

BUDDHIST RELIGION IN BURMA, BEFORE AND AFTER 1885

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BUDDHIST ECCLESIASTICISM IN 19TH CENTURY BURMA

An account of Buddhist life in Burma during the reign of King Mindon is contained in the Pali chronicle entitled *Sāsanavaṃsa*. This is the work of the King's own tutor, Paññasāmi, whose account of Burmese Buddhist history takes the reader as far as the year 1860, three years after the founding of the city of Mandalay by King Mindon. As the author says, in almost the last words of his account: "This is the founding of the *Sāsana* in the city of Ratana-puṇṇa (i.e. Mandalay)".(1)

The '*Sāsana*', whose history he has been writing, the *Sāsana* which he had now seen established in the new capital city of Mandalay, consisted of a particular pattern of relationship between Burmese King and Buddhist monks in which Paññasāmi himself had a special interest. Elsewhere in his chronicle he declares that "under the patronage of the righteous kings this religion of the supreme Buddha (*Sammāsambuddhassa sāsanaṃ*) in the Maramma country (Burma) was made to shine greatly, and it came to growth, prosperity and full development. And the religion as it is called (*sāsanañ ca naṃ etaṃ*) endures under the patronage of kings". He adds that its prosperity was not only the work of kings, but of all the loyal people as well: "also all the inhabitants of the kingdom, who were obedient to their kings, and supported by the righteous kings, were the helpers of the religion (*sāsanaṃ upakārā*)".

The word *sāsana* is here given a somewhat more specialised meaning than that which it bears in the canonical literature, where it means generally, the message, or teaching, or instruction, or doctrine of the Buddha.(2) From that primary meaning a more specialised usage follows, in which the 'ninefold Buddha-sāsana' is spoken of; this is a way of distinguishing nine types of canonical literature in which the doctrine is contained.(3)

The word *sāsana* as it is used by Paññasāmi, however, clearly indicates a particular kind of Buddhist polity. Sometimes *sāsana* is virtually equivalent to 'Sangha', as in the account of the reform of the Sangha by Mindon in 1858, when the king asks who, in the *Buddha-sāsana*, are the monks and novices whose way of life does not conform with the Vinaya.(4) At other times it appears to indicate as we have first seen a polity which kings and lay-people also co-operate in building up.

It is in the *sāsana* in this sense that Paññasāmi's interest appears to lie. It is this which he sets out to chronicle: "the history of the *sāsana* in the Aparanta country", that is, in Burma. In doing so, one of his major concerns is to show that orthodoxy has to be distinguished from unorthodoxy, and it is quite clear that he regards himself as tutor of the king and chief Buddhist monk, as representing orthodoxy. Since the king's teacher was holder of the title "head of the *sāsana*", or, in Burmese *thathana-baing*, it is evident

that the royally supported Buddhist establishment was regarded as representing orthodoxy. This term was well known to the French Bishop, Bigandet, who recorded in a work written and published in Burma in Mondon's reign, in 1866, that the keystone of the Buddhist fabric "is the superlatively great master residing in the capital or its suburbs. His jurisdiction extends over all the fraternity within the realm of his Burmese Majesty. His position near the seat of Government and his capacity of king's master, or teacher, must have at all times conferred upon him a very great degree of influence over all his subordinates. He is honoured with eminent title of *Thathanapain*, meaning that he has power and control over all that appertains to Religion. It does not appear that peculiarly shining qualifications or high attainments are required in him who is honoured with such dignity. The mere accidental circumstance of having been the king's instructor when he was as yet a youth, is a sufficient, nay, the only necessary recommendation for the promotion to such a high position. Hence it generally happens that each king, at his accession to the throne, confers the highest dignity of the order to his favourite *phongyie*".(5) It was this fortuitous way of making *thathanabaings* that the British administrators in Burma after the annexation of 1885, were not in a position to appreciate. As we shall see later, part of the trouble over the appointment of a new *thathanabaing* was that the British Governor was too conscientious in trying to get, as he thought, the right man.

