

# *The Biography of Modern Burmese Buddhist Meditation Master U Ba Khin: Life before the Cradle and past the Grave*

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With the rise of individualism during the early eighteenth century, writers became more interested in the uniqueness of persons and biography came to signify the story of the life of an individual human being.<sup>1</sup> Biography has a long history going back at least as far as the Egyptian tomb stones and early oral history. Yet biography also has a short history in that it has been subject to relatively recent trends. Kindall found that the word biography was first employed in the seventeenth century to mean a literary tradition used “to create a separate identity for this type of writing.”<sup>2</sup> Today “biography” is a dedicated Western literary genre with strict rules of classification. In the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* biographical literature is defined as seeking “to recreate in words the life of a human being, that of the writer himself or of another person, drawing upon the resources, memory and all available evidences—written, oral, pictorial.”<sup>3</sup> Derived from Greek *bio-* (life) plus *graphy* (writing), the term suggests three distinct orders of meaning, extending from “life-course of a living (usu. human) being,” “written life of a person,” to “a branch of literature dealing with persons’ lives.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet not everyone understands “biography” in quite such a restricted sense. Sometimes the term is used to mean something much wider in scope, namely the record of the life of any life process, ranging from the life of an insect to a geological process, or even of an organization.<sup>5</sup> *At-htok-pat-ti*,<sup>6</sup> the Burmese term for biography, has such “dispersed” quality as it goes beyond events pertaining to a human life and may include events pertaining to any object, whether animate or inanimate: for example, it may concern variously an animal, a spirit, an institution, a mountain, a dictionary, or a human being.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the concept for “biography” may have many other uses in the vernacular apart from a literary “genre”: in everyday Burmese the term is used to mean variously “facts,” “events,” “a statement of fact,” and “narration of events.” The Burmese concept therefore carves out a larger and less circumscribed field of meaning than our literary sense of “biography” allows for, and includes additionally what we might call variously “story,” “history,” or “fable.”

Often several different, sometimes contradictory notions of biography compete side by side within the same culture. For example, influenced by secular education and socialist thought, contemporary Burmese authors are apt to interpret biography in terms of the much narrower range of meanings provided by its Western secular-literary equivalent concept. This has been fostered by the centralized Burmese government with a strong tendency toward censorship over the last few decades.<sup>8</sup>

With this essay I have two aims. The first is to present the biography of a meditation teacher and accountant-general of Burma, U Ba Khin (1899–1971). This biography must be understood in the context of the increased popularity of Buddhist meditational practice since British colonial rule began in Burma in the early nineteenth century. It was King Mindon (r. 1853–1878) who first incorporated insight contemplation into royal discipline in the 1840s–1850s. However, it was at that time very much an aristocratic technique intended for the royal court and the monks, and the first-known *wi-pat-tha-na* (P. *vipassanā*) insight contemplation center for the masses was not dedicated until 1911 in Myó Hlá, where the Mìn-gùn Hsa-ya-daw taught. Since then, some one-thousand meditation centers have emerged all over Burma, but also many abroad, which advocate a Buddhism of personal practice.<sup>9</sup> These centers, which range from converted monasteries and factories to centers newly built for the purpose, are a major national service industry. U Ba Khin, the subject of this biography, is an unordained individual who played his part in this movement. In the run-up to 1948 National Independence and the reorganization of the colonial civil service, he rediscovers meditation as the core message of Buddhism and seeks to have his office, the Burmese civil service, and the foreigner take an interest in it.

The second aim of this essay is to look (from a Western secular-literary angle) at the “fuzziness” of traditional Burmese Buddhist biography with respect to the distinction between history and biography. The biographer of U Ba Khin sought to “historicize” his teacher so much that only 27 out of 614 pages are devoted to the subject’s life, the rest being devoted to the lineage of pupils. Although this would hardly qualify as a biography from the Western secular-literary point of view, such designation is quite acceptable from a Burmese Buddhist-literary perspective. After all, the biographer writes the U Ba Khin biography in celebration of its subject’s realization of insubstantiality and no-self. This, it is argued here, cannot be readily reconciled with a narrow conception of the “individual” who is presumed to have the consistency of a self, and the two understandings are bound to come into conflict. After declaring the complicated interlinking between vernacular biography and vernacular history, I shall conclude by arguing that at least some authors of Burmese vernacular Buddhist biography (including the author of the U Ba Khin biography) aspire for their biography to be a history in which the subject is not readily confined in time and place.

### The U Ba Khin Biography

The biography of U Ba Khin considered here is entitled *Burma’s Honourable Special Teacher U Ba Khin (His Biography and Missionary Works)*.<sup>10</sup> One of few renowned unordained insight teachers, his religious aspirations blossomed late in life, and his fame as an important civil servant preceded him. The biography portrays a dual career: a secular career leading up from the post of clerk at the Office of the Accountant-General in November 1917 to the post of accountant-general of Burma at national independence in 1948; and a religious career, leading from a budding interest in insight on January 8, 1937 to becoming a teacher in the *a-na-pa-ná* tradition of the Ledī Hsa-ya-daw<sup>11</sup> during his visit to the Wei-bu Hsa-ya-daw<sup>12</sup> in July 1941, and finally, opening up his own insight center on November 9, 1952—the International Meditation Centre. The author of the preface suggests that the purpose of the biography is to portray U Ba Khin (hereafter BK) as a Buddhist.

This book is not a preaching (*da-má*) work in the sense of a collection of discourses. But this is a biography (*at-htok-pat-ti*) in the sense of a collection of events and experiences of a person who was successful in practice according to the discourse exercises, and in teaching his pupils. The Great Teacher Ba Khin must be considered a master of perfection (*pa-ra-mi shin*) who succeeded in the propagation of Buddhism (*tha-tha-na*) in an unusual way. Without having preached around the world, his

pupils nevertheless enjoy his teachings everywhere. Meditation centres have appeared in many countries in Asia and Europe—England, America, Canada, New Zealand, Australia.<sup>13</sup>

Published in 1980, nine years after BK’s death, it is based on interviews, reminiscences of BK’s biographer, letters and publications from pupils (mainly foreigners), and publications and broadcasts on Buddhism by BK himself. The relationship between Ko Lei, the author, and his subject has been described in some detail elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Suffice to note here that the author is a retired vice chancellor of Mandalay University and BK’s pupil. Ko Lei started the biography in 1963, but BK did not want to have it published until after his death, which explains its late publication date.<sup>15</sup> Ko Lei includes in the book much information about himself and his relationship to BK, including a summary in the introduction, and the entire chapter 6 (“The Great Teacher and I”).<sup>16</sup> In brief, they first met through work in 1934, when the author was unaware of BK’s religious aspirations. He became BK’s pupil only after being reintroduced to him by foreigners impressed with his teachings.<sup>17</sup> At one point Ko Lei even describes BK as resembling his own father (demised in 1946) in stature, appearance, manner of walking, and manner of talking.<sup>18</sup>

### U Ba Khin

BK’s life is described in the second chapter under the heading, “From Accountant-General to Great Teacher.”<sup>19</sup> BK was a true Rangoonite. The son of U Pàw, a broker,<sup>20</sup> and Daw Sàw Mei, he was born in 1898 in a Rangoon neighborhood.

Under the subheading “From study to work,” it is described how his education began with traditional monastic training in a local monastery until the age of eight (1907), after which he went to a Methodist school, where he stayed until the seventh standard (1907–1914). “Ever since young, he was of exceptional intelligence, and without fail first in every class.”<sup>21</sup> At the end of the seventh standard he was awarded a government scholarship and went to St. Paul’s, Rangoon, a college of excellent reputation. He was always at the top of the class and was awarded a scholarship at completion, but did not continue his studies. With both parents deceased by then, he had no one to encourage him. He decided to go his own way.

His first job was to work at *The Sun* (*Thu-rí-yá*) newspaper, one of the first Burmese-language nationalist newspapers set up by some of the founders of the YMBA movement. By November 1917 he had become a low-grade clerk at the Office of the Accountant-General, and in November 1926, having passed the Indian Government Accountancy exams, he was promoted to assistant office supervisor. These offices were

known as the “Indian Offices” because they employed no Burmese. Only three Burmese people worked there at the time and most other employees had left their positions in this office due to oppression by the Indians. This trend continued despite the efforts of the Accountant-General to turn the “Indian Office” into a “Burmese Office” by hiring six highly educated Burmese among whom was also the author of BK’s biography. Only BK stayed on. He was held up by some as an example of how a Burmese could get on after passing the exams. Without a university education, BK had been promoted from an ordinary clerk to a deputy supervisor over nine years. He showed courage and a strong commitment to studying for the accountancy exams. He had such good memory that he could recite the accountancy books from back to front. In 1937, when Burma was to have a separate Accountancy Department from India, BK became a special supervisor at the Office of the Auditor General. On February 28, 1941, he was promoted to accountant officer of the Railways’ Board.

The section on “The Great author Khin Shwei Chó,” describes how BK authored novels of which, however, he was not proud.

Under the subheading “The seeker of truth,” BK is described in his quest for Buddhist truth. Although already studying the *a-bí-da-ma* in Bassein in 1931,<sup>22</sup> and helping to organize a visit by the Mò-hnyin Hsa-ya-daw to Rangoon in 1934, it was not until his forties, from 1937 or 1938 onwards, that Ba Khin took a serious interest in Buddhism. As Ko Lei put it, “at that time The Great Teacher changed from his pursuit of ordinary literature to literature on the Buddha’s preachings.”<sup>23</sup> He was particularly interested in the works of famous Le-di Hsa-ya-daw. He became a member of various Buddhist associations such as the Dawn Merit Association (*a-yon a-thin*) and the Religious Duty Recitation Society (*wut yut a-thin*), and a member of an *a-bí-da-ma* discussion group<sup>24</sup> at Su-le Pagoda. “In this manner, The Great Teacher already carried out his various duties in the Three Jewels to the Buddha and the Order as a fully aware and devout Buddhist (*bok-dá-ba-tha ta-ú*).”<sup>25</sup> Even when traveling, he faithfully observed religious obligations.

