDING DOCTRINAL
CONSISTENCY AND POLITICAL PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND
BEHAVIOR OF THE MODERN DAY BURMESE BUDDHIST SANGHA

CHAPTER VI

ARE THE POLITICAL BEHAVIORS AND VIEWS OF THE MODERN DAY BURMESE BUDDHIST SANGHA CONSISTENT WITH BUDDHA’S TEACHINGS AND BUDDHISM?

Introduction

In answering the question “Are the political behaviors and views of the modern day Burmese Buddhist Sangha consistent with Buddha’s teachings and Buddhism?” a pre-analysis must include, by default, the justification of consistency as pivotal. It is crucial that the doctrine Buddha preached along with his behavior be placed side by side the behavior and views of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha. Additionally, it is critical to examine the participants of the sangha and see if it is appropriate to include all of Burmese Buddhism in this discussion. Essentially, it is imperative to differentiate Buddha and his teachings from Buddhism as a religion.

Analysis

Why consistency is important

The question of consistency is first necessary to compare presentation with source. Here Buddhism is the presentation via the Burmese Buddhist Sangha and the source is the teachings of the Buddha. A religious institution, such as Buddhism, encapsulates a philosophy with a worldview. Adherents to Buddhism are impacted in the sense that an existential framework claimed to have been revealed by the Buddha is mirrored in their lives. This mirroring dictates aspirations, behaviors, views,

soteriological goals among other states of being which create meaning both internal to the Buddhist experience and externally in a secular sense, which includes politics and its frequent companion violence. By adopting a tutelary head, Buddha, as the foundational custodian of its doctrinal core the Burmese Buddhist Sangha is legitimized as a functional orthopraxy while being in possession of truths others should incorporate along with Buddhism as a religion, if not an institution.

If consistency exists between the Buddha's teachings and political involvement by the Burmese Buddhist Sangha, then by rational extension the dhamma preached by the Buddha supports the varied forms of political activism as evidenced by the sangha. If instead inconsistency exists, the political activities by the sangha may be questioned along with the sangha's functional role of protecting the dhamma as presented by the Buddha. This position now creates a dilemma for the rational Buddhist, namely 'are the teaching of Buddha to be followed?' or 'is the institution of Buddhism to be followed?' Certainly the question of dhamma and its intended uses now becomes pertinent.

Dhamma versus sangha

The core teachings of Buddha were the *Four Noble Truths*, *The Eightfold Noble Path*, *Renunciation* and *Harmlessness*. More than this the Buddha commented negatively to monks who involved themselves mentally, verbally or physically in politics and with rulers of the time. Buddha's doctrine centered itself around personal salvation aimed at achieving nibbāna. Buddha's interaction with rulers of his time was not focused on change of policy, protest, revolution or even fighting for human rights. His conversations invariably advised and counseled these rulers and instructed situations in the way of

dhamma, the way to end suffering. At most, he filled the role of advisor with respect to *dhamma*.

Frequently the following statement by the Buddha, in the *Mahavagga--Vinaya Pitaka* the *First Khandhaka*, is used as a justification for political activism:

And the Blessed One said to the Bhikkhus: ‘I am delivered, O Bhikkhus, from all fetters, human and divine. You, O Bhikkhus, are also delivered from all fetters, human and divine. Go ye now, O Bhikkhus, and wander, for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, and for the welfare of gods and men, Let not two of you go the same way, Preach, O Bhikkhus, the doctrine which is glorious in the beginning, glorious in the middle, glorious at the end, in the spirit and in the letter; proclaim a consummate, perfect, and pure life of holiness.’

However, the above passage is a partial quote. The rest of the passage reads:

There are beings whose mental eyes are covered by scarcely any dust, but if the doctrine is not preached to them, they cannot attain salvation. They will understand the doctrine. And I will go also, O Bhikkhus, to Uruvelâ, to Senâninigama, in order to preach the doctrine.⁹⁷

By completing the passage, the doctrine Buddha refers to is not a political, human rights or any other doctrine than the soteriological *dhamma* preached by the Buddha. The ‘salvation’ to be attained is nibbāna, which is what the bhikkus (monks) were trained to attain via the discipline. The Buddha made no mention of monks being politically active. The monks had not been trained in the art of politics, in fact he admonished against it. The monks had been trained in the *Four Noble Truths*, *The Eightfold Noble Path*, *Renunciation* and *Harmlessness* Again, the focal point of this statement has to do with what they were trained in, spreading the dhamma. Had the Buddha been referring to political affairs, the doctrine he espoused would itself be inconsistent.