The system within which the *thathanabaing* functioned was one which can be described as royal state Buddhism, or in the sense in which the word is used by Paññasāmi, the *sāsana*. It was a system in which the king had become the final authority in ecclesiastical affairs, as Mabel Bode observed on the evidence of the *Sāsanavamsa*,(6) and in which the higher members of the Sangha had 'become councillors of State or dignitaries of a Church supported and enriched by royal bounty'. But also at the lower levels especially, the monks acted as a 'social force, an upholder of humanity and justice against barbaric tyranny, a grave, strenuous influence in the midst of a careless people'.(7) This function the monks continued to fulfil after the British usurpation of royal power, and in spite of the absence of an effective *thathanabaing*. So far as the royal system and its exalted Buddhist officials were concerned, however, Bode comments that there was "in the religious history of *Mramma* a striking departure from the Master's (that is, the Buddha's) conception of the true *Samana*, the monk-philosopher, with his intense spirituality and his detachment from all".(8)

It was a system in which the Buddhist monk depended to a very large degree for his well being upon the king's power. Such was the nature of this royal power that it amounted to despotism, sometimes benevolent, sometimes not, and under such rule 'no man's property or labour is his own; the means of supporting the Sangha may be withdrawn from any subject who is under the royal displeasure'. Thus, Bode points out, "the peaceful, easy life dear to the Burmese bhikkhu the necessary calm for study or the writing of books, the land or water to be set apart for ecclesiastical ceremonies (a fitting place for which is the highest importance), all these are only secured by the king's favour and protection".(9) In her view it is this which explains 'the general loyalty of the Sangha to the head of the State'. But it is not certain that all monks were subject to ecclesiastical authority or supported this royal Buddhism. Paññasāmi himself gives plenty of evidence of 'dissent' monks who refused to bow to official rulings made by *thathanabaing* and king in concert, as, for one example in the famous robe-wearing controversy.

Paññasāmi's interest was, as we have noted, to emphasise the distinction between orthodoxy and unorthodoxy among Buddhist monks. This is in itself also an acknowledgement that monks in Burma in mid-19th century differed considerably in their views of what it was to be a Buddhist. In this version of the matter orthodoxy consisted in the ability to prove one's position by showing that it was derived from some great Buddhist teacher of the past, by the only recognized method for doing so, which was appeal to the canonical Pali texts. As in many other cases in the history of religion the politicisation of religion is accompanied by the need for a definitive standard of orthodoxy, in order to try to ensure unity within the ranks of the professionals of the state religion. Such orthodoxy is likely to be in greater or lesser degree arbitrary, and possibly even a matter of historical chance. It becomes in effect a type of prejudice, and can sometimes be very rigid. Certainly, as Bode recognises there are, woven into Paññasāmi's work considerable "orthodox prejudices".(10) His historical record is one sided and is marked by some glaring and significant omissions.(11) What is perhaps most indicative of the fact that here we get a picture of only one element in the Buddhist religious life of Burma in the nineteenth century, alongside which it is necessary to set others, is the writer's apparent total lack of interest in what may be called popular religion, even of a Buddhist kind. We "rarely hear of popular movements and feelings" comments Bode in her introduction.(12)

Yet it is certain that there were other varieties of Buddhist religion. By his concern for orthodoxy against unorthodoxy Paññasāmi tacitly recognises this; other witnesses are more positive and explicit. As a modern Burmese writer puts it; "Buddhism had never in any place been a single canonical religion and Burmese Buddhism was no exception". Every monk was encouraged 'to debate any point of doctrine or monastic usage, and only when the discussions resulted in serious controversy did it become necessary for the whole congregation of monks to vote and to express the view of the majority. Even at that point, the minority could leave the congregation and form a group of their own'.(13)

The existence of such variety as would be likely to result from the working of this principle is well attested. Michael Mendelson, in particular has emphasised this, especially in his recent work, *Sangha and State in Burma*.(14) Moreover, Mendelson's own field work in Burma in 1958-1959 was effective in revealing the existence of Buddhist 'Messianic' associations, or *gaings*, which, since their basis is one which runs back into the medieval period, are likely to have been a feature of Burmese Buddhist life for some centuries, even although they did not receive much mention in written documents, at least until the British period.(15) There was, moreover, what he has called the 'passive' Sangha that is, communities of monks who were content to take the Vinaya as their sole arbiter, and to dispense with any royal patron or controller.