BK started his mental culture without prior design. On a duty day in late December 1936, he accompanied a relative to the house of U Ei Maung, a Burmese school teacher and pupil of Hsa-ya Thet-Gyi, who soon taught him the rudimentaries of mental culture. BK began practicing “concentration” meditation (*tha-ma-htá*) on January 1, 1937.<sup>26</sup> BK discovered that his concentration was so good that he could play with imaginary light before his mind’s eye in any way he wanted to. He practiced *a-na-pa-ná* at home by himself. The same signs occurred, and he resolved to go to Da-lá-byaw-bwe-gyi Village to learn the method from Hsa-ya Thet-gyi himself. He obtained a leave of absence from his office,<sup>27</sup> but he did not meditate

seriously until January 8, 1937, when he practiced for seven days. When made to recite a Pāli verse, BK immediately felt impermanence throughout his body and he contemplated throughout the night with these feelings. The next morning Thet-gyi came to enquire about the experiences, which he did every morning and every evening. He was pleased with BK’s progress and told him to sit in mental culture for seven days, and to wear a white cloth<sup>28</sup> around his shoulders. Before BK left, Thet-gyi showed him the monastery and pagodas of the area. It was very windy, and Thet-gyi turned to BK, asking him, “You who knows the teachings (*ta-yà*), do you have the courage to withstand the wind of the Law (*ta-yà*).” He told BK to continue his practice at home. From 1937 onwards BK visited Thet-gyi every year to learn the method. Thet-gyi also went occasionally to Rangoon to receive his students’ homage and give instructions in BK’s house.

Under the subheading “From Rangoon to Wei-bu Hill,” it is described how BK’s earliest encouragement for teaching mental culture came from a famous member of the monastic order. In 1941 BK became a Railways’ Department accounts officer. On July 2 BK went to work at Myit-thà station by train. Upon his return the train halted at Kyauk-hse station for a considerable time. In front of the station he could see the inviting Shwei-tha-lyaung Hill, which he climbed without delay, together with the assistant station master, to worship. Upon looking north he saw a small monastery at the foot of a mountain. The deputy station master told him that the venerated Wei-bu Hsa-ya-daw<sup>29</sup> resided there who was thought by many in the area to be enlightened (*ya-hàn-da*). BK immediately wanted to go there, but the deputy station master remarked that Wei-bu was unlikely to receive them at that time of the day. After lunch at the station, BK went into his railway carriage and, taking the doctrine (*ta-yà*) as the object of his consciousness, sent loving-kindness to the Wei-bu Hsa-ya-daw and petitioned the Hsa-ya-daw in his mind to let them come and pay their respects.

At about 3 P.M. they made their way by horse cart to this monastery, passing by the Kò-na-win Pagoda on the way. They met two nuns, who suggested that they should visit the Wei-bu abbot either during morning breakfast or for evening preaching. BK said that either time would be suitable, as long as they might bow their heads in reverence. Then he sat down and, at the place where he had taken his slippers off, he bowed his head aiming in the direction of the monk and thought, “Having come from Rangoon I have come to worship you Hsa-ya-daw.” At exactly that time the door of the monastery opened and the Hsa-ya-daw’s face showed. He asked “By what need do you worship layman?.” BK answered, “Because I have the wish to achieve the path and fruition of enlightenment (*mek-hpo*

*neik-ban*), oh lord.” The Hsa-ya-daw then inquired, “Right . . . if you want to go to enlightenment (*neik-ban*), how do you propose to go?” BK replied, “With *wí-pat-tha-na* knowledge I shall go, oh lord. Now I am also putting insight (*wí-pat-tha-na ta-yà*) as object of consciousness, oh lord.” “Very well . . . *tha-dú, tha-dú*, how did you get this teaching (*ta-yà*)?” the monk asked. BK recounted how he had practiced under his benefactor Hsa-ya Thet-gyi for the first seven days, and how he always practiced mental culture on the train while traveling. “In that case you layman must have perfection (*pa-ra-mi*). I thought one had to go into the forest for it and that it was such exhausting work,” the teacher responded. They spoke like this for about an hour. BK left and went back the next day to offer the Hsa-ya-daw a vegetarian meal. People were surprised to see the Wei-bu converse so much as he was not usually talkative. In the end the Wei-bu Hsa-ya-daw instructed: “The teaching (*ta-yà*) you layman have received, you are likely to have to share with others. You do not know when you will see again the layman in your company now. Pass the teaching on to him while you are still meeting up. Give him a method. Give him the teaching (*ta-yà*) as a layman after having changed to wearing a white cloth.”<sup>30</sup> Back at the Kyaukhse station, BK taught the deputy station master in a railway carriage according to the Wei-bu’s instructions; this was his first pupil in mental culture. Thus, without relinquishing his responsibilities of government, he had not only started practicing but also teaching mental culture.

Under the subheading “Accountant-General and Great Guru<sup>31</sup> U Ba Khin,” it is described how he achieved the pinnacle of his two careers. During the war, BK’s responsibilities in government increased as English and Indians were leaving the accountancy department.<sup>32</sup> He also taught various government ministers mental culture, including Myan-má A-lin Û Tin, Prime Minister U Nu, and Minister of Education U Hlá Mìn. They all could only reach the level of breathing as the object of meditation (*a-na-pa-ná ka-ma-htàn*). BK arranged for these ministers to practice with his teacher Hsa-ya Thet-gyi, but government responsibilities prevented them from traveling. It thus fell upon BK to assist them with their difficulties in practice. Hsa-ya Thet-gyi had impressed upon the ministers that BK was like a doctor taking care of the sick. They should listen to the teaching (*ta-yà*) given by BK, and his morality, concentration, and wisdom should be accepted. The English returned after the war, and BK was promoted on May 16, 1945 to the rank of deputy accountant-general.

Bits of information about BK’s health problems, his death, and the institutionalization of his work pertaining to mental culture are found throughout the remaining chapters. While practicing at the A-le-tàw-yá monastery, BK developed trouble with one of his eyes, which ultimately required an operation. He was not allowed to see in daylight and had to

stay in the dark. Meanwhile Hsa-ya Thet-gyi fell ill too, and he came to Rangoon for treatment. They were not far away from each other, but as they were both patients they could not meet up. On the night of his death, December 14, 1945, Thet-gyi gave BK in his dream the instruction to preach the First Sermon (*Da-ma-set-kyà*).<sup>33</sup> Thet-gyi was put in a cave north of the Shwei-da-gon, now called Martyr’s Hill.<sup>34</sup> When BK’s eye disorder recurred and he was off work for a month the following year, he healed himself through his practice of mental culture: “Great Teacher resolved to follow a prolonged fasting. After having practiced *wí-pat-tha-na* he observed the *ta-yà* so as to see the impermanence in parts of the face. For nutrition he took only three mouthfuls of rice with oil and salt . . . after about one week he was free from disease, and it never came back.”<sup>35</sup>

On Independence Day, January 4, 1948, BK became the first accountant-general of independent Burma with a salary of 1,600 kyats. Since starting in November 1917 as the lowest clerk with only a 40-kyat salary, he had by then transformed the office from an Indian into a Burmese one. BK also achieved a geometrical progression in religious works and reached the pinnacles of his dual career as a teacher of mental culture and as an accountant, at roughly the same time. He began to teach at his office. Upstairs in his office he arranged a small room with a Buddha shrine, then taught his employees insight (*tha-ma-htá wí-pat-tha-na*).<sup>36</sup>

In 1951 the institutionalization of his methods truly began. On July 18, 1951, BK set up the Accountant-General Vipassana Research Association.<sup>37</sup> The foundation of this society was morality. The society was devoted to progressive scientific research beginning with work on concentration, and only continuing with insight work once concentration was matured, testing whether it was in conformity with *Wí-thok-di mek*, and whether it was possible to achieve a break-through in respect to the thirty-seven Factors of Enlightenment (*bàw-dí-pek-hkí-yá ta-yà*). From this inquiry it appeared that the path to true “practice” (*pa-dí-pat-tí*), at the basis of which are morality, concentration, and knowledge, required only a few days practice with those methods. Practicing like this, they could achieve insight, but at the same time, they found the development of special knowledge<sup>38</sup> to wash away the defilements and craving for origination.

Some Indians were still in the office, and BK not only taught Burmese Buddhists but also these Indian Hindus who had an intuitive access to concentration meditation. After they practiced meditation with breathing as its object (*a-na-pa-ná*), they saw a light omen and were grateful to BK, who had become their “Gu-ru.” Mr. Venkataraman, one of the Indian employees, even became a master of perfection (*pa-ra-mi*) and went beyond meditation on breathing (*a-na-pa-ná*) to find the true understanding that is insight. This was confirmed by the Ma-sò-yein Hsa-ya-daw. Not only BK’s

staff, but also their families attended BK's teachings (*ta-yà*) so that more space was needed on the top floor of the office to accommodate them all.

BK called a meeting on January 11, 1952, to set up a committee of ten persons to raise funds to buy the grounds for an insight center. His pupils came and had a look at it: the Indian Venkataraman sat down on the ground and having taken the teaching (*ta-yà*) as his object of concentration, the four guardian *nats* of the teachings (*tha-tha-na*) arrived and encouraged him to take it quickly as it was true vantage ground.<sup>39</sup> BK and his pupils decided where to place the pagoda and bought the land in May 1952. The Accountant-General Vipassana Association<sup>40</sup> was set up on April 24, 1952, and teaching began at the center in a temporary hut on May 1. On May 8, construction of the Da-má-yaung-chi Pagoda began, which was completed by November 9, 1952, when its umbrella was hoisted. The International Meditation Centre (IMC)<sup>41</sup> had come into being. It was the time of preparation for the Sixth Synod (*Than-ga-yá-na*), and there were many foreigners in Burma who sought to know about insight.

From 1952 on, BK felt his main task was to teach foreigners. Though retired by June 1953, BK still worked hard to fulfill his many national responsibilities.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, he himself practiced daily, taught, and preached. During 1955 the number of foreigners at the IMC increased.

When the revolutionary government came to power in 1962, BK played an important role in nationalizing Burma's industry and demonetizing the 50- and 100-kyat notes. He served on various committees, including the Investigative Committee on Religion set up by the 1962 Revolutionary Council, of which BK eventually became treasurer. By October 1962, BK resigned from this committee and, by October 1964, retired from almost all government work due to further health problems and his desire to devote all of his time to teaching mental culture. BK moved to the International Meditation Centre. His request to obtain government permission to visit Sri Lanka was denied in March 1966 on policy grounds. BK's dreams to missionize abroad in person were not to be realized. The news that he could not go abroad was brought by the permanent secretary to the Home Ministry himself. "For normal people this refusal to allow him to go abroad would have been terrible, but BK could bear it."<sup>43</sup>

By April 1969, it became clear that even if the government were to change its position, BK would no longer be able to go abroad: he was seventy-one years old and frail. He decided to send a letter to a number of foreign students he identified as Masters of Perfection (*pa-ra-mi shin*), informing them that he had been refused permission to go abroad. He also indicated that he had successfully experimented with remote control and could guide them from a distance, much like transmitting radio waves. He ended with a request to them to come to Burma to be trained as teachers.