⁹⁷ Internet Sacred Texts Archive Web Site.

The Burmese Buddhist Sangha uniquely includes the *Milinda Panha* in the Burmese version of the Pali Canon. The *Milinda Panha* sutta is used as justification for deposing immoral or incompetence rulers. The implementation of comments associated with ridding the country of rulers has resulted in overt political activity and much of the time this has resulted in violence.

Not one sangha but many

This work has significantly identified behaviors and views in the sangha which seemingly diverge from the doctrine Buddha promoted. However, not all secular activities the sangha has contributed to come under the same harsh scrutiny that has been applied to political involvement. The sangha has contributed to the education, the helping of those in need both physically, spiritually and in hospices and hospitals. Also, the sangha has acted as a genuine advisor to government officials when needed. Additionally, some members of the sangha have continued the tradition of renunciation even to the extent of being forest monastics. There exists variety and diversity in the different roles and lifestyles different monks have chosen.

What exists is not a single homogeneous sangha reporting to a central Buddhist committee, though the government of Myanmar has tried to create such a structure. This centrist structure does not even manifest itself in modern Buddhism, at large. Even though there have been six Buddhist Councils organized to preserve Buddhism, the goal has been to codify and authenticate the Theravada tradition. Hence, there has been negligible interference with individual monasteries and sanghas' autonomy.

Buddhism has bifurcated itself into different groups and it is prudent to put into perspective the element referenced in this work that adopts political activities. This work

looks at the Burmese Buddhist Sangha as being comprised of different general sanghas' with different yet overlapping concerns: a forest sangha, city sangha (involved in preaching the dhamma and meditation) and socially engaged sangha (involved in helping the physical needs of the laity). Then there is the political sangha which is concerned with human and political rights. The above division should be considered a loose structure, as it is artificially contrived for the purpose of this work and is used as an aid to draw the readers' attention to the fact that the whole of Buddhist monks in Myanmar are not necessarily involved in political activities. Furthermore, it cannot be said that these are ridged boundaries, as Buddhism in Myanmar is amorphous and is culturally integrated in Myanmar.

It is that part of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha which is and historically has been politically active this work gives a face to, as culturally it too has been integrated. It is this politically involved part of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha that had its birth with the annexation of Buddhism to government in traditional Buddhist Burma, asserted its position and power and continued its dominance into modern day Buddhism that this work concerns itself with. Furthermore, it is this part of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha this work calls The Political Burmese Buddhist Sangha.

Buddha versus Buddhism

It is a naïve and inaccurate argument to say that since Buddha practiced the doctrine he discovered and preached he was a Buddhist. He did however, create an organization of voluntary followers known as the sangha and trained them in the execution of the discipline he articulated. It is this sangha, and its evolved forms,

referenced in this work, as the core and source of Buddhism and the preservation of Buddha's teachings and practices.

Buddhism traditionally claims to preserve and represent not only the teachings of the Buddha, but also the practices associated with and designed by the Buddha. It is important that Buddhism has not restricted itself to the teachings alone, as that would make the dynamic property associated with the discipline static in presentation. With this in mind the Pali word '*magga*' or path takes on a meaning more in tune with the human experience Buddha commented about in a prescriptive fashion in the *Four Noble Truths and The Eightfold Noble Path*. It is obvious the Buddha saw life as a non-linear activity; ups and downs, happy and unhappy, on task and off task, achievement and loss and he called this '*dukha*' or suffering. The discipline he found experientially was formulated to keep the new sangha from spiraling out of control and not be inconsistent with his soteriological doctrine.

Buddha's followers by default took on the '-ist' and '-ism' in Buddhist and Buddhism, respectively. Upon Buddha's passing there was no authority to keep the sangha from losing its perspective, creating duties to obligations or interpreting the words of the Buddha in a fashion other than what he had demonstrated. In fact this tendency was so strong that it was the motivation for the First Buddhist Council, when a monk suggested that the sangha could do what it wanted since the Buddha had died. When Emperor Asoka assumed the role of protector of the sangha he exercised an authority similar to that of the Buddha in order to keep it pure in a fundamental manner, as the sangha had a tendency to stray.