On the basis of all these considerations, Mendelson would seem to be justified in concluding that "the *thathanabaing* was never regarded by the whole, fundamentally ungovernable, Sangha as its head".(16) And it is clear that while one kind of religion, the royal state Buddhism or *sāsana*, in which Paññasāmi had a vested interest, had 'endured under the patronage of kings' this by no means constituted the Buddhist community in Burma in its entirety. What has befallen Buddhist religion in Burma in the modern period cannot, therefore, be regarded simply as a question of what befell the *sāsana* in 1885

and afterwards. It is this latter question which has monopolised much of the discussion of the condition of Buddhist religion in Burma during the period of British rule and after. A better balance needs to be struck between this one element and others which are equally important, notably those which existed outside the network of royal Buddhism; local Buddhist communities, independent, not conforming to state orthodoxy, but possibly more faithful to the Vinaya in some cases, or to the essential conceptions of the Buddha-sāsana in India.

The nature of the crisis which the Burmese people experienced on 1885 was, strictly, national and psychological rather than religious. There is evidence that religious belief, practices and institutions continued very much as before, outside the capital city. Bode records that 'the changes brought about in Burma by the annexation ... affected the Buddhist religion and the Order very little', and quotes Fielding Hall's testimony that while the monks of Burma ceased to have the direct influence upon public affairs which some of them had exerted before 1885, nevertheless in general the status and prestige of the monks among the people was by no means lessened, 'and of their literary activity we have abundant evidence'.(17) Commenting on the condition of what he calls 'the elusive Sangha majority' in Burma in 1885 Mendelson suggests that this overwhelming 'passive' majority (politically and sociologically passive, that is) was not much affected by the change of government. It was, he says 'elusive in so far as it lacked a high degree of organization and leadership and elusive also in that it had a great turnover of personnel'. Moreover, he adds, 'in its very nature, the Sangha is a body which simply does not need self-government, or government of any kind ... Its simple strength, residing in the patron-monk relationship, still enables a great number of monks to survive today in the way in which it appears the Buddha once wished them to survive'.(18)

One aspect of the British annexation of 1885 which has received some attention in connection with Buddhist religion in Burma is the failure to appoint a new *thathanabaing*, in the way that Burmese kings had done. This, it is sometimes argued, had a serious, adverse effect on the condition of Burmese Buddhism. Various comments on this argument can be made.

In the first place the influence and power of the *thathanabaing* was already in decline by 1886, for we have Bigardet's evidence to that effect. 'In our days (i.e. at the time of writing), the power of the *thathanabaing* is merely nominal; the effects of his jurisdiction are scarcely felt beyond his own neighbourhood. Such, however, was not the case in former times'.(19) When eighteenth century accounts of the power and activities of the *thathanabaing* are compared with those of the nineteenth century the general impression conveyed by the comparison is that by the latter period the power and importance of the *thathanabaing* was in decline.

The British administrators of Burma from 1885 onwards were not unwilling to appoint a successor to the *thathanabaing* of the last Burmese king. The difficulty in doing so lay in the fact that they misunderstood the nature of the task which had devolved upon them. An account of the events of the period written by a British administrator, Sir Henry Thirkell White, records that the Chief Commissioner recognized the importance of enlisting the support of the *thathanabaing* and of offering him whatever help and encouragement it was open to the new Government to give, in order to maintain the

traditional system. 'At the time of the annexation the *Thathanabaing* was a weak but well-meaning person who had been King Thebaw's tutor. The Chief Commissioner interviewed him in person and essayed to excite his enthusiasm for the new Government ... The Thathanabaing was induced to visit Rangoon with a view to the extension of his authority over Lower Burma. Government provided for his journey, which was made in some state with a long train of monks. He was received with rapture at Prome and in Rangoon; and a rest-house (*Zayat*) for him and his successors was built on the slope of the *Shwe Dagon Pagoda*'. In spite of all that could be done, however, the result only emphasised the extent to which ecclesiastical power had declined in Lower Burma between 1852 and 1885, when many of the more ecclesiastical monks had fled from the British-controlled area to the security of Mandalay. 'The effort (by the Chief Commissioner) was ineffectual. Neither that Thathanabaing nor his successors have exercised any power in Lower Burma, which still remains in a state of reprobation The Thathanabaing had not the authority, even if he had the will, to control and direct his monks by moral force alone'.(21)

When this *thathanabaing* died the problem of appointing a successor faced the Government. Not wishing to take the positive action of naming a successor, which would have been contrary to what had become the British policy of neutrality in matters of religion, the Government indicated that it would be willing fully to *recognise* any successor whom the Buddhist leaders might wish to name. But this was not the way things had been done by the kings. The Chief monks of the Sangha would inevitably disagree, it seems, about whose name should be put forward. The kings had always *declared* who was Thathanabaing. As one of the chief monks said, 'What was the use of the Uparaja (vice regent) asking *us* to decide who shall be Thathanabaing? The pupils of each great Thera will always think it to be wrong to vote for anyone else than his own teacher, and all the Theras will never agree. If the Uparaja, like our Burmese kings, had said, 'So and so *is* the Thathanabaing' then we should accept his selection and everyone would be very pleased'.(22)

If there was a single major factor in the change which occurred in the political status and influence of the *Sasana* during the British period it was not in the absence of a thathanabaing but the absence of a king. The traditional ecclesiastical Buddhism at the pre-1885 days rested heavily on the presence and power of the king, the reflection of whose glory was seen in his *thathanabaing*. The British conquest, the exiling of the king, and the removal of the royal throne from Mandalay Palace to a museum in Calcutta meant for many Burmese Buddhists the collapse of a cosmology and the system of morality that was largely associated with it. It was this national psychological crisis which was one of the most potent causes of the social and moral upheaval of the period following 1885.

Another crucial factor was the change brought about in the nature of the education which now replaced the traditional, monastery-centred schooling which village boys and girls had received in the old days. At the beginning of the first Anglo-Burmese war, Burma had a higher rate of literacy than England, thanks to the monk-teachers in every village. And at the same time as they learnt to read and write, Burmese children had also absorbed the attitudes and values of their religion. When the new Government began to set up schools the education offered was as Thirkell White records, 'rigidly secular'. Commenting on this, he says, 'It is now felt by many that this policy,

however well intentioned, was mistaken, that in allowing, or even encouraging education to be exclusively secular, government had done much to sap the foundations of morality and loyalty, to undermine the basis of character. Probably the right course would have been not to stand aloof from the diverse creeds of the Empire, but to take an active interest in all, and to see that each had fair play and encouragement.(23) But such a policy, so far as the Indian Empire was concerned, had to wait until the establishment of the 'secular', or religiously plural independent republic of India in 1947. Any attempt by the British Government of Burma to pursue a policy of this sort would, observed Thirkell White, not have been tolerated by Christian public opinion in England. In words that are well worth recalling, for they have not entirely lost their force, he observed: 'So far as India is concerned the tiresome thing about public opinion in England is that, where interest might be beneficial, it cannot be roused; while in some vital matter in which only the man on the spot had materials for judging, the British public, or its spokesmen, insist on interfering.'(24)

With the establishment of British rule in Burma, forms of employment were being offered in Rangoon and other towns, in commercial and government offices, for which the traditional education, namely, reading, writing, and study of the scriptures, was not an appropriate preparation. Burmese Buddhist parents began sending their children to missionary and government schools. The devaluation of monastic education resulted in a reduction in the amount of religious and moral instruction being given to the young, and predisposed them to look down on the excessively traditionalist learning of the monks. On the other hand, the new style of education had consequences for Burma which Protestant missionaries may not have foreseen: it produced a new type of Buddhist layman, who was able to bring to bear upon the hitherto excessively text-centred religious teaching of the monks something of a wider-world. However, had the monks in village monastery-schools been given adequate opportunities and encouragement it is possible that they might have co-operated in expanding the scope of village education. A British memorandum of 1868-9 had already recognized this possibility. It noted that "the best method for reaching the masses in British Burma" was the village monastery school. It proposed that books dealing with subjects such as arithmetic and land-measuring should be made available to the village schools. If these "were furnished to the Chief *Phongyee* of each monastery, and a qualified Burmese teacher engaged to superintend the studies occasionally" then it was likely "that the books supplied would be willingly used".(25) Had such a policy of co-operation with Buddhist monks at village level in the work of education been vigorously followed, it might well have prevented the alienation of many Burmese children from Buddhist religion and culture, and there might have been a significantly different sequel to British rule in Burma. But the general policy towards Buddhism which was forced upon British administrators by the religious arrogance of some nineteenth century Englishmen, and the pursuit of money which began under British rule, together ensured that Buddhist monastery education declined. Moreover, in the event, many monks were unwilling to co-operate.

The subject is a large one, and hasty generalisation in such a complex area are dangerous, but perhaps a tentative conclusion may be suggested at this point. In the case of British *political* irruption into the life of Burma it was mainly the ecclesiastical form of Buddhism (that is, the *sāsana*, which flourished under the patronage of Kings) which suffered, because of the extent to which royal power was, so to speak, its life-blood; other, local forms, the

'passive' or Vinaya-ruled and Vinaya-following Sanghas would not have been greatly affected by political interference. But in the case of British *educational* irruption into the life of Burma it was the entire fabric of Buddhist religion that suffered; the damage was more widespread, and was felt in thousands of villages and towns throughout Buddhist Burma. R. Grant Brown, who worked in Burma for 28 years from 1889, opens his account of education there by pointing to "the remarkable fact that the Burmese had universal education of a sort long before anything of the kind existed in any European country".(26) He ends his account with the sad observation that British educational policy in Burma had brought about a reversal of that earlier, happier condition of things : "What it has done is to equip, or attempt to equip, with knowledge the children of a tiny group of people who happened to have money or to live in Rangoon. As a result we have a handful of Burmese who are both educated and intelligent, a great many who are educated but not intelligent, and a great many more (sc. outside Rangoon) who are intelligent but not educated".(27)

Buddhist values could have survived the destruction of state Buddhism in Burma. What they were less easily able to survive was the destruction of the religious element in education.

NOTES

1. *Sāsanavamsa* 164 : *Idam Ratanapunṇa-nagare sāsanaṣṣa patitthanam.*
2. E. g. *Digha Nikaya* I. 110; II 206; *Sutta Nipata* 482 etc.
3. See Nyanatiloka, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 1956 p. 150 for details.
4. *Sāsanavamsa* 154f.
5. P. Bigardet, *The Life or Legend of Gaudama, the Budha of the Burmese*, Rangoon, 1866, p. 501.
6. Mabel Bode, *Sāsanavamsa*, London, 1897, p. 54.
7. *Op. cit.* p. 58.
8. *Ibid.* p. 57.
9. *Ibid.* p. 53.
10. *Ibid.* p. 57.
11. *Ibid.* p. 53.
12. *Ibid.* p. 35.
13. Maung Htin Aung, *Burmese Monk's Tales*, 1966, p. 14f.
14. E. M. Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, Cornell 1976; see especially Chapter 11.

15. E. M. Mendelson, "A Messianic Buddhist Association in Upper Burma" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, London, Vol. 24, 1961, 560-580; "The King of the Weaving Mountain", in *Royal Central Asian Journal* Vol. 48, 1961, 279-287; "Observations on a Tour in the Region of Mount Popa Central Burma", in *France-Asie*, Vol. 179, 1963, 786-807; "The Uses of Religious Scepticism in Burma" in *Diogenes*, Vol. 41, 1963 94-116.
16. Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, p. 195.
17. Mabel Bode, *The Pali Literature of Burma*, 1909 (repr. 1966) p. 94.
18. Mendelson, 1976, p. 117f.
19. Bigardet, *Op. cit.*, p. 502.
21. Sir Herbert Thirkell White, *A Civil Servant in Burma* 1913, p. 189f.
22. Cited in Mendelson, 1976 p. 183.
23. Thirkell White *Op. cit.*, p. 188.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Vol. XLVI, Pt. II. Dec. 1963, p. 89.
26. R. Grant Brown, *Burma as I saw it*, 1926, p. 90.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 100.