His choice of whom to train was made carefully, as they had to be free from physical and mental disease. BK eventually instructed them by mail, as permission to travel to Burma was denied.

In 1969 BK underwent three kidney operations and received a blood transfusion. BK died on January 19, 1971, due to kidney malfunction and internal hemorrhage. BK's ashes and bones were scattered in the Irrawaddy River after cremation on January 21. Candles were lit at night and the pupils practiced. On January 21, 1971, an offering was made to seventy-three monks, and BK's remaining bones were cleaned in coconut milk. BK had taught 3,500 yogis, including about 300 foreign visitors and distinguished Burmese government officials, among them ex-president Sàw Shwei Thaik and former Prime Minister U Nu.

Although the text makes no direct statement about his achieving enlightenment,<sup>44</sup> his saintliness is implicit: "The brilliance of the benefits of the merits of the morality, charity and mental culture which Hsa-ya-gyi performed in this life will be very great. Among these merits, is the gift of the *da-má* which is the most noble, and there is no mistaking that his benefits will include that he will have reached the top."<sup>45</sup> Also,

It is no surprise that Hsa-ya-gyi could not support the blood given by the doctors. Hsa-ya-gyi was someone who, with the strength of *da-má dat*, helped to destroy greed, ignorance, and anger, and amertorious elements called "defilements" (*ki-lei-tha*). He was a person who understood that only knowledge of the nature of impermanence can overcome these defilements. He was a man who took great care not to let these demeritorious defilements find a way into his work and environment. He wanted the Da-má-yaung-gyi Pagoda as a pure retreat and only accepted money from pupils who had practised under him. He was careful to deny donations from strangers who, wanting to make merit, came to donate food and things, as these may be impure. Being someone who upheld this principle, how could he accept the introduction of blood into his body that was derived from people who had not practised the *ta-yà* with him and did not know the state of his physical particles; surely, it was only to be ejected.<sup>46</sup>

## The Biography Analyzed

Here I wish to look at how the Ba Hkin volume could be considered a biography in the Burmese vernacular sense even though only a small section of the text is devoted to recounting his life.<sup>47</sup> A chronological account of his life is given only in chapter 2 (22 pp.), the briefest of chapters, and appendixes (6 pp.), which list details such as the posts he held, his publications, his salary, and even the number of his identity card. Some small

episodes on his life are also recounted in other sections, but proportionately very little deals with BK as a person, and most deals with BK as an institution: about his foreign pupils, his insight center and its pagoda, the nationally famous monks in attendance at events he organized, and so forth.

### *Sacred Biography versus Hagiography*

Reynolds distinguished between “sacred biography” and “hagiography.”<sup>48</sup> The first refers to “those accounts written by followers or devotees of a founder or religious savior” and “primarily intend to depict a distinctively new religious image or ideal.” The latter “chronicle lives of lesser religious figures” and “present their subject as one who has realized, perhaps in a distinctive way, an image, ideal, or attainment already recognized by his religious community.” The BK volume is, strictly speaking, a hagiography, given that it portrays how BK implemented the Buddha’s teachings as he inherited them. Yet it is also a sacred biography, given that BK modified the methodology he inherited to suit unordained people, and that he founded his own institutions and lineage while pursuing his secular career at the same time.

There are four ways in which the biographer establishes BK as a saintly person. First, Reynolds<sup>49</sup> suggested that one mark of a hagiography is that “slight attention is given to chronological rendering of the life” because there is an overarching need to “emphasize the virtues or attainments manifested in the subject’s life.” This, indeed, is the case here. This biography illustrates the continuity of Ba Khin’s spiritual lineage more than it recounts the chronological story of his personal life. Its order is not without a sense of unfolding chronologically from the beginning of BK’s life, in chapter 2, to the commemoration ten years after his death in chapter 10. However, the episodes are chronologically disjointed so as to allow the passages on BK’s predominantly foreign pupils to convey indirectly the unfolding of his life. The result is a pupil-centered hagiography in which inflated episodes of the lives of BK’s pupils structure the plot and give meaning to BK’s life. In other words, it is an account of an individual’s life dispersed into the context of a lineage history.

Second, if I consider biographers having the choice, to “humanize” or to “spiritualize” a subject, by “including episodes which reflect his common humanity” or “by expunging references to his human weakness, mental lapses, signs of occasional cruelty, and so on,” this biography has clearly spiritualized its subject.<sup>50</sup> BK’s emotions and inner contradictions are not considered, and the master is portrayed in conventional terms of exaltation typical of any biography on Buddhist subjects: he has the attributes of Buddhist saints, namely of “perfection” (*pa-ra-mi*);<sup>51</sup> “morality” (*thi-lā*),

“concentration” (*tha-ma-dī*), and “insight” (*pyin-nya*).<sup>52</sup> He radiates “loving kindness” to his pupils.<sup>53</sup> He is characterized as a “benefactor” (*kyei-zū-shin*).<sup>54</sup> He also practiced some degree of dietary asceticism by abstaining from “four-legged” meats, and eating only fish and fowl. On the front cover BK is also depicted with a halo<sup>55</sup> around his head. The success he enjoyed in his career as a civil servant closely shadowed his career as an insight teacher, almost as if it were a measurable indication of his perfections (*pa-ra-mi*) and superhuman status.

Third, perhaps converse to the above, the author has suppressed relationships and episodes in the subject’s life insofar as these could possibly shed doubt on his sanctity. This leads to a life story skewed away from the formative family relationships and toward the spiritual lineage. This biography is almost entirely limited to the latter half of BK’s life, after he learned mental culture from 1937 onwards. Completely lacking is the description of BK as a family man: nothing is conveyed about his family life, his wife, and his children. The name of his wife is mentioned only in passing in the episode of his death.<sup>56</sup> I was told by informants that he had three children, a son and two daughters. But I do not know much about his natal family or about his interactions in a family context. The first nineteen years of his life are dismissed in less than half a page.

Fourth, the biographer sought to impress upon the readership the importance and reality of this sanctimonious image. The scholarly style in which the BK biography is written—with full appendixes, letters, and bibliography—may be interpreted as part of the hagiographical principle. Ko Lei struggles to include as many facts as possible in the text’s 614 pages. The division into chapters with numbered subheadings, the many appendixes, and an extensive bibliography are evidence both of the author’s conviction that BK was a man of significance, and of the author’s academic background. It is this urge to record all of BK’s achievements exhaustively and in a scholarly manner that appears to be responsible for the length and complexity. This style may befit an educated author, but the scholarly approach is also intended to validate the life of an apparently secular layman. This strategy is reminiscent of nineteenth-century biography as described by Nadel, who states that “The acceptance of the multi-volume life in the nineteenth century, inflated by lengthy excerpts from letters, reflects the importance of documents to validate a life, a defense as well as a justification of the biographical form.”<sup>57</sup> Though in my summary of his life I have concentrated mainly on those episodes important to our understanding of BK’s life, nearly two-thirds of the biography focuses on correspondence with foreigners and their lives.

Through these four hagiographical devices a carefully constructed picture emerges of an influential man characterized by sanctity and superhuman

achievement. Or, as Reynolds might put it, a biographical image appears that “takes precedence over a simple chronicling of biographical facts.”<sup>58</sup>

### *Historicized Biography*

However, a fifth device is equally crucial to this biography, if not more so. This is the tendency to historicize BK and to extend his influence far and wide. The author viewed BK’s work as a “milestone in history” and BK was depicted in a way that goes beyond his personal time and space.

Most insight teachers are monks. Monk insight teachers commonly have two spiritual lineages. The first, known as the scriptural learning lineage (*pa-rí-yat-tí -a-sin-a-hset*), traces the teachers through whom monastic ordination and scriptural learning were derived. The second lineage, known as the practice lineage (*pa-dí-pat-tí a-sin-a-hset*), traces the lineage of teachers from whom mental culture was derived. The scriptural learning lineage does not include the unordained, and BK had only a practice lineage linked to the unordained Hsa-ya Thet-gyi as teacher. Although the latter instructed him to teach, a lay teacher could not give BK, also a layman, the credibility of a monk with his scriptural learning lineage through ordination.

This problem of spiritual continuity was resolved in two ways. First, it is described how BK had a sacred *stūpa* built, the power of which he could tap and use to send waves to distant places beyond the geographical boundaries he was never allowed to cross. This *stūpa* was consecrated in his insight center compound with the aid of beings in the Brahma realm who themselves perpetuated the Buddha’s teachings and who allowed him to tap cosmic energy (*dat*), which he emanated to his pupils abroad at set times when he was incapable of being in their presence.

Second, the author established BK’s spiritual credentials by focusing on the master-pupil relationship so crucial to this biography. Hsa-ya Thet-gyi had been told to teach by his monastic teacher, the famous monk Le-di Hsa-ya-daw. BK needed also a famous monk to legitimize his teaching so as to place him within a continuous tradition going back to the time of the Buddha. He sought the sanction from the famous monk insight teacher Wei-bu Hsa-ya-daw to teach and also be ordained under him. This compensates at least to some degree for BK’s unordained status and lack of a scriptural learning monastic lineage.

This emphasis on BK’s teachings as derived from the ancient Buddhist teachings through evidence of historical continuity is, of course, a feature of Buddhist biography at large. Teachings have to be authenticated, the inheritance of duties and commands have to be substantiated; a hagiogra-

phy serves to establish legitimacy after death. The Buddha derived legitimacy by making merit through paying homage to previous Buddhas. One may recall here the episode where, in his life as the hermit Thú-mei-da, he lay across a ditch to allow the Di-pin-ká-ra Buddha to walk across and subsequently made the vow to become a Buddha himself one day.<sup>59</sup> It ends with an account of his pupils, the Buddhist Councils, the distribution of his relics and teachings, and the legacy he left behind up until contemporary times. And so also the BK biography, like biographies of other teachers, carefully documents the lineages through which its subject received his methods, and how he transmitted these to his own pupils, some of whom are generally acknowledged teachers in the Burmese tradition of practice. The legitimacy of these lineages also encompasses those who learn mental culture with BK. BK was therefore historicized through the master-pupil relationship by his biographer, who projected back into history a place of significance for his subject, and extended BK’s influence through intergenerational transmission beyond the present, pointing at the future.