The overwhelming evidence produced in this work shows that the sangha and Buddhism grew in time and still developed other presentations than what existed during the life of the Buddha. Traditional Buddhism in Burma took the role of education, which may be consistent with Buddha's instruction to 'go forth.' However, it also became a pivotal instrument for government in the King-Sangha-Laity triad that legitimized secular power. This punctuates the observation that a division between church and state did not exist. As evidenced throughout this work, the traditional Burmese Buddhist Sangha has filled the political role of legitimizing Burmese governments. It has involved itself in resistance, rebellion, revolution and protest against the governments of Burma when rulers failed to fulfill their role according to tradition; much of which has resulted in violence and bloodshed. This role increased in scope and definition with the advent of the modern Burmese Buddhist Sangha, starting with the period of time Burma was occupied by the British, continued this tradition amid the modernization of culture, politics, society and the world at large.

In this regard it is useful to note Heinz Bechert proposal "to distinguish three different forms of Buddhism to be dealt with ... early Buddhism, traditional Buddhism and modernistic Buddhism."⁹⁸ These three different forms of Buddhism are not to be considered separate branches, sects or divisions of Buddhism. Instead, it is constructive to think of the forms existing in a parallel fashion with each evolving from the preceding form of Buddhism, with the exception of the early Buddhism introduced by the Buddha himself.

⁹⁸ Bechert, "*Buddhism and Society*."

Conclusion

Before proposing answers to the questions of consistency, the following quotes are provided representing Karel Werner's views on Buddhism and its corresponding involvement in politics add insight to this issue. Karel Werner explored the Buddha's idea of peace. The issue is whether the Buddha meant inner peace, a peace attained via the attainment of nibbāna or if his teachings were to be applied to worldly affairs of governments and nations. He asks the following question:

Has Buddhism ever succeeded in making the world, or at least the countries in which it took root, or perhaps just India where it originated, more peaceful?⁹⁹

He continues:

The fact that Buddhism had owed its spread over virtually the whole of India to the overwhelming influence of Asoka's authority created a precedent which determined its future fortunes throughout Asia. It also created an inner tension within its monastic communities. First, there were those who understood its message of peace in the original sense as an individual path to liberation from the shackles of saṃsāric life, . . . They were solitary practitioners in forest hermitages or inconspicuous incumbents of monasteries dedicated to meditational practice; . . . Second, there were those who joined one of the monastic institutions under royal patronage, perhaps with some awareness at the back of their minds of the ultimate purpose of monastic life, but meanwhile taking advantage of the status and prestige which monkhood gained by its link to the throne, to play a role in the political arena which they otherwise could not hope for.¹⁰⁰

The Buddha's message of peace was addressed primarily to the individual. He should preserve his inner peace under any circumstances and endure atrocities with calm and self-control, as described in the Kakacūpama Sutta (M 21) where a monk is advised to preserve his peace of mind without any thought of enmity or revenge even if his limbs were to be sawn off one by one by villains. . . sometimes even monks, who find themselves unable to live up to the calling, because they still cling to the idea that this world could and should be made into a pleasant and peaceful abode. It means that the crucial message of Buddhism, namely that the saṃsāric world can never become a peaceful place for all and that true peace, the

⁹⁹ Werner, "*Buddhism and Peace*," 8.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

peace of *nirvāṇa*, lies in transcendence and is attained only individually, has not truly sunk in.¹⁰¹

Whatever the doctrinal intricacies there are if we delve into the philosophical systems of Buddhism, the basic fact remains that Buddhism is a doctrine of peace on all levels... True Buddhism has not established peace in the world during its 2,500 years of existence and cannot impose it on an unwilling mankind,...¹⁰²

Buddhism, particularly in the Western world, has at times been embellished to the extent it is scarcely distinguishable from a New Age idea. Many comments read on the Internet and in other materials have assigned Buddhism with the responsibility of being *engaged, a vehicle for human rights, a political philosophy* or given other roles to fill. Furthermore, much material found causes one to wonder if any suttas about the Buddha and/or his teachings were read beyond a bare informational level.

Buddha's teachings along with prescribed practices are a snapshot in time. The *dhamma* presented by the Buddha was a result not only of his own personal efforts and enlightenment but also a convergence of different factors existing in a particular civilization at a particular time in history. This convergence of social, religious, political, economic and philosophical forces gave birth to an appropriate soteriological formula to alleviate suffering observed at that particular time and place in human history. Whether the formula produced by the Buddha applies to other ages, including the present era is a subject worthy of examination. However, regardless of the outcome of such an effort the sangha has accepted the obligatory responsibility of preserving the Buddha's revolutionary philosophy in both word and deed. The modern world presents similar, yet different, challenges to the sangha. The sangha as an institution is subject to the

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 27-28.

¹⁰² Ibid., 29-30.

evolution of existence as much as it is subject to its own tradition, which challenges it to make decisions consistent with the baseline philosophy of the Buddha.

Are the political activities and views of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha consistent with Buddhism?

The Burmese Buddhist Sangha, as an evolving institution, has from the earliest times been politically active. Traditionally it has and still does culturally influence the politics of Myanmar. Additionally, it has traditionally forged a place in governmental affairs and become as much political as the secular entities in the governments. Much of this is an artifact of the culture of Burma, where the evidence points to a non-existent separation between church and state. On the other hand, the culture of Burma has been defined by the Burmese Buddhist Sangha over time. Whether or not the Burmese Buddhist Sangha is an artifact or progenitor of Burmese culture and politics, evidence indicates the political activity and views of The Political Burmese Buddhist Sangha, under consideration, are consistent with traditional Burmese Buddhism.

Are the political activities and views of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha consistent with Buddha's teachings?

The Buddha did not write any of his works, instead a sangha wrote suttas purported to be his teachings. Hence, the teachings of the Buddha are second hand and a product of the early Buddhist Sangha. By accepting the teachings of Buddha to be what is written in suttas it is assumed that any eisegetical issues at a hermeneutic level have been resolved or put aside. With this in mind, this work has produced an abundant amount of evidence from suttas written by the Buddhist Sangha indicating the Buddha was displeased with monks' involvement in politics at a mental, verbal or physical level.

Additionally, instruction by the Buddha to engage persons or institutions of a secular character was an activity dependent upon preaching the *dhamma* and pertained to the soteriological path culminating in nibbāna. The only conclusion this work finds possible is that the political activities and views as presented by The Political Burmese Buddhist Sangha, under consideration, as evidenced in this work are inconsistent with the Buddha's teachings as chronicled in the Pali Canon of the Theravada tradition.

CHAPTER VII

IS THE BURMESE BUDDHIST SANGHA A POLITICAL PARTY?

Introduction

By asking if the Burmese Buddhist Sangha is a political party this study attempts to attach a label to the sangha, under consideration. Labeling is a risky enterprise which may be muted if careful comparison and contrast is employed. It is imperative a definition for political party be considered for comparison.

Neil McDonald in *The Study of Political Parties* asked the question “What is the nature of the astonishing correlation between party label and political behavior?”¹⁰³ McDonald’s work looked at the American political landscape for clues as to how to define a political party. It may seem non-uniform to apply his investigation to a South East Asian country such as Myanmar, however the similarities are stark and will be shown to be valid. Though the concept of a ‘political party’ may have its roots in Western Democracy, it is prudent to note that Myanmar is in the throes of a political and human rights crisis. This is compounded by a visible deviation, on the part of the population, from historical support for a monarch to form a modern government centered on Western democratic ideas. Though McDonald’s work looked at the label of a party versus behavioral characteristics, his work was thorough on a characteristic level so that fundamental descriptions are sufficient for cross disciplinary analysis. This work focuses

¹⁰³ McDonald, *The Study of Political Parties*, 1.

on observing the correlation between the Burmese Buddhist Sangha's political behavior and political party characteristics.

A Definition

McDonald says that a political party can be uniquely defined by referencing “*form, function or object of action.*”¹⁰⁴ He quotes a definition as follows:

A political party is a collection of individuals clustering around an interest whose furtherance they make an issue and whose value they generalized into an ideal.¹⁰⁵

This seemingly theoretical definition McDonald explains in terms of form, function and object of action:

In this case the party is a *collection* of individuals who *cluster around, further* (by making an issue), and *generalize an interest* into an ideal. The object is an *interest*. In this definition, then, party in form would *be a collection*, its function would be *to cluster, further and generalize*, and its *object* would be an *interest*.¹⁰⁶

It is on the above definitional template this work will map the Burmese Buddhist Sangha's political character. Note that by observation, the form of the **political** sangha is a ‘*collection* of individuals,’ the politically active monks; its function is *to cluster, further and generalize* to the extent this study has produced evidence of planned group resistance and recruitment of a political nature; and finally, the object of action is and has been the current and past governments of Myanmar as *an interest*.

The Political Sangha's Formation

McDonald references a political party as a *social formation* which has different structural components which loosely distinguish it from other social entities, namely *group, association, organization, institution* and *system* all of which have alternate usages

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

outside the context of politics. These components are loosely defined when applied to the concept of a political party, as the definitions are directly referencing a dynamic, not static, structure. This same diffuse assignment of components, when applied to the political sangha in Myanmar, is resolved indirectly by comparison of evidence submitted in this work. Such reconciliation between abstraction and perceived fact is provided via linkage between referenced evidence in this work of the political sangha's characteristics to each political party form.

Group

The *group* in this context is specific in that it refers to a “social unit” as perceived within the framework of human society and not confined to “structure, size, complexity, ...” however extended to something more than a small grouping of friends or acquaintances engaged in social amenities.¹⁰⁷

In this context the grouping of monks concerned with the political aspects of the Myanmar government are a group. As this work has evidenced, particularly since the occupation of Burma by the British, there have been distinctive groups of monks opposed to occupation. From the time of U Nu groups of organized political monks have existed, though in many cases without party labels or names, and sought to influence the government.

Association

McDonald says the focus with respect to an *association* “...is on objective rights and overt performance and ... is on meaning, intent, motive, and feeling.” He continues by saying “An association is said to emerge when a considerable number of people have

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 11-12.

established tangent relations of the same sort and when they interact with one another...
It is a group of a continuing pattern of interactions...”¹⁰⁸

This work has demonstrated that historically the political sangha in Burma is comprised of monks with tangential political relations and have continued to interact with each other on political venues toward the various governments of Burma.

Organization

McDonald connects political party and *organization* in the following quote by E. E. Schattschneider:

A political party is first of all an organized attempt to get power.¹⁰⁹

He subsequently distinguished a political party as an organization designed to gain control of a government from a “pressure group” which does not have this as its goal.

This work has shown the history of the political sangha in Burma, from the early days of British control to the present day, is dominated by efforts to get enough control to force the government to do its bidding. The evidence produced in this work show the present day political sangha has used the welfare of the people of Myanmar and the establishment of a fair democratically elected government as a political platform.

Institution

McDonald quotes R. M. MacIver’s work:

Institutions have external insignia, marks of public recognition, which customs as such do not require.¹¹⁰

This work has shown evidence that the political sangha has maintained its traditional forms of recognition in the process of resisting the various governments of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 12-14.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

Burma. Specifically it has maintained the wearing of robes and the chanting for *metta* while protesting. The political sangha has placed the *institution* of Buddhism at the forefront of resistance to the government.

System

McDonald says “The most general and fundamental property of a system is the interdependence of parts or variables...as contrasted with randomness of variability.” “In other words, interdependence is *order* in the relationship among the components which enter into a system...must have a tendency to self-maintenance or a stable equilibrium.” “This is called a moving equilibrium and is well exemplified by growth.”¹¹¹

It is obvious, from the evidence submitted in this study, that the political sangha has been a *system* comprised of political policies and resistance. The various elements involved in this political struggle for power, by the political sangha, have depended on each other and worked together toward a common goal. This work has shown present day resistance by this sangha is more organized and interdependent than in the past and has grown in both numbers and strength.

The Political Sangha’s Function

The connections between form and sangha are at some level an internal identification whether or not said identification is common to all individual participants. What is of more poignant interest and more convincing is the linkage between macro functional identifiers and the political sangha’s observable function within Myanmar. These macro functional identifiers are what McDonald refers to as “function performers” and are *connector, manager-operator, broker-mediator, organizer, nominator* and

¹¹¹ Ibid., 18.

organizational weapon.¹¹² These *functional performers* are to be viewed in contrast to the *form* as mentioned in the previous section. Quite literally, these performers give structure to the *form* of the sangha interested in politics and allow either safe labeling or no labeling of the political sangha as a political party. This work concurs with McDonald in that structural correlation requires reconciliation between the abstract looseness of definitions and the nebulous nature yet observable actions of a political party. Hence the following approach adopts this strategy in making correlations between definitions of political party and the actions of The Political Burmese Buddhist Sangha.

Connector

McDonald refers to Henry Jones Ford and his statement regarding *connection*:

Party organization acts as a connective tissue, enfolding the separate organs of government, and tending to establish a unity of control which shall adapt the government to the uses of popular sovereignty.¹¹³

To see how this relates to the political sangha in Myanmar and the Burmese Sangha at large, recall that traditionally there was not a separation of church and state. Once Buddhism was institutionalized within the governments of Burma and became a state religion, it was part of the King-Sangha-Laity triad which connected and unified the country. As traditional Buddhism came under assault and the modernization of Burma commenced in part due to British occupation, the sangha lost its original power over government. The remnants of this power, to unite and connect, rest in the sangha's function to legitimize a Burmese government in the eyes of the population or to delegitimize a particular government.

¹¹² Ibid., 23.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Manager-operator

McDonald notes that social formations, in his case a political party, may fill the role of *manager-operator* of the macro entity within which they are encapsulated, specifically the government. Not only control of the government but also management and sponsorship of programs or subservient organizations are indicative of the manager-operator role.¹¹⁴

This work has produced evidence indicating that the political sangha has filled the supportive role of political organizations. Three examples of the politically connected organizations and two of the monks are the All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA), by senior monks; two monks, U Issariya and U Gambira previously involved in politically active organizations, the All Burma Sangha Union and the All Burma Youth Monks Union, respectively. Additionally, evidence has been submitted in this work which notes that monks (in part of the sangha) want the government to end and at times assumed control of governmental functions.

Broker-mediator

McDonald states,

Under the broker approach the typical party leader is a person engaged primarily in mediating, adjusting, and pulling divergent views into sufficient harmony for action.¹¹⁵

Evidence has been produced, in this work, indicating that there are members in the political sangha that want to have talks with the government of Myanmar to mediate a sort of truce between the government and the people, with respect to government treatment of the citizenry. The *broker-mediator* role of the sangha also extends to

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 23-24.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

brokering some agreement within the sangha that political resistance does not violate *Vinaya*.

Organizer

McDonald says,

As symbol or myth the party functions as a kind of automatic organizer of opinion.¹¹⁶

The work has shown that from traditional to modern times the sangha been an educator of the people and ruling class. The sangha has organized popular opinion to either favor or discount the ruling government. Additionally, this work has shown that the political sangha has favored certain political candidates in Burma and has influenced the population's opinion regarding politics.

Nominator

McDonald says,

A party must make nominations if it is to be regarded as a party at all...he who has the power to make the nomination owns the party.¹¹⁷

This project has produced evidence that the political sangha has not only given tacit approval but has equivalently nominated political figures by the traditional means of legitimizing a political candidate. The most conspicuous case of the sangha acting as a *nominator* is the mutual association, support and identification between the Burmese Buddhist Sangha and Aung San Suu Kyi. McDonald refers to this as “professional *initiative-taking* in connection with the filling of public offices.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 26.

Organizational weapon

Concerning *organizational weapons* McDonald quotes Philip Selznick:

We shall speak of organizations and organizational practices as weapons when they are used by a power seeking elite in a manner unrestrained by the constitutional order of the arena within which the contest takes place.¹¹⁹

This work has evidenced continued power seeking actions on the part of the political sangha and has included the demonstration of controlling civic activity. It has shown ability and actions consistent with winning the allegiance of the people both for the sangha and the political goals adopted by the sangha. Additionally, evidence in this work shows the political sangha has not only pressured the government but has also delegitimized the government in the eyes of the Burmese people.

The Political Sangha's Object of Interest

This work has demonstrated the traditional and modern political sangha's *object of interest* or its action has focused upon the past and present Burmese governments, whether indigenous or externally imposed as in the case of British occupation. Traditionally the sangha has been part of the government, there has been no division between church and state, and has had a profited position due to its influence on government. However with the advent of the modern era Burmese governments have been less prone to serve the interests of the sangha at large. The overall effect of the government discounting sangha pressure has created a distinguishable political sangha within Myanmar. Now the question is whether the political sangha is a political party or simply a pressure group.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

What Buddhism's role and function *is not* is what has been examined in this study. What the role and function of Buddhism *is* needs to be exhaustively covered in a future project. However, before proposing an answer to the question of whether the Burmese Buddhist Sangha is a political party or not, a question and answer quote is provided. A Buddhist monk from Thailand, Phra Ajaan Suwat, responded to questions concerning monks and involvement in politics. The reader is encouraged to compare his responses to the situations provided in this work.

Question: Suppose that the Thai government tried to change the religion in the country and began to oppress Buddhist monks or to drive them out of the country. Would the monks resist — *should* they resist — if the government were to oppress the monks in Thailand?

Ajaan Suwat: One of the basic principles laid down by the Buddha is that monks shouldn't get involved in politics. They should focus instead on the practice, exercising restraint over their words and actions so as to stay within the correct bounds of the dhamma and the precepts. As long as the monks practice properly, there are people who will be inspired by them and who will respect them. The people who respect them would resist of their own free will — the monks wouldn't have to resist.¹²⁰

Question: Suppose that in Thailand the government didn't oppress monks, but cruelly oppressed the general populace instead. If the monks were to see the sufferings of the people, would they have any duty to help them?

Ajaan Suwat: The issues of the monks' life are very subtle. The Buddha laid down rules forbidding us from even talking about these things, so I'd rather not go into these matters in detail. My main concern is what I can do so that you can depend on yourselves to attain peace and happiness of mind...If every person were to listen to the Buddha's teachings and be responsible for him or herself, we'd see that everyone else is just like us. If we curse them, they'll curse us back. If we show them respect, they'll show us respect in return. This is why we shouldn't oppress them or harm them. We should treat them with justice, because if there are things that we don't like having done to us and yet we go do them to other people, it creates dangers for ourselves. When we can see these dangers, we should look after our own behavior. Then these dangers won't exist. This is the

¹²⁰ Suvaco, "*A Fistful of Sand.*"

basic principle at which the Buddha's teachings aim. And this is why monks are not involved with worldly affairs. We have to study this principle until we understand it, and that way there will be no oppression.¹²¹

Arguments have been provided that demonstrate a correlation between a political party and the political sangha in Myanmar. One may argue that the above reconciliation is fallacious and inappropriate since a secular institution called a political party is being compared to a religious belief system that is doctrinally based. However, this position fails to recognize that political parties are also comprised of beliefs and in many cases doctrine based as they represent ideological beliefs based upon perceived principles. For this reason it is possible to correlate the components describing a political party with corresponding actions of a religion by means of *functional equivalence*.

The Functional Equivalence of the Political Sangha to a Political Party

To understand the clarity behind the conclusion of this work by using functional equivalence, the following quote by Jan Van Deth is provided:

The idea of functional equivalence is based on the relevance of relationships instead of intrinsic properties of concepts.¹²²

Functional equivalence refers to the requirement that concepts should be related to other concepts in other settings in more or less the same way...functional equivalence refers to similar relationships between similar objects in different settings.¹²³

Based upon the historical data and evidence produced in this work, and based upon correlations between political party and the political sangha in Myanmar an answer to the question “Is the Burmese Buddhist Sangha a political party?” is possible. The Burmese Buddhist Sangha is a fractured sangha. There are portions of the Burmese

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Van Deth, *Comparative Politics*, 5.

¹²³ Ibid., 6.

Buddhist Sangha that have nothing to do with politics. There are portions of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha involved in helping the people of Myanmar in everyday life and matters of faith. There is also a portion of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha which has traditionally been involved in politics and continues to be involved in politics. This portion of the Burmese Buddhist Sangha has historically pressured, politicked, resisted and revolted against past and present governments of Burma as it sought position, power and policy. This work calls this portion of the sangha The Political Burmese Buddhist Sangha. The Political Burmese Buddhist Sangha is functionally equivalent to a political party and hence is a political party.

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