Changing Buddhist Practice in Burma

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"This thesis is my own work. All sources used have been acknowledged."

To my teachers with gratitude

To my parents with gratefulness

To my friends with thankfulness

Table of Contents

Notes **1-2**

Abstract **3**

Chapter One: Contemporary Meditation Practice in Burma

The emergence of the Mahasi Thathana Yeikthar 4

Contemporary Mahasi Meditation Centre 6

Burma and Buddhism 8

Meditation: the Teaching of Buddha 9

Mahasi meditations 12

Vispassana and its techniques 14

Concept and function of Vispassana 17

Anthropology of religion and the changing practice of Buddhism 19

Endnotes 22-3

Chapter Two: Buddhism and Buddhist practice in early Burmese Politics

Buddhism in early Burma 24

Theory of the early Buddhist state 26

Traditional ideas of individual and society 27

Classical Burmese states 30

Lay practice of Buddhism: king and Sangha 32

Roles of laity and monk....36

Purification and dependency between king and monk....38

Conclusion....40-2

Endnotes....43-5

Chapter Three: Mahasi Vispassana in the modern nation state of Burma

The beginning of lay meditation practice in the colonial period....46

Colonialism, Buddhism, and Vispassana....51

Post-Independence Burma and Buddhist Revivalism....55

Mahasi and Buddhist Revivalism: the establishment of practice-oriented Buddhism....58

Mahasi Vispassana after 1962....61

The Burmese Way to Socialism and Mahasi meditations....64

Buddhism, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (1988-97)/ the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (1997-) military regimes....68

Political/ moral legitimacy....72

Anna/ Awsa and ritual hierarchy/individual spirituality....72

Mahasi and Buddhism in contemporary Burma....77

Endnotes....80-2

Conclusion....83-8

Map 89

Pictures 90-95

Bibliographies 96-103

Notes about the English spellings of Burmese names and words

This thesis uses consistent English spellings for Burmese words (including those that derive from Pali and Sanskrit), except in cases of direct quotations. For example, *byamaso taya* is used for *brahmaso taya*. Also English words are used, where it is possible, for Burmese words that have similar meanings, for example, Nirvana (English, Sanskrit) is used for *Neik-pan* (Burmese) and *Nibbana* (Pali). Where possible, English translations are provided for Burmese words as well as for broader concepts and meanings.

Burmese names customarily have a pre-fixed 'title' in accordance with the person's status such as gender, age, occupation, and profession. For example, U Ba Kyi, is used for a middle-aged Burmese male whose name is Ba Kyi, and Ma Hla Hla is used for a young female whose name is Hla Hla. The pre-fixed title of 'Sayadaw' is usually used to refer to a Buddhist monk, and 'Sayalay' to a Buddhist nun.

It should also be noted that Burmese usually do not have surname. They may be referred to by their nicknames, full names, or popular names. Burmese names used in this thesis follow conventional as well as popular usages. For example, Aung San Suu Kyi is used for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, U Nu rather than Nu, Hla Pe instead of U Hla Pe. Finally, in this thesis some unfamiliar

Burmese names of persons and places, as well as certain words and terms, are consistently italicised.

Abstract

Changing Buddhist practice in Burma

In early Burmese state polities Buddhist practices among the laity focused on materially supporting monks, listening to their preaching and observing Buddhist moral precepts. The king held a special position as sacred leader claiming direct descent from Buddha, and relying on the monks (Sangha) for his moral and political legitimacy.

In contemporary times meditation has become the dominant religious practice among the laity. Meditation practice represents a new practice of Buddhism, and is seen as the hallmark of modernity, with its institutional establishment assuming a significance in politics and its social and political ideas used extensively by political adversaries. Contrary to common perceptions of meditation as an individual and self-centred religious practice, this new form of Buddhism has assumed a significant social role in Burma.

This thesis examines the Mahasi Meditation Centre and its Vispassana tradition, known also as Insight Meditation. It argues that the Centre is not only representative of the new Buddhism but is also a new monastic institution that has significant functional relationships to the wider Burmese society. Mahasi constitutes a new form of Buddhist practice through which individuals as well as social groups come to perceive, reflect on, adapt and respond to social changes.

Chapter One

Contemporary Meditation Practice in Burma

"No slacker nor the man of little strength

May win Nibbana, freedom from all ill.

And this young bhikkhu, yes, this peerless man

Bears the last burden, Mara's conqueror".

Nidana Vagga, Samyutta, 466

(The Book of Kindred Sayings II, page 188), in Mahasi Sayadaw (1984: 41).

This chapter provides an ethnographical description of the Mahasi meditation centre and practice. The meditation practice of the lay meditator is a new phenomenon unprecedented in Burma. Over recent years the numbers of meditators as well as meditation centres has increased with the popularity of the practice. The emergence of the Mahasi Thathana Yeikthar symbolizes the popularization of meditation practice and mass laity meditation movement, in particular the phenomenon symbolizes the democratization of Buddhism in which Mahasi is a lay initiated organization.

The emergence of the Mahasi Thathana Yeikthar[1]

In 1947, a year before Burma gained Independence from British colonial rule, a Buddhist meditation centre called Thathana Yeikthar (Buddhist Retreat) was founded amid the modern urban landscape of Rangoon, the capital city of

Burma. The establishment, which thirty years later extended to cover about twenty acres, was originally built on five acres of land donated by Sir U Thwin, an educated and influential elder statesman of the country. He was the first President of the lay Buddhist organization known as the Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization which had been founded a year before.[2] This organization consisted also of other prominent politicians and public figures including U Nu, who later became the first Prime Minister of Burma. The main object of the organization in founding the centre was to "promote the Buddha Sasana both in study *(pariyatti)* and in practice *(patipatti)"* (Mahasi Sasana Nuggaha Organization 2002).

Meanwhile in upper Burma a monk known as Venerable U Sobhana Mahathera, then aged 45, attracted reverence from many Buddhists through his Insight Meditation teaching. He was a well-trained scholar, versed in Pali, and had been teaching the meditation practice from his leading Mahasi monastery at *Seikkhun,* in upper Burma, for some years. Later he became known as Mahasi Sayadaw, a title which was derived from the name of this presiding monastery, the *Maha-si Kyaung* (in Burmese *maha* literally means large, *si* - drum, and *kyaung* monastery or school), which in turn was named after an unusually large drum in the monastery. Gradually his meditation method began to attract both the locals who lived in the surrounding *Shwebo-Sagain* regions in Central Burma and numerous other followers around the country, including Sir U Thwin. Sir U Thwin, who had been looking for a nominated head for the centre, travelled to upper Burma to meet the monk. "After

listening to a discourse on vipassana meditation given by the Sayadaw and observing the Sayadaw's serene and noble demeanor, Sir U Thwin had no difficulty in making up his mind that Mahasi Sayadaw was the ideal meditation master he had been looking for" (Mahasi Sasana Nuggaha Organization 2002).

Later in 1949, on behalf of the lay organization, Sir U Thwