

***Dhamma* Predication and Political Transition**

Brac de la Perrière Bénédicte

IRASEC-CNRS (Yangon)

For those who have observed Burmese religious life long enough, one striking evolution of the last decades has been the growing place of Buddhist preaching in the practice of many monks and in the public space. While until the late eighties *dhamma* predication was hardly to be seen on the public scene, from the beginning of the nineties onward, it started to become more and more visible.

Traditionally monks were requested to preach on private or communal ritual occasions such as funerals, noviciation or offerings made at the monastery at the end of the rain retreat season (*kahtein bwe*). The large public performance of « *dhamma* talks » by monks invited by laypeople independently of any ritual occasion contrasts sharply with these previous practices. They are called in Burmese *taya bwe*, the “feast of Law”, they are held at night and usually last around an hour, or more. As stated by Mahinda Deegalle in his study on Sri Lanka (2006), the development of public predication, known as the *bana* tradition in that context, particularly from the beginning of the eighteenth century onward, corresponds to the will of consolidating Buddhist communities through popularization of Buddhist teachings. In Burma, resorting to mass preaching to educate the public at large has its own genealogy starting in the early nineteenth century with the famous addresses of Thingaza Hsayadaw and those not less famous of Ledi Hsayadaw towards the end of the nineteenth century. Mass preaching had its heyday in the 1920s, when it was used as a tool to initiate reform among the public and contest the colonial rule by young activist monks such as Ottama and Wisara. It had continued until the 1960s when it drastically decreased, after Ne Win’s military coup, because expressions of religious life then tended to be relegated to the private sphere. The large public *dhamma* talks were to re-emerge only in the 1990s, at the joint initiative of local communities and the authorities, to become the highly popular events prevailing today.

Of course, one cannot but notice the congruence of public predication unfolding in Burma with the growing popularity of religious preaching elsewhere in the world, be it Islamic or Christian. However, the growth of *dhamma* predication does not have transnational origins, as do the other cases, although invitations abroad of some famous monks by the diaspora has probably played a role at some point. In Burma, the expansion of public preaching has been both multifaceted and more

connected to the situation in the country.¹ First, it was the result of the religious policy of the military regimes, which promoted the spread of Buddhist teachings to strengthen the national Buddhist community. And second, the rise of moralistic preaching in reaction to more institutional sermons came as a backlash. Later on, public preaching grew tremendously until today where, whether in Rangoon or Mandalay, during winter time, one will always find a “*dhamma* talk” to attend on any given night, on one street or another, organized at the initiative of the local communities or of some different body. It is, among other things, because of the development of public sermons since 1990 until today that the “969” discourse spread like wildfire in late 2012 and early 2013.

From these simple observations, it is possible to deduce that the striking growth of public religious preaching during the two last decades has not been independent of political evolutions and may have ambiguous political implications. I will try in this paper to look more thoroughly at what happened with predication in the political transition conjuncture. This raises the issue of the way monks’ position is affected by the new political situation and their capacity to take initiative within the post-2011 authority configuration in Burma.

First we have to look back at how the spread of public predication has been made possible before the change of power in 2011, under the national merit economy developed by military regimes and what opportunities it had opened for the preaching monks. In 1990, the new junta, calling itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), sought to establish legitimacy through, among other measures, its systematic policy of funding and supporting religious institutions and religious order. As Juliane Schober writes, “[t]he military regime’s patronage of Buddhism provided an alternative source of legitimation and transformed a national community into a ritual network.”² Thus, building on the reform of the sangha that had been implemented by Ne Win’s regime in 1980 and had placed all the monks under the authority of the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, a body of senior monks administered by the Department of Religious Affairs, this new religious policy contributed to a seemingly complete control of the religious institutions. Only but a few charitable figures emerged out of the religious institution, able to have their own religious initiative such as the departed Thamanya Ssayadaw or the famous Thitagu Hsayadaw, to name only the best known.

¹ One should not ignore, however, the possibility that Burmese preaching monks who travel abroad, especially to preach in the Burmese diaspora, may have been influenced by the general development of public preaching.

² J. Schober, 2011:86. Also see G. Houtman, 1999 for one of the most comprehensive analysis on the cultural outcome of SLORC’s policies.