So far I have noted that there is an important historical dimension to this biography. Central to it is the individual’s achieving sanctity not just by his own efforts at mental culture, but by tapping into ancient knowledge as transmitted through ordination, lineage, scriptural learning, and supernatural preservation of knowledge in the higher heavens. This attempt to prove the historic affiliation of BK’s knowledge takes the biography away from the much more narrow focus on BK as an individual.

But there is yet another way in which the biographer portrayed BK as a “historic institution,” which brings this volume closer to Reynolds’ sense of a sacred biography of the founder of a movement. The biographer saw BK as a founder of an important new movement, the history of which needed to be written. The history of the insight traditions as these have been documented in Burma hitherto, are shallow, dating from the end of the nineteenth century at best.

A common view by students of Buddhist practice is that its history until the end of the nineteenth century is one of “sleeping texts”—texts that were meaningless because they were not put into practice—on the one hand, and conversely of “silent Buddhas”—experienced contemplators who did not bother to teach their practice to others—on the other.<sup>60</sup> Only in the course of this century did Buddhist texts come alive by having been put in practice. Experienced yogi, rather than disappearing without a trace after quietly achieving enlightenment in the forest, had now actually come out to teach others. The biographer judged Buddhist history in a similar vein when he wrote that the conventional history of Buddhism was a history of scriptural learning, where Buddhist “practice” (*pa-dí-pat-tí*) and its fruits “remain hidden.”<sup>61</sup> He portrayed BK as a pioneer who broke silence



by teaching mental culture to the unordained. In turn, the biographer himself, by writing the biography of BK, aimed to textualize contemporary practice for posterity, thereby providing the Burmese tradition of practice with a historical continuity that it would not otherwise have. This emphasis on documenting lineage history in the BK biography, therefore, must be understood in this context of urgently compensating for a dearth of historical information about the tradition of practice.

### Burmese “Biography”

So far I have sought to explain the emphasis on history in this volume in terms of both a more universally shared “hagiographical” theme of establishing continuity with the past and determining rules of succession, and the “sacred biographical” theme of establishing the uniqueness of a subject’s role in the twentieth-century movement from text to practice. Furthermore, Ko Lei was conscious of the importance of his biography as documenting this historical transition from text to practice.

At this point I want to raise two questions. First, how “dispersed” can a biography become before it ceases to be a biography? If, for whatever reason, a biographer emphasizes mainly the subject’s historical-institutional dimensions and devotes little space to the subject’s life between cradle and grave, can it still be termed a biography? In order to comprehend this I must convey something about Burmese ideas about biography.

Various early Burmese genres incorporate biographical information.<sup>62</sup> The earliest stone inscriptions (*kyauk-sa*) included information about Maha-ek-gá Pan-dí-ta (1174 A.D.) and King Da-má-zei-dí (1479 A.D.). With the expansion of literature in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, much biographical information came to be conveyed in stylized literary genres, mostly composed in verse (*ga-bya*), often by monks and courtiers specifically for the ear of royalty. This included the historical records (*màw-gun*), which took notable events in the king’s life as their theme. Eulogies (*eì-gyìn*) are verse biographies commonly composed about members of royalty on the occasion of important life-cycle ceremonies in the form of an address to a royal child, which told the child of the great achievements of his or her royal ancestors, tracing the line back to ancient progenitors of the family. Historical accounts of a campaign (*a-yei-daw-bon*) pivot around the exploits of a member of royalty. From the sixteenth century onwards, biographical episodes of monks and kings in interaction with each other were recorded in the royal chronicles (*ya-za win*).

The introduction of the printing press in the nineteenth century marks a significant increase in the sheer quantity of biographies in circulation. It also marked a completely new era in Burmese biography, of which con-

temporary Burmese teacher biographies are an example. They were the result of a movement in twentieth-century literature: from verse to prose, and from Pāli or Pāli-Burmese *neik-tha-yá* (P. *nissāya*) to the vernacular. Also, until the 20th century the laity and the commoner were rarely subject to biographical description, but they gradually became worthy biographical subjects. Since almost all early biography dealt either with kings or monks, the volume considered here is representative of the trend toward biographies of unordained nonroyal persons.

Somewhere along this historical time scale the term *at-htok-pat-tí* came to be understood in a somewhat exclusive way. Some have argued that this term took over in popular reference from the more ancient scriptural term *a-pá-dan* (P. *apādāna*).<sup>63</sup> But the term was already in use during the life of the famous monk author Thi-lá-wun-thá (1453–1518), who used it in the title of his biography of the Buddha (*Bok-dok-pat-tí*). And yet, despite this evidence, some critics have suggested that there has never been any form of *at-htok-pat-tí* in Burma until very recently in the latter part of the colonial period: “Biographies [*at-htok-pat-tí*] have been almost completely absent in early Burmese literary history. As for part-biographical works such as the ruling by Hkon-daw Maung Kyá-bàn, the *A-yu-daw Min-ga-la* petition . . . these were not complete biographies. Biographies came with modern Burmese literature among such works as *Pi-mò-nùn i Pi-mò-nùn*, which records experiences in Oxford University.”<sup>64</sup> This notion that the Burmese did not have “biography” until they visited Oxford, despite all the evidence cited already to the contrary, needs closer examination.

Today the term *at-htok-pat-tí* serves as the Burmese generic term for biography. It is a Pāli compound loan word, made up of *at-htá* (sense, meaning, import, a principle, fundamental idea) and *ok-pat-tí* (occurrence).<sup>65</sup> In the Pāli texts it meant “occasions, esp. an occurrence giving occasion to a *dhamma-desanā*,” meaning that some event required didactic elaboration in terms of the *dhamma* as derived from a context larger than apparent to those who were witness to it.

*At-htok-pat-tí* has a wide range of meanings. First, it recounts the story not so much of a biological individual, as of a person in terms of their life (or multiple lives), which are not strictly circumscribed. Life is not only a matter between the cradle and the grave, but it covers the story of an individual’s many births in different guises—spirit, animal, or human. This does not necessarily mean that a person’s life will *always* be recounted in terms of many different lives, but biographers have creative license to write about relationships as if they were bound to have evolved as the effect of actions in past lives in terms of Buddhist principles. Contemporary Burmese censorship laws prevent too imaginative a claim. In particular the popular biographies of concentration meditators, *weik-zas*, *bo-daws*, and *gan-da-ri*



practitioners have been banned from publication and are confiscated from the bookstalls. Such “occult” biographies include for example Paw Û (1952) and Sein Gán (n.d.) on the life of Bò Bò Aung,<sup>66</sup> and Maung Gyì (1952) on the life of Aung Mìn Gaung.<sup>67</sup> These extend the lives of individuals beyond the normal human life span and allude to the maturation of powers of their subjects over many lives as the result of concentration meditation and occult practices. But even in the mainstream Buddhist tradition of insight contemplation (*wi-pat-tha-na*), there are allusions to previous lives. For example, the author of the Ma-ha-si Hsa-ya-daw, a famous teacher, suggested that the meeting with his benefactor was bound to happen as in a past life they were associated and they had the same lay name.<sup>68</sup> Literary critics may dismiss this as merely a literary device. However, this dispersal of life by projection of it into history beyond the individual’s life span also, I would argue, affects notions of “history,” “tradition,” and “lineage,” and can potentially turn a hagiography into a form of religious history based on the exploits of more than a single individual.

Second, the use of the Burmese term *at-htok-pat-tí* in everyday vernacular (i.e., not as a literary genre) pertains to “events” in the widest sense without strict delineation as to the exact nature of the subject to whom these pertain, including those referring to objects and institutions. Taking “life” in its widest meaning of cause-and-effect, it is used to indicate variously “facts,” “events,” “a statement of fact,” and “narration of events.”<sup>69</sup> Thus I can refer to the *at-htok-pat-tí* of a dictionary or an institution as well as of a human being. In other words, where I discriminate between “fact,” “event,” “history,” “story,” or “fable” in English, in the Burmese vernacular this may all be loosely referred to by the term *at-htok-pat-tí*. In this way it is, for example, difficult to determine the life of an occult wizard (*weik-za*) known as Aung Mìn Gaung, which is billed as both a “royal history” (*ya-za-win*) and a “biography” (*at-htok-pat-tí*): does this latter use of the term mean “biography” or simply “events” (Paw Û 1952)? Given that Aung Mìn Gaung was presumed to have extended his life through the process of an ordeal (*htwet-yak pauk thi*), it is quite plausible that life should be billed as both biography and history. This common emphasis in biography of yogi on transcendence of the here and now shows that the BK biography is but one example of the situation where any rigid distinction between vernacular biography and vernacular history melts away. This vernacular sense of *at-htok-pat-tí* as the story that goes beyond the individual in the here and now is thus bound to come into conflict with the more narrow Western secular-literary criteria of biography, the purpose of which is exactly to confine the person to time and place and to divulge his or her true self.

There are, however, other important ways in which Burmese “vernacular” differs from “secular-literary” sense of biography. First, where secular-

literary criteria are typically author-centered, vernacular criteria are typically subject-centered. Observers of biographical literature have sometimes sought to make a distinction between early and contemporary Western biography. Beckson and Ganz (1990) suggest that modern biography, as a carefully researched and relatively dispassionate type of literature, is comparatively recent.<sup>70</sup> With the Renaissance and Reformation, they argued, there grew an emphasis on the individual, when the modern biography evolved (e.g., Boswell’s work on Dr. Johnson). With the Romantics and later Freudian influence, the inner life of the subject was emphasized, as in André Maurois’ work. However, more than an increased emphasis on the individual as the subject of the biography, I might in fact conclude that this development represents an increased emphasis on scrutinizing the biographer’s ability to write about the subject.

This shift in emphasis toward the author, which Foucault dubbed the “author” function, would appear to have marked a change in Western biography. For example, Cockshut observed that Boswell used the term “biography” to cover both autobiography and biography, after which he suggests that: “We may suppose that this was because more interest was felt in the actual record of a life and in the facts shown than in the point of view from which it was written. When the question of point of view becomes crucial for the reader, then only comes the awareness of autobiography as a separate form.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, here the distinction between biography and autobiography was less the result of an increased interest in the individual subject than in the author who wrote it. It recognizes biography as a creative effort by a qualified author. At this point, I suggest that the skill of the author to get under the skin of the subject in a truthful manner becomes more important than the inevitable story of the archetypal saint as a historical motif. In this way, contemporary Western secular-literary classification as introduced after Boswell’s work at the end of the eighteenth century, namely which distinguishes between *biography* (the author writes about someone else) and *autobiography* (the author writes about him/herself), is not crucially important in traditional Buddhist biography, where the historical imagery of the subject reigns, not the author’s skills at evoking this, and where the distinction between different classes of biographical subject (e.g. “human,” “monk,” or other) is more important.

Second, Western secular-literary classification emphasizes facts<sup>72</sup> and sets great store by demarcating historically verifiable from fictional events, as in the distinction between “fictional” (historically not verifiable) and “historical” (historically verifiable) biography. This particular distinction is not really an issue in Burmese traditional biography, which is probably why the Burmese government decided to take such a strong line against traditional biography, which could ascribe all kinds of miraculous supernatural

powers to the subject, and hence potentially destabilize the political order by the uncontrolled appropriation of charisma by biographers to their subjects. Burmese criteria are more concerned with the evocation of awe for the subject of the biography than whether such claims are historically accurate or not.

The differences between secular-literary and Burmese vernacular approaches are reflected in the respective classification of biographies themselves. If, as suggested, Western secular-literary classification is based on the author and author's style of writing, as in ordinary (the author writes about someone else), auto- (the author writes about him/herself), fictional (historically not verifiable), or historical biography (historically verifiable), vernacular biographies are "personalized" biographies, classified on the basis of the subject they consider, as in: for Buddhas (*Bok-dok-pat-tí*); for monks (*Than-gok-pat-tí* or *Htei-rok-pat-tí*); for novices (*Thá-ma-nok-pat-tí*); for "humans" (*lu*) simply by prefixing the name (e.g., *Za-nok-pat-tí*); and for particular named individuals (e.g., *Ma-ha Bok-da-gàw-thok-pat-tí* or *Shin Rá-há-tha-rok-pat-tí*).<sup>73</sup>

Based on unspoken conventions and emulation of previous authors, the criteria of vernacular biography are subconscious, implicit, and unanalyzed; this is different from Western scholarly secular-literary criteria, which are highly explicit, analyzed, and sharpened by a long intellectual debate about the value of biography in history versus its literary merit.

Plummer suggests that during the Victorian era there was a shift in emphasis which "marked a lesser concern with the praise of great men to a stronger concern with accurate research: the modern biographer has a wealth of facts at hand that have to be sifted out, made into theory, carefully checked."<sup>74</sup> Also, the biographical subject here is no longer an illustration of historical sanctity, but a creation of the individual author that can be only as truthful as the author's methodology and circumstances allow. The biographer at this point is more a researcher and a creative literary writer than a person who has to write because he or she is overcome by the superior and appealing purity of the subject.

But it would be wrong to suggest that all senses of Burmese biography operate in the vernacular sense sketched so far. Alongside the vernacular classification just described, there is a tradition of biography that operates with a much narrower and concise concept similar to the secular-literary concept as described above. In Burma also, the Western secular-literary emphasis on author and historical verifiability has become, in some way or another, a central force in the classification and understanding of biography, thus shifting away from the traditional focus on the subject's significance. Elsewhere I have shown how Burmese Buddhist biography today is placed uncomfortably alongside "modern" Burmese biography as defined at a

conference on biography organized by the Burmese government.<sup>75</sup> This forum adopted the usual Western secular-literary classification, by now influential internationally, and regarded virtually all previously produced Burmese biography as an anomaly because it is unchanging, legendary, and not true to reality, where all "bad is drowned and only the good tends to be recounted."

## Biographized "History"

In the discussion so far I have noted that *at-htok-pat-tí*, the Burmese term for biography, is in its vernacular sense a remarkably flexible term that can be made to mean the story of almost anything, including animate and inanimate subjects, and that could also mean the history of a lineage. Furthermore, a flexible notion of life encompassing the idea of rebirth extends an individual's life into the past and allows a biography to be potentially more historical than I could imagine in terms of the secular-literary understandings of this genre. Where I talk of influence and emulation of historical personages, the Burmese biographical subject is potentially multiple historical personages.

Conversely, however, it should be noted that the Burmese have for a long time conceived of their history within a biographical framework. Reynolds drew attention to this phenomenon,<sup>76</sup> which was further elaborated by Tambiah.<sup>77</sup> Tambiah developed the notion of "periodization" in the context of his analysis of biographies of Thai teachers. He distinguishes between two notions of biography in the Buddhist tradition, namely *avadāna*, the earliest scriptural instance for a biographical episode, as it "seems to have referred to a great action having decisive consequences" used to "highlight a point of discipline or a moral precept." This he contrasts the concept with *vamsa*, a much later development that "implied some kind of succession of kings or teachers." In the latter the Buddha biography itself became the kernel of elaborated histories. In the Sinhalese *Mahāvamsa* and the Thai *Jinakalamali*, the Buddha biography forms "a necessary prelude to their (Sinhalese and Thai) religio-political tales"—i.e., both to the monastic religio-history as well as the secular chronicle.<sup>78</sup>

In Burma, there is a very similar relationship between biography and history. History was for a long time the history of the Buddhist teachers and their teachings (*tha-tha-na win*), and the rulers and their dynasties (*ya-za win*). The Buddha's biography invariably prefaces both of these, and his relics and footsteps link various geographical regions into a single history. Indeed, the Buddha's biography may be seen to envelop Burmese history, for his manifestations have not come to an end. His *da-tú neik-ban*, the final reassembly of his relics, will initiate the decline and eventual disappearance

of religion 2,500 years from now, which will mark the end of history for this world-system. Hence, as pointed out by Tambiah, the Buddha's biographies not only show, but participate in "a remarkable view of the 'historical' unfolding of Buddhism."<sup>79</sup>

The Buddha is not only placed at the apex of Burmese vernacular history, but Burmese conceive him as perhaps the most significant source from whom they not only derive their spirituality, but also their language and physique. This view Burmese have of continuity with both the "spiritual" lineage back to the Buddha through the tradition of ordination and the "physical" lineage through the lineage of kings is also reflected in the way the Burmese language is thought to have originated with the language of the Buddhist scriptures ("the original language," *mu-lá ba-tha*) so that there is a tendency for the etymology of the Burmese vernacular terms and for the grammar of the vernacular to be sought in Pāli. Western historians and linguists have ridiculed this view as uninformed and inaccurate. For example, Burmese vernacular history has been derided by colonial historians such as Harvey, who found that "perhaps as much as half the narrative told as historical down to the thirteenth century is folk-lore."<sup>80</sup> History, colonial historians proposed, should be consistent with Western linguistic, geographic, but in particular racial classifications. As Harvey put it, "the Burmans are a Mongolian race, yet their traditions, instead of harking back to China, refer to India . . . the surviving traditions of the Burman are Indian because their own Mongolian traditions died out."<sup>81</sup> In similar vein, Luce wrote that "the Abhiraja/Dharaja legends showing the continuity in the Buddha's Indian lineage with those of Burmese royalty were presumably invented to give Burmans a noble derivation from the Sakiyan line of Buddha Gotama himself. But one only has to put a Burman between a North Indian and a Chinese, to see at a glance where his racial connections lie."<sup>82</sup>

Where colonial historians conceived of history in terms of "racial" and "linguistic" continuity of a people, Burmese vernacular historians were more concerned with the "spiritual" continuity from the time of the Buddha from which all history was conceived to come forth, irrespective of race or language. The Buddha's personal visits (often marked by footprints) and his relics determined the periphery of his immediate geography, by virtue of which all shared a common history. But this vernacular scheme of history, where Burmese considered themselves as having a closer historical relationship with people in India, was contradicted by the view emerging during the colonial era, which proposed that they were racially and linguistically "mongoloid" with more affinity to the Tibetans and, more distantly, the Chinese, than with the Indian subcontinent.<sup>83</sup> In relation to this it is interesting to note that insight contemplation, by its emphasis on

impermanence, change, and non-self, releases individuals from their immediate past and allows the integration of Buddhism with this much changed contemporary society as it was inherited from the colonial experience. Historical accounts of practice are unlike the older vernacular histories, for they do not commence their history with the life of the Buddha, but limit themselves only to the history of practice in Burma. In this respect perhaps, these new genres of literature have recognized a geographical "break" in accordance with contemporary "secular" ideas about their origination.

So traditional Thai and Burmese history could be seen as "biographized" because they recount history in terms of developments in the life of the Buddha and his relics.<sup>84</sup> But the BK biography considered here is, though related, slightly different. The BK biography is "historicized biography," namely a biography of lineage rather than just of an individual's life.

#### *How Historical Can Biography Be?*

Given the dispersed, largely historical nature of BK's life as it comes across from his biography, and given the important role of biography in vernacular history, I may ask what this means in the light of our own conceptions of the relationship between history and biography as genres. Are there any limits to biography? At what point does a biography become, for example, a "history"?

As noted above, the conference on Burmese biography adopted the author-centered classification of biography and dismissed most pre-twentieth-century Burmese biography as an improper form of biography. If this genre, of which the BK biography is part, is not "biography," is it a form of "history"? Some historians, such as Collingwood, class biography as not only "non-historical," but "anti-historical."<sup>85</sup> When I ask why, I find that Collingwood points at the biological limitations on the life of a human being, the framework of which allows the tides of thought to "flow cross-wise, regardless of its structure, like sea-water through a stranded wreck." Collingwood here makes two assumptions.<sup>86</sup> First, he views biography as limited by the cradle and the grave, so that he cannot conceive of alternative constructions of life in other cultures, e.g., comprising rebirth or documenting the authenticity of an individual within a tradition. Second, his exclusive view on history as "what historians think it is" does not leave much room for alternative vernacular history of any sort. Although he recognizes historical value in religious documents and biography, as these are not based on the premise of history as a science and do not involve the qualified interpretation of evidence, these can not be called "history."

In a sense, then, if I am to accept the criteria advanced in the arguments of both the government conference on biography and of Collingwood, the

BK biography is neither biography nor history. But neither the government conference nor Collingwood were prepared to advance biography as constructions by the biographer's and historian's respective sociocultural backgrounds. Closer to the social sciences I find historians and literary critics prepared to modify this "hierarchical" notion. Here the author's function is extended to the author's social environment. The social sciences have thereby come to exert an important influence on history, and a gradual shift has taken place where, for example, the relativity of science is recognized as the product of an author at a particular time with a particular socioeconomic or other background,<sup>87</sup> which allowed the development of new branches of history such as oral history.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, here I have merely extended the same secular-literary qualification of biography, which is that this recognizes both biography and history to be not only "created" by authors, but also in a wider sense by the author's sociocultural environment and personality. These therefore attribute agency for the life story to the author more than, as in the vernacular biography, to the immutable story sanctity which the author merely has the privilege of "facilitating." The reader's preoccupation has changed from a "literal" interest in the text as simply true in a divine sort of way, to a "literary" interest as a text that has been "humanly" created at a particular time in a particular place.<sup>89</sup>

Vernacular biography and history are both literal (not literary) subject-centered (not author-centered) genres in which a subject moves somewhere in between the interstices of life episode, life, lineage, and history. "Biography," in this way, could refer to "history", and, conversely, "history" could refer to "biography."

Vernacular biography therefore merges into vernacular history without a clear boundary in between. I have shown how vernacular history is sometimes prefixed and enveloped by the biography of the Buddha. However, I have not yet noted that the biography of the Buddha is the only biography of an individual to merit the designation "history" (*win*) in Burmese. For example, as used by Da-má-reik-hkí-tá (1980) the term *bok-da win* refers to the biography of the Buddha with no other episodes beyond information directly relevant to his life. Out of 101 pages, only the first deals with his vow to become a Buddha during his life as the hermit Thú-mei-da and the last page deals with his relics in the Rangoon Shwedagon Pagoda: the rest deals with his life directly. Yet the term *bok-da win* can also refer to the lineage of the twenty-four Buddhas, in which case the prefix Buddha should be read in the plural. Furthermore, when the term *dispensation* is added, as in *bok-dá tha-tha-na win*, I may find a combination of a biography of the Buddha and the history of the religion until the present. For example, in Za-na-ká (1951) two pages are devoted to the Buddha's previous life as Thú-mei-da who gives away his wealth and, as a

hermit, prostrates himself in front of the then Buddha, forty-nine pages to Gotama's birth and his life, seven pages to the distribution of his relics and the councils after his demise, and a final six pages to Buddhism in Burma. But there is no doubt that, when used in the sense of Da-má-reik-hkí-tá, (1980) the term *bok-da win*, which strictly speaking means "history of the Buddha," is the biography of Gotama Buddha only (without the story of other Buddhas) and without the additional history. Use of the term *win* in the sense of "biography" is not acceptable reference to the biography of anyone else but the Buddha.

I suggest, therefore, that the Buddha biography is conceived as both a history and a biography. If this is to be interpreted as a role model for Burmese biographies, I may ask whether there are aspirations here to be a "history" too. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that this is the case. The one evolves almost surreptitiously from the other. Burmese Buddhist literature recognizes two different types of biographical description. The first, with the suffix *htok-pat-tí*, implies the story of the individual whose name precedes the suffix, as in *Ma-ha-si htei-rok-pat-tí*, the biography of the venerable Mahasi. Here the story is recounted with the person as a focus, though it may, as with BK, quite readily depart into the historical realms away from the person as an individual and just seek to understand the origination of his spirituality deep into the past, and/or his historical influence on others.

The second type of description, with the suffix *win*, implies a succession of biographies related by lineage to a main personage. Derived from *wun-thá* (P. *vamsa*), i.e., "race," "lineage," "tradition," "dynasty," "spiritual lineage," or "history of persons or places," the term *win* itself has come to mean history. I have also noted that *Bok-dá-win* is sometimes exceptionally used to refer to a single biography,<sup>90</sup> and may be used (apart from meaning "biography" in the case of the Buddha) to refer to the lineage of the twenty-four Buddhas who preceded Gotama Buddha and not just to his life as Gotama, connected to one another by vows to become Buddhas taken in the presence of previous Buddhas. Here it is used in the sense of a compilation of biographies within a lineage. In this way, the biographies included in the *tha-tha-na win* reflect an ordered historical succession of persons related by pupilage to a single teacher.<sup>91</sup>

There is evidence that sometimes the "history" (*win*) is composed before the "biography" (*at-htok-pat-tí*) of its founder is issued as a separate document. In this way, the biography of the Mahasi, the chief monk of one of the biggest insight associations in Burma, was first published in 1974 in the context of the ambitious *History of Practice* (*pa-dí-pat-tí tha-tha-na win*), which strung together his biography with 186 brief biographies of his pupils who were teaching at insight centers all over the country.<sup>92</sup> His

biography was published only much later in 1982, separately as a biography in the first sense, namely as a *htei-rok-pat-tí* (in much the same format).<sup>93</sup>

While Mahasi's biography was initially published as a prelude to many subsequent biographies, as the lineage's standard only to be published later as a separate biography, the BK tradition, in contrast, lacks any consistent record of a preceding separate "lineage." There is only one document by Ko Lei, which happens to be a "biography" but must at the same time address the historical dimensions of the BK heritage.

I do not here wish to suggest that vernacular biography (*at-htok-pat-tí*) always evolves from a prior vernacular history (*win*). It is, for example, quite possible for biographies to precede the development of a vernacular history. Indeed, Htei Hlaing (1981) and Wí-thok-dí (1976)<sup>94</sup> chronicled the tradition of practice in Burma by summarizing from preexisting biographies of monks and lay people renowned for their practice. What I do suggest, however, is that vernacular biography stresses the historical dimensions of its subject and that it is in the nature of the Buddhist tradition to emphasize historical continuity of the subject as early as possible, without which a biography can not be a credible proposition. The BK biography, by having no preceding "history" (*win*) published, serves not only as a biography in the narrow sense of recording someone's life, but as a biography in the wide-ranging Burmese sense of *at-htok-pat-tí*, meaning a description of the continuity of his teachings with the past, and of his heritage amongst his pupils. In other words, it is biography as well as history in the vernacular sense.<sup>95</sup>

### Conclusion

Kindall argued that "biography as an independent art form, with its concentration upon the individual life and its curiosity about the individual personality, is essentially the creation of Western man." He furthermore suggests that in Asia, and in particular in China and Japan, biography developed as a by-product of historical writing, so that "biographical literature does not show the development, nor assume the importance, of Western life writing."<sup>96</sup>

When we look at Burma, Kindall's statement would, at first sight, appear to be valid. It is undoubtedly true, as I have noted in the case of the BK biography, that there is an emphasis on history in this biography. It is also true that the distinction between biography and history is not self-evident. But once the vernacular categories are considered in some detail, I find that what Burmese might refer to as "biography" I would often prefer to call "lineage history." Conversely, what Burmese call "history" could readily be interpreted as a form of biography.

As the BK biography shows, the relationship between history and biography can evidently be conceived in various ways. Biographies of insight teachers document continuity and seek to legitimize the new lineage these teachers engender. In building upon Reynolds (1976) and Tambiah (1984), I suggest that, once the interest in a person's life persists, this life becomes rewritten as the focal point of a lineage strung together in the form of multiple linked biographies called *tha-tha-na win*, which may (and it is probably the author's intention that they should) become national histories. The BK and Mahasi biographies illustrate intersections along these trajectories of *at-htok-pat-tí*, where individual persons are teased out of their "individuality" in the here and now to transcend the contemporary world and to become a force in history. A successful biography here is one that can convince the readership of the claim to a long historical period of influence on the subject, and by the subject on others. To this extent, then, vernacular biography both encompasses and is encompassed by vernacular history, and a strict typological distinction between the two is false. These are not discrete, bounded genres, but "dispersed" genres always in the process of evolving from one into the other.

It would therefore appear that Kindall's two premises should be qualified as follows. First, it is not that Burmese biographical writing is a by-product of historical writing; instead, it represents an appeal for legitimacy of its subject which, by virtue of the nature of Buddhism, must be rooted in a historical discourse about lineage and spiritual continuity. Second, it is not that biographical writing is any less important in Burmese literature as compared to Western literature; instead, it is that they both involve an entirely different genre based on different conceptions of life and history. The Burmese concept incorporates animate as well as inanimate subjects and, by virtue of perceiving life as dispersed across different species and lives, takes potentially a broader "historical" time scale in view.

These arguments are, of course, largely moderated by secular education introduced in the course of this century, when the genres of "biography" and "history" came to be redefined in Burma much along the lines supported by the Western syllabus introduced into the schools and universities. Nevertheless, the way Buddhist teachers such as BK are historicized in their biographies is bound up with the historical nature of Burmese Buddhism. In fact, the tendency to accentuate the subject as a historical dispersed individual is still evident in the Burmese classification of "Buddhist." Different vernacular terms have come to be used to designate different classes of Buddhist, depending on how pure and how historically close the person is to the Buddha's teachings in terms of ordination and mental culture. Buddhists are designated either as "inside Buddhism" (*bok-dá tha-tha-na win*) or "inside Buddhendom" (*bok-dá ba-tha win*).<sup>97</sup> The first is closest to

the original historical source in ordination, interpretation, and practice. The last is more distant, having been inherited through convention, birth, and parental education. The point to note here is that the term *win* has a double meaning. First, it means sometimes “history,” when a historical sequence of events is recounted with reference to either the Buddha’s teachings (*tha-tha-na win*) or several generations of rulers (*ya-za win*). Second, the term *win* is used sometimes to refer to a “core” Buddhist by ordination or action (e.g., mental culture), as in *tha-tha-na win*. If the first takes *win* in the sense of Pāli *vamsa*, which implies a succession of generations and the source of this, the second refers to an individual member “within” this history (as in “Party member,” *pa-ti win*). The tendency toward historicizing BK is therefore not just another device of the biographer, but it is generic to the definition of “Buddhist,” so much so that, for an individual to be a true Buddhist, they have to be designated as an incumbent in a historical tradition. This reinforces the view that I have already developed here, which is reflected in the Burmese genres of “biography” and “history,” namely that there is an overall emphasis on situating the Buddhist subject in a long history, in historicizing the Buddhist.

Reynolds showed in his analysis of the Buddha biography how a gradual process of incorporating new elements over time culminated eventually in full-life stories of the Buddha. There is one important point easily overlooked in the overwhelming detail of this process. The Buddha’s last life as Gotama seems to have received less attention in the early biographical material extant than did the accounts of previous Buddhas in the lineage of Buddhas and Gotama’s previous lives. Perhaps, as in the BK biography, the presumption that realization of no-self has been attained in mental culture can only lead to biographies that step beyond the limits of individuality set by the secular-literary criteria discussed in this essay.

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## Notes

1. Though biography, in the general sense of “human document,” goes back to the most ancient of times, most who look at the history of biography

have pointed at the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a watershed. Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method* (London and Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 8, suggests that, although autobiography goes back to Egyptian tomb inscriptions and oral history, the sense of individualism that arose in the eighteenth century provided a new sense of biography much in the way Lionel Trilling (*Sincerity and Authenticity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972], p. 42) said that “at a certain point in history men became individuals.” At this point in time people “start to develop fully a sense of themselves as objects of introspection, of interest, of value, when the individual begins to brood and reflect over his or her inner nature; a time when the individual starts to retreat from the public life into the realms of privacy—the inner thought, the private home, the real self.” Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) in particular stands out as the most eloquent example of biography. R. Gittings (*The Nature of Biography* [London: Heinemann, 1978], p. 35) suggested that biography failed to develop as a distinctive form until the Victorian era, with the writings of Carlyle, Mrs. Gaskell, and Lytton Strachey.

2. Paul M. Kindall, “Biography” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Macropaedia, vol. 2, 1980), p. 1011.
3. Ibid.
4. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).
5. W. R. Siebenschuh, “Biography” (*American Academic Encyclopedia*, Compuserve, 4/28/91).
6. The romanization of Burmese adopted here is the conventional transcription with accented tones as developed in John Okell, *A Guide to the Romanization of Burmese* (James G. Forlong Fund, vol. 27 [London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1971], pp. 66–67).
7. The Burmese term has been used in relation to a hill, as in “The biography of Pok-pa hill” (*Pok-pà-taung i at-htok-pat-ti*) by Tha Tin, Hsei-hsa-ya-gyi and Û Bá Sein (n.p., n.d.).
8. G. Houtman, “Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1990), pp. 326–37.
9. The implications of the vernacular terminology for “Buddhism” and “Buddhist” from the perspective of this new-Buddhist movement have been analyzed in G. Houtman, “How a Foreigner invented Buddhendom in Burmese: from *tha-tha-na* to *bok-dá ba-tha*” (*Journal of the Anthropological Society at Oxford*, vol. 21/2, 1991).
10. Ko Lei, Û (see also under pen-name Zei-ya Maung), *Myan-má-gon-zaung-pok-ko-htu Hsa-ya-gyi Û Bá Hkin at-htok-pat-ti hnín tha-tha-na-pyú lok-ngàn-mya* [Burma’s special person glorious Hsa-ya-gyi Û Bá Hkin, his biography and missionary works] (Rangoon: Ngwei-sa-yin mìn-gyi-yōn Wí-pat-tha-na A-hpwé, 1980), cited hereafter as KL.
11. The Le-di Hsa-ya-daw (1846–1923) was a famous monk-scholar who, although he did not set up dedicated meditation centers, was extremely

- influential in the meditation traditions of Burma. He taught many monks and some lay people who went on to found meditation centers throughout the country.
12. The Wei-bu Hsa-ya-daw (1896–1977) was a famous meditation teacher.
  13. KL (1980, p. i).
  14. See Houtman (1990, 204–205).
  15. KL, pp. 9, 66, 160.
  16. Ibid., pp. 245–321.
  17. Ibid., pp. 261–266.
  18. Ibid., p. 294.
  19. Ibid., pp. 66–88.
  20. We do not know what kind of broker his father was.
  21. KL, p. 67.
  22. Ibid., p. 591.
  23. Ibid., p. 76.
  24. *A-bí da-ma pyán pwà yèi A-thìn.*
  25. KL (1980, p. 76).
  26. Ibid., p. 591.
  27. It should be noted that BK's leave for meditation was taken three months before the accountancy office was to be separated from India, which may not have been a coincidence.
  28. *Ta-bet-hpyu*, for which another word is *law-bet*. Commonly put on during Buddhist duty day.
  29. In Burma, abbots are popularly known by the name of the region in which they reside. Hence, the Wei-bu Hsa-ya-daw derives his name from a nearby mountain spur.
  30. “A white cloth” is *peik-hpyu lè-pì*; KL (1980, p. 83).
  31. The designation of U Ba Khin as a “guru” in Burmese is interesting, as it is not a Burmese term and not normally used to address a teacher. However, as explained in this essay, U Ba Khin worked in an “Indian” office that he eventually transformed into a “Burmese” one. But he was a teacher to some Indians, and many foreigners who came to Burma were more comfortable with the Indian designations than with the Burmese “Hsa-ya-gyì.”
  32. During the period of Japanese occupation (1942–1945), BK was director of the Accountants and Auditors Department (KL 1980, p. 592).
  33. Ibid., p. 592.
  34. The name of the hill was *A-za-ni Kòn.*
  35. KL (1980, p. 359).
  36. This association, known as Bok-dá-tha-tha-ná a-kyò-hsaung A-thìn, was founded on November 10, 1950; it counted 497 members, of which 24 were officials (KL 1980, p. 592).
  37. Ngwei-sa-yìn-mìn-gyì-yòn Wí-pat-tha-na-dat-pyin-ya A-hpwé.
  38. *Weik-za-dat a-htù.*
  39. KL (1980, p. 99).
  40. Ngwei-sa-yìn-mìn-gyì-yòn Wí-pat-tha-na A-hpwé.
  41. A-pyi-byi-hsaing-ya Pa-dí-pat-tí-lok-ngàn Hta-ná (KL 1980, p. 100).
  42. He was still head of the Department of Merchandise and Crops, head of the Traffic Auditors, and head of the Accountancy School.
  43. KL (1980, p. 405).
  44. The term *pa-rí-neik-ban san thi* is not used for death.
  45. KL (1980, p. 440).
  46. Ibid., p. 437.
  47. Other episodes on BK's life include: a subsection on “the looking for a place and the building” (KL 1980, pp. 98–100); an episode in the chapter on the relationship between the biographer and BK (chap. 6); on the deteriorating health, death, and subsequent commemoration of BK (chaps. 8,9); and on the contents of his preaching (chap. 11). Elsewhere I identified three pervasive themes both in this and in the biography of the Ma-ha-si Hsa-ya-daw: namely, the distinction between different forms of Buddhist action, in particular between scriptural learning (*pa-rí-yat-tí*) and practice (*pa-dí-pat-tí*); the foreigner and the notion of “globality”; and the master-pupil relationship and the notion of “lineage” (Houtman 1990, p. 214–233).
  48. Frank Reynolds, introduction to “The Many Lives of Buddha: A Study of Sacred Biography and Theravada Tradition,” in *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History of the Psychology of Religion*, ed. F. E. Reynolds and D. Capps (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).
  49. Ibid., p. 5.
  50. Ibid.
  51. E.g., KL (1980, pp. i, iii, 83, 375).
  52. Ibid., pp. 373, 393, 440.
  53. Ibid., pp. 42, 278.
  54. Ibid., p. 462.
  55. A Burmese friend interpreted this halo as a “clever” presentation, because—with U Ba Khin sitting outside—it could also be interpreted as the full moon appearing behind him.
  56. KL (1980, p. 439).
  57. Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 6.
  58. Reynolds (1976, p. 4).
  59. The story of Thú-mei-da and Di-pin-ka-rá forms the first couple of illustrations in a book about the Buddha's life by Da-má-reik-hkí-tá, *Bok-da-win-yok-pon* [Illustrated life of the Buddha] (Rangoon: Sa-be-ù, 1980), pp. 5–6, and in a book by Bí-wun-tha Za-na-ká, *Yok-son bok-dá-tha-tha-na win* [An illustrated history of Buddhism] (Rangoon: YMBA, 1951). In both of these the Gotama Buddha-to-be lies across a ditch with flowers held up high in offering to the previous Buddha, who walks over him. Both have the distribution of the relics and the way Rangoon Shwedagon commemorates these, but only the latter has the story of the Councils.



60. These interpretations come from two works on the practice tradition: Da-má-sa-rí-ya Û Hteì Hlaing, *Myan-ma Naing-ngan pa-dí-pat-tí tha-tha-na-win: ya-hàn-da hnín pok-ko htū myà* [History of the Burmese practice tradition: enlightened and special persons] Rangoon: Bok-da A-than Sa-bei, 1981) p. 12; and Thi-la-nan-da (1979, p. i). See Houtman (1990, p. 76–96).
61. KL (1980, pp. ix–x).
62. I am indebted for my understanding of early Burmese biographical literature in particular to Prof. Em. Hla Pe, “Burmese Literature” (typescript submitted to *Letteratura d’Oriente*, n.d.) and Û Hlá Kyaing, *Myan-ma at-htok-pat-tí tha-maíng* [The history of Burmese biography] in *At-htok-pat-tí sa-bei-hnì-hnàw hpa-hle-bwè sa-dàn* [Proceedings of the conference on biography] (Rangoon: Sa-bei Beik-man, 1971), pp. 1–39.
63. Hlá Tha-mein, *Myan-ma Naing-gan gan-da-win pok-ko-gyaw-myà at-htok-pat-tí* [Collected biographies of famous authors from Burma] (Rangoon: Han-tha-wá-di, 1961), p. *nyá* and Nei-yín Û Kàw-wí-dá, *Mò-hnyin Ma-ha-htei-ra-pa-dan* [Biography of the Mò-hnyin Hsa-ya-daw], 1st ed. (Rangoon: Nei-yín Û Kà-wí-dá, 1971), p. xiv. This is the main biography of a meditation teacher pupil of the Le-di Hsa-ya-daw, which includes an astrological chart on pp. 15–16.
64. *At-htok-pat-tí, Myan-má swe-zon kyàn* [MSK] [Burmese encyclopaedia], vol. 15/1976, compiled by Myan-ma Naing-gan Ba-tha-byan Sa-bei A-thìn (Rangoon: Sa-bei Beik-man Pon-hneik-daik), pp. 353–354.
65. Pāli *atthupatti*, “sense, meaning, explanation, interpretation” (T. W. Rhys-Davids and William Stede, *Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary* (London: Pāli Text Society, 1921–1925, reprint, 1979. Rhys-Davids & Stede suggested P. *attha* means “interest, advantage, gain; (moral) good, blessing, welfare; profit, prosperity, well-being,” which is also used to refer to interpretation according to the “letter” (P. *attha*) as opposed to the “spirit” (*dhamma*) of a particular passage. Htùn Myín in *Pa-lí thet wàw-ha-rá a-bí-dan* [A dictionary of Pāli loanwords] (Rangoon[?]: Tek-ga-tho-myà sa-ok-pyú-sú htok-wei-yeì kaw-mi-ti, sa-zin 31, 1968), pp. 460, 461, translates *at-htá* as meaning *a-kyasng a-ya*, for which J. A. Stewart and C. W. Dunn in *A Burmese-English Dictionary* (London: Luzac and Co (pts. I–II), SOAS (pts. III–VI), 1940–1981) give “the facts.” Htùn Myín (1986) translates *at-htok-pat-tí* as *hpyit-zin*, meaning “occurrence,” “event,” or “happening.” Biographies are sometimes not referred to in the title as either *htei-rok-pat-tí* or *at-htok-pat-tí*, but simply as “his life” (*thú ba-wá*), as is the case for example with Hteì Hlaing, Da-ma-sa-rí-yá Û (*A-na-gan Hsa-ya Thet-gyi thú ba-wá, thú-ta-yà hnín thú kyei-zù* [He who has introduced Burma to the world—A-na-gan Hsa-ya Thet-gyi, his life, his teachings, and his grace] Rangoon: Nì-thit Sa-ok-daik, 1978).
66. Û Paw Û, *Pok-pà-taung-ka-lat weik-za-do Aung Mìn Gaung í htwet-yak-pauk ya-za-win at-htok-pat-tí* (Rangoon: Mí-bá Myit-ta Pon-hneik-daik, 1952); Pa-hta-má-gyaw Û Sein Gán, *Bò Bò Aung at-htok-pat-tí hnín kò-gwe-nì* (Rangoon: Myan-má-yok-shin-sa Pon-hneik-daik, n.d.).
67. Û Maung Gyì, *Weik-za-do Aung Mìn Gaung í htwet-yak-pauk ya-za-win at-htok-pat-tí* (Rangoon: Mí-bá-myit-ta Pon-hneik-daik, 1952).
68. Thi-la-nan-da (1979, p. 8).
69. Examples of the term *at-htok-pat-tí* are as follows: “as for the history of a country, these are the records of a country’s *at-htok-pat-tí* or past happenings” (*Nain-ngan-tha-maíng hso-thi-hma naing-ngan í at-htok-pat-tí* (*wa*) *shei-hasng-hnasng hpyit-dó-go yei-hmat-htà-thí hmat-tàn-bin hpyit thi*, MSK vol 6, p. 110); “the *at-htok-pat-tí* and circumstances of printing the dictionary” (*A-bí-dan yaik-hneik-gyìn at-htok-pat-tí*), which refers to the Pāli Dictionary on which the Le-di Hsa-ya-daw had been commissioned to work by Western Pāli scholars (Le-di Û, Wun-ní-tá *Le-di Hsa-ya-daw Ma-ha-htei-myat-gyi í ma-ha-htei-rok-pat-tí-gá-hta* [The biography of the Le-di Hsa-ya-daw], [Rangoon: Han-tha-wá-di, 1956], p. 191); or in the title “The history of *events* relating to the BTNA organization of the Union of Burma” (*Pyei-daung-zú Myan-ma-naing-ngan-daw Bok-dá Tha-tha-na Nok-ga-há A-hpwé at-htok-pat-tí tha-maíng*). It is used as “fact” in: “considering the *facts* that the eyes are staring and do not wink, he must be the god Sakka.” It is used in the sense of “statement of facts” in “they told (the King) where his (Mahosadha’s) parents dwelt and *all about them* and his age.”
70. Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz, *Literary Terms: A Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990).
71. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 113–138. A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Art of Autobiography in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 13.
72. Nadel (1984, p. 5) emphasizes this when he says, “The importance of fact in biography corresponds with the seventeenth-century rise of science, the eighteenth-century emergence of empiricism, the nineteenth-century dominance by history and the modern emphasis on individual experience rather than a collective tradition. . . . Facts, evidence, establish the authenticity of a life, as realism—aligned with objectivity—replaces romance.”
73. See Houtman (1990, pp. 326–327).
74. Plummer (1983, p. 10).
75. Houtman (1990, p. 326–337).
76. Reynolds (1976, p. 55).
77. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 16–19.
78. *Ibid.*, pp. 119–121.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
80. G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest* (London: Longmans, 1925), p. xvii.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

82. G. H. Luce, "Old Kyauske and the Coming of the Burmans," *Journal of Burma Research Society*, vol. 63 (1959), p. 000.
83. For the debate about the merits of colonial versus Burmese vernacular history, see Htin Aung, *Burmese History Before 1287: A Defense of the Chronicles* (Oxford: The Asoka Society, 1970).
84. This so-called "biographical view of history" is not unique to Burmese or Thai history. The practice by Western writers of dating events from the time of Christ's birth is thought to have originated with the *Chronographia* (Chronicle) of Eusebius at its earliest, a Latin adaptation by St. Jerome, and the influential Bede's (672–735) "Ecclesiastical History of the English People." With these genres, local history came to be dated from and inextricably bound up with the life of Christ.
85. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 394.
86. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11, 302.
87. E.g., E. H. Carr, *What Is History?*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 165.
88. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
89. See also A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1988), p. 5, who describes how between the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries commentators of the Bible began to view texts as creations not of the divine author, but of human authors, so that the interest changed from a "literal" to a "literary" interest.
90. The term *win* could refer, as noted above, to history in a much wider sense when prefixed with other terms. Most of the information about Burmese history is derived from the *win*. Nine traditional categories mentioned include: (1) the lineage of the Buddhas (*bok-dá win*); (2) the lineage of the Buddha's relatives (*ma-ha win*); (3) the lineage of kings (*ya-za win*); (4) future events (*a-na-gá-tá win*); (5) the lineage of the relics of the Buddha, silent Buddhas, and *ya-hàn-da* (*da-hta da-tú-win*); (6) the history of Sri Lanka (*dí-pá-win*); (7) the history of stupas and pagodas (*htu-pá win*); (8) the history of Bodhi trees (*bàw-dí win*); and (9) the history of Buddhism (*tha-tha-na win*) (See A-shin Bí-wun-thá Ma-htei-myat Aw-ba-tha *Thú-dei-tha-ná tha-yok-pyá a-bí-dan* [A reference dictionary] (Rangoon: Thú-dam-má-wa-di Sa-pon-hneik-taik, 1975). We may add here *gan-da win*, the history of the Pāli Canon, and the recent "history of practice" (*pa-dí-pat-tí win*).

Yet the contemporary generic term for history is no longer *win*, but *tha-maing*, a term which has undergone a shift in meaning during the colonial era. If as late as 1906 the term *history* was still translated into Burmese by using *win*, this soon changed. Tin Ohn, in "Modern Historical Writing in Burmese" (*Historians of Southeast Asia*, ed. D. G. Hall [London 1961], p. 93), noting the important changes in Burma during the 1920s, including the introduction of secular schools, English as a language

of instruction, and new-style Burmese syllabi for schools, observed that the Burmese sense of history had also changed. These changes involved recasting the term *tha-maing* to signify history of all sorts, including secular history; it came to mean "history" or "chronicle" (Hok Sein 1981), and "the knowledge and systematic study of past events pertaining to, e.g., nations, creeds, institutions and peoples" (*Myan-ma A-hpwé A-bí-dan*). From the end of the 1920s, Tin Ohn noted, there was a "growing acceptance of the meaning of the word history in its wider sense," so that it "has acquired a new connotation, namely, a history that covers political as well as economic, social, and cultural life of the people."

It should not be mistaken that the term *tha-maing* acquired this meaning quite late. Harvey (1925, p. xviii) still characterized *tha-maing* as "local histories . . . frequently late, . . . written by individuals, they have not the range and accuracy of the great official compilations," and Pe Maung Tin (1960, p. xxi) glossed these as "mainly devoted to objects which testify to the establishment of the religion," and, though sometimes also used for other objects such as monasteries and towns, this is "generally associated with the prose-history of a pagoda." The *Burmese Encyclopaedia* (MSK, vol. 13, p. 33) gives the following: "The term *tha-maing* means records in either prose or rhyme of special places such as pagoda, cave, monastery, pagoda stairs, pagoda porch, refuge for worship of the Buddha, epistle, and special people."

91. The Ma-ha-si Hsa-ya-daw was chief monk of the BTNA (Bok-dá Tha-tha-na Nok-ga-há A-hpwé-gyok), which was originally set up by influential ministers of the 1948–1962 democratic government and in 1996 had over 300 meditation centers in Burma and abroad.
92. Ma-ha-si Tha-tha-ná Yeik-tha, *Ma-ha-si pa-dí-pat-tí tha-tha-na win* [The tradition of practice of the Ma-ha-si Hsa-ya-daw] (Rangoon: Tha-tha-ná Yeik-tha, 1974 (BurE 1336)), p. 756. As it said in the preface to this "history": "We have had to publish the *History of Ma-ha-si practice* (*Ma-ha-si pa-dí-pat-tí tha-tha-na win*) only: in order that there be no possibility of hiding from Buddhists the Ma-ha-si's vigor in energetically achieving the brilliance of practice-oriented Buddhism (*pa-dí-pat-tí tha-tha-na*) to reach beyond Burma—such as Asia, America, and Europe, and inasmuch as it is the responsibility of present Buddhists to advance Buddhism (*ta-yà*) for the benefit of those who come later; and in order to establish and prolong practice Buddhism." (Thi-la-nan-da, A-shin Bí-wun-thá, *Ma-ha-si Hsa-ya-daw-hpa-yà-gyi i htei-rok-pat-tí* [The biography of the Ma-ha-si Hsa-ya-daw], part 1 [Rangoon: Tha-tha-ná Yeik-tha, 1979], p. vi).
93. The transition from history to biography is also evident elsewhere. Modern Burmese biography has its "roots" in the religious (*tha-tha-na win*) and secular chronicles (*ya-za win*), from which during the twentieth century the biographies of famous monks and kings came to be composed retrospectively. The biographies of U Thi-lá and the Htut-hkaung Hsa-ya-daw, famous for their practice, appeared many decades after their lives

- ended, only after adherents of practice, becoming self-conscious of history and lineage of practice, pulled these subjects from their embeddedness in the chronicles.
94. Wí-thok-dí, Tha-tha-ná Ò (also known as Bo Thein Hswei), *Sśn-lśn ya-pyeí-meín-gśn da-má àw-wa-dá-myà* [A century of the teachings of the Sùn-lùn Hsa-ya-daw] (Rangoon: A-myō-thà sa-ok-daik, 1976).
  95. Hagiography thereby continuously recycles through unique constructions of continuity between life episodes into lives, between lives into lineages, and between lineages into a country's history, and the other way around. To the extent that history is about constructing sensible strands of continuity between biographical episodes, by means of which it extends the lives of teachers into their pupils and of kings into their subjects' lives, hagiography is at the root of history. To the extent that contemporary hagiography is retrospectively composed from royal and monastic lineage histories, history is at the root of hagiography.
  96. Kindall (1980, p. 1013).
  97. Houtman (1991).

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