Junta's policy of lavishly sponsoring Buddhist institutions, however, started being less enforced in 2004 following a government reshuffle and the firing of Khin Nyunt, then the prime minister, who, for years, had been patronizing the main state rituals. Following his arrest, a number of ritual networks were shut down. The change in the junta's internal power relations therefore affected the overall balance of relations between the state and the sangha. Placed in this context, the break out of the monks' protest known as the « Saffron revolution », in September 2007, emerged as a return of monastics (some of them at least) to the political arena as a force equipped with a certain degree of autonomy.

On the one hand, the merit economy defined by the junta's religious policy had involved major segments of the sangha that ended up deemed corrupt by the political power. Labeled as *a 'soya 'pon 'gyi*, or “the government's monks”, these monks were accused by part of the opinion of being void of “true” intent and straying from the monkhood renunciation ideal. On the other hand, monks' protest amounted to a breach of renunciation vows and was labeled as « political » by the government and its affiliates: it allowed to defrock the monks and to take action against them. But for many civilians, defrocking monks in order to arrest and interrogate them was tantamount to insulting the monkhood.

The events of September 2007 revealed that governmental authorities no longer had as full a control over the religious establishment as was generally assumed and that the sangha was not a monolithic body. This marked the return of the monks as an independent force equipped with a certain degree of autonomy. It did not take long for the monks' capacity for initiative to be again demonstrated. The crisis and need for emergency aid prompted by Cyclone Nargis on May 2, 2008 would give them a new opportunity to take action in the world. The urgency of having to bring help to disaster victims provided room for action that the general public as well as the monks—at least some of them—used to organize themselves against government control. Therefore during this relief crisis, it is the social activism on the part of the monks as well as the laypeople that was condemned as “political” by the junta.

In other words, under the military regimes, the “political” and “governmental” labels were used by protagonists on both sides to question the authenticity of monkhood renunciation, and have been an integral part of the Burmese debates. The defense of Buddhism had become assimilated with the moral position of opposing the repressive government. In the end, in this eminently political game, no position could be considered solely religious or political due to the symbiotic relationship between state and religion. It is this situation that the new political order unsettles by introducing electoral legitimacy and democratic values that contribute to setting apart political and religious orders. But this mutation has been

taking place while the monastic order for its part was experiencing a marked evolution.

The events that have occurred in 2007/8, the so-called « Saffron revolution » and the humanitarian crisis caused by cyclone Nargis, have been particularly significant in this regard in as much as they have signaled the advent of a new generation of monks in line with their time and within a religious environment the boundaries of which they were contributing to re-delineate and reshape. One characteristic of the monks' involvement in social work as it was redefined in the context of the Cyclone Nargis aid crisis is the innovative combination of a certain number of practices in order to ensure access to religious donations independently from official networks: in other words, through these new practice some monks have been able to delineate autonomous ritual networks articulated to their *dhamma* predication. Public predication assorted to independent charitable foundations of influent abbots has been a particularly efficient mean to regain initiative, of which Thitagu Hsayadaw is just but one illustrious instance.

In the years before 2011, mass Buddhist preaching had thus become a common arena, shared by different religious actors present on the social scene. However under the military governments, the Department of Religious Affairs had closely monitored Buddhist predication through the requirement of its authorization, together with the approval of various local authorities to organize such a public event. For most of the entrepreneurial abbots trying to carve out a space allowing them for action through public preaching, this had to be carefully negotiated inside the religious institutional framework provided by the central administration of the sangha.

The release on general media censorship that took place in 2011 and that instituted freedom of expression for the public did not changed a dim for the sangha as demonstrated by incidents that occurred in Mandalay during the autumn of this very year, during which monks demanded freedom of expression. In 2011, cases of ban on preaching of the most outstanding monks of the time were also pronounced by the ecclesiastic hierarchy (Sanha Maha Nayaka Committee) particularly against Ashin Pinya Thiha and Udu Mingala, the latter following a series of sermons on the “10 duties of the Buddhist sovereign,” in others words on good governance. All these developments together with the ban of the clergy from electoral franchise showed, if it was needed, that Sangha was kept at distance of the general reform/opening of the public sphere taking place through the democratization process.

On the contrary, the Ministry of Religious Affairs soon resorted to sangha political-control policies of previous governments through the decision to restrict authorization to preach in public for monks who had passed the national monastic exam (*dhammacariya*). This measure was meant to prevent those who had been formed outside mainstream official religious institutions from preaching in public. This attempt to curb monks' public speaking did not, however, go to the extreme of evicting from the sangha and imprisoning those monks deemed to threaten the institutional order through their preaching: they were only temporarily prohibited from preaching in public. This was also the case recently of the vocal Shwe Nya Wa Hsayadaw. However, the decision to restrict authorizations of preaching to those monks holding the *dhammacariya* does not seem to have been systematically enforced up to now except for those monks deemed to threaten the governmental authority. In any case, it was not enforced during the series of "969" sermons that inflamed the country against the Muslim community in the winter 2012/2013.

Moreover, as a means to act upon the world, preaching had become all the more powerful that new media technologies had entered into the religious landscape to allow performances of charismatic religious leaders to circulate widely. However, in Myanmar, mass distribution of *dhamma* talks had not flourished freely because of the strong censorship exercised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs until 2011. While those sermons by monks close to the authorities benefitted from official distribution and diffusion on the official TV, those of less obedient monks were banned. However, this has not prevented CDs of *dhamma* talks circulating widely underground, even under military rule, as soon as this technology had been available. CDs of monks' sermons were to be found in numerous street stalls, besides kungfu videos and other audio-visual products and street sellers of *dhamma* talks had become a common feature of cities. In any case, watching these performances at home had become a favorite leisure-time activity of the Burmese when the « 969 » campaign burst out, adding to the precedent selling spots new peddlers specifically recruited to diffuse 969 labeled CDs of sermon.

While the 969 fever has somewhat calm down since 2013, the movement has mutate into a new nationalist Buddhist association known as Ma Ba Tha which is aimed at the defense of Buddhism as the national religion and was formed by a number of monks at the Insein Ywama convention of monks in June 2013. This association known for the laws for the "protection of the nation" (*amyo saung...*) it has initiated has developed at an impressive pace since. A number of committees informally linked to it have branched out, among which the *gunna wasaka* or the body of the preaching monks for instance. What should be noted is the vigorous activism of this association that translates particularly in further developments of the predication sphere.

A preaching season in Yangon downtown

To give an idea of the monks' predication activity today lets wander in downtown Yangon last winter. Preaching season is supposed to start at the end of the Buddhist lent, typically at the *kathein bwe* (november), and to last all the winter. But nowadays, *taya bwe* are organized on a yearly basis by local communities, « street families » as they oft call themselves, and they are held without discontinuity well into May with the predications following the new-year celebrations (*hnitthi U dhamma puzaw bwe*). One has to imagine downtown streets emptied one after the other of the newly imported parked cars and closed to the circulation at the end of the day for three to five consecutive nights, to host Buddhist sermons. The preaching throne is set in its middle, adorned with flowers and brightly illuminated. The asphalt is covered with mats on which devotees dressed at their best will take place in good order before the arrival of the programed preaching monk. Huge screens are now set up as well as powerful sound-systems to allow the audience that may count by thousands in the best attended cases to watch and listen comfortably.

Many of these streets have mosks alongside which makes that the Buddhist preaching scene may be located shoulder to shoulder to the Muslim establishment: it happened this winter in such a case that the mosk was veiled with large posters of Buddha's life scenes. Devotees are welcome at the end of the streets by laypeople dressed with the yogi clothes, (white shirt and brown longyi for the women). Since a few days, the stand for donation has been operating in front of the red portico adorned with large billboards picturing the expected monks during the preaching program. The event has also been advertized through regular loud announcement since some days and with flyers lavishly distributed. Laypeople are still collecting donations, drawing the attention of the passer-by through making their silver bowl resonate. Inhabitants coming back home with no intent to sit down among the listeners are bound to sneak alongside the predication setting trying to make themselves invisible. The scene is thus set for the monk sitting above the devotees to deliver his *dhamma* talk in the midst of the city night life. Public visual and sound-scapes, both of them, are saturated with the *dhamma* predication. Public space is thus turned into *dhamma*-scape.

To assess the novelty of the spread of these events, it is enough to look at the serial number inscribed on the red porticoes erected at the end of the street: most of the preaches organized this winter have not known more than 7 annual occurrences and a lot are only in their second or third iteration pointing to a change in pace of this development after Saffron revolution and Nargis cyclone, and still another one after the 969 campaign. In a number of cases, when the celebration is more anciently

established, the *taya bwe*, or *taya puzo bwe* has been added to a different kind of communal celebration such as collective offerings to the monks (*shoun laung bwe*) 28 Buddhas celebrations (*hniq kyeik shi hsu bwe*) in such a way that one could say that *dhamma* predication is on its way to displace more diverse communal ritual occasions under its moralist reform project. This is all the more apparent if considering the new-year predications (*hnittiq U dhamma puzaw bwe*) seemingly taking the place of the protective paritta recitations (*payeik bwe*) that used to be performed by monks after the *thingyan* celebrations. Sermon delivering is becoming the overarching Buddhist communal ritual form displacing those deemed more magical as the *payeik bwe*.

The explanation usually advanced for the noticeable development of Buddhist predication is that the organization of public preaches has been facilitated following the dismissal of military governments. According to one member of a committee for the elevation of *dhamma* predication, formed under the Theravada Dhamma Kumyet that was a prefiguration of Ma Ba Tha, the demand comes from the local communities organized in small ad-hoc associations, two to three hundred members, financing themselves through small monthly participations, following the NGO model. Now that this kind of associations are allowed without authorization, I was said, local communities are no more afraid to such undertaking.

Public preaching still requires authorization from not less than five administrations to be held and this is where intervene dedicated committees such as that of my informant, facilitating the approach of these administrations and advising people on suitable monks to invite, those duly sanctioned by the governmental *dhammacariya* exams that allow preaching. The aim of these committees is to purify Buddha's teachings, or *thathana than shin yay*, to avoid the preaching of « false precepts ». The impulse in promoting a purified predication, in the eyes of these religious activists, has actually be the predication by U Kawthala (teaching at the Theravada International University) that Buddhism (*bodha batha*) was endangered and could disappear from Burma as it had already disappeared in many countries. This predication had at this time « opened their eyes » (*myessi pwin-*) and was the signal for embarking actively in the defense of *thathana* through monitoring and developing *dhamma* predication. Most active monks on the predication scene are those that have taken part in the 969 campaign and those known for their erudition, called *hpa hkyop* or *pitakat 3 bon*.

Facilitation of public events by dedicated committees may be said to be one of the main device of the expansion of predication. This function of the committees involved in the organization of the preaching events requires that they have a privileged access to the authoritative institutions allowing the events to take place.

Among these committees have been recently the more active those that are linked to Ma Ba Tha, the large movement issued from the 969 campaign that advocates the defense of Buddhism as its main objective. Nevertheless, local communities are not uniformly depending on these committees to plan their preaching event. Those having more lasting experience of the process may have more direct access to the authoritative institutions and more autonomy in the choice of the preaching monks they invite. Also, some other committees as the one linked to the Thitagu Hsayadaw may have developed independent networks for the organization of predication relying on the fame of the preaching monk. The spread of Buddhist predication on the contemporary religious scene is thus not monolithic. However, one could postulate that the large involvement of branches of Ma Ba Tha in this spread does have a definite impact in the general outlook and content of predication.

Lets take a closer look at these events that although framed in a rather uniform way could end up quite different. *Dhamma* talks taking place in a downtown street, in a local community of a far-away suburb or in a prestigious religious university may attract various public and create contrasted atmospheres. Preparations start long over by the invitation of the monk, the authorization process and the collection of donations to finance the event and insure the donation to the monk. The audience is already sitting in good order before the announcement of the monk's arrival in time, 7:30 or 8 in the night, accordingly, his car adorned with religious flags and escorted by cavalcade of bikes. Led by a singer or by reciters, the audience starts a welcoming hymn cheering the abbot while he gets out of his vehicle and heads on to the preaching throne by walking under white umbrellas hold by male attendants, amidst the devotees *shikoing* him. Some monks are very ceremonial, others are joking with the local notabilities escorting them. One of the most extravagant monk's appearance I observed was at the preaching event organized to dispense the instructions (*owada*) of the Ma Ba Tha Monks for the *dhamma* dispensation of the new-year (Thingyan) at a suburban religious university. Planned by different local groups affiliated to Ma ba Tha, the processional entry of the monk was accompanied by conch players and the mock elephant of a local *wunthanu rakhita* group.

In some cases, donations are presented at this point, when the monk seats on his preaching throne, and the merit sharing ritual takes place before the actual preach starts, in other cases, it follows the talk. The preach starts with the monk administering the five precepts to the devotees and the standard collective recitation. Then the preaching monk begins his talk with precise contextual announcement of the date, the circumstances of the event and the theme of the

speech. The theme can be very prosaic as with this event at the occasion of the installation of 28 buddhas in a small suburban local community: the theme was the importance of the gift of the law (*dhamma dana*) from the part of the sangha, creating a debt for the laypeople in order to incite them to donate to the sangha. In another occasion, the head of a prestigious religious university was not secretive about the fact that the invitation of laypeople to deliver a preach was all the more welcomed that he had been to Bangkok to check his health and had spent a lot during his stay abroad. Donations are at the center of many preaches and point to the importance of predication as a mean to raise funds for the Sangha.

This pragmatic approach to fundraising by many preaching monks strongly recalls Wijeyewardene's remarks on preaching as a strategic tool to ensure that the needs of the Sangha are met (Deegalle 2006, 15). In any case, the amount of donations collected is often advertised in the course of the sermon, particularly when the preaching event is coupled with the financing of a particular program such as the operating of the *Dhamma skul* at the Maha Theindaw Gyi of Theingyi Zay. In some cases, preaching is structurally linked to the financing of a charitable foundation, a practice initiated by Thitagu Hsayadaw but that has known a new impulse in the context of the cyclone Nargis relief operations. In one case that I documented in a paper published in the latest issue of *Contemporary Buddhism*, the foundation launched by the monk was entirely financed by his preaching program. One could well ask if predication as a mean to raise funds for the Sangha has not become all the more important today that the change of regime has put an end to the junta systematic raising of religious funds for legitimacy reasons.

Most of the talks however are commentaries of texts taken from the Pâli corpus and aim at explaining their content in Burmese. Thus Thitagu Hsayadaw preach on the second of Kason on the invitation of the Yekyaw community (downtown Yangon) chose very simply to preach on the talk delivered by Shin Ananda on the same date in 104 at Kapilavattu for the people of this Buddhist kingdom had forgot everything of Buddha's teachings. Thitagu seemed to take the preach as a pretext to teach side lessons on the history of Buddhism in Burma, on the Indian geography of Buddhism and so on, as he proceeded explaining the Pâli content of the text, translating pâli concepts in both Burmese and English and having them repeated by the audience in order they memorize it.

Very different was the manner of the abbot preaching at the Maha Theindaw Gyi who started by chanting the Pâli text during 10 minutes, after to have check that the sound system fit his voice, before to reassure the public that he will explain the teaching. This did not prevent him to speak vehemently to defend *dhamma skul* against its' critics: the attacks were defaming the governmental background of the

dhamma skol program while it was pure religion (*batha yay*). Thus, many preaching monks defend their own agenda on the top of the transmission of the Buddha's teachings at the occasion of their *dhamma* talks.

In the case of the Ma Ba Tha preaches such as that one given after Thingyan in a suburban monastic university, the defense of the Ma Ba Tha program pervaded all the discourse. Particularly the preacher placed the new reformation of *wunthanu* associations whose explicit aim was the defense of the race (*anwe*) in the context of a discussion of meritorious action (*kutho*) and exonerated the program of the "worldly" suspicion (*lawki*) because of the gravity of the danger incurred by the religion.

Finally, I'd like to refer to another kind of preach although this one was specific, being held at the occasion of the annual meeting of a charitable foundation headed by the preaching monk. Besides being a kind of presentation of the association activities, in the shape of a sermon, all his talk was also an admonition for the monks to have "dreams" and to act accordingly and a critic of the uselessness monks of the previous generation who "stayed sleeping".

Indeed, one of the characteristics of the predication arising from the Ma Ba Tha circles is that it is not just about teaching the *dhamma* but it is also an incentive to action: it is a tool for mobilization. It is at the chore of the development of the Ma Ba Tha movement as a growing mobilizing force to various causes linked to the defense of Buddhism as national religion. As has been exemplified recently with The Saving the Shwedagon movement, Ma Ba Tha is becoming a major lobbying body in today Burma, more efficient in some cases than other actors of the civil society, and predication is one of the tools of this lobbying force.

The expansion of predication is for a good part a result of Ma Ba Tha religious activism for the defense of Buddhism as national religion. An activism that unfolds all the more freely that it operates outside or besides the political institutional framework. May we put it this way: because the Sangha has been kept at distance from the democratization process Ma Ba Tha has been formed to regain new influence and capacity to act in the social word through religious activism of which the investment and development of predication is a part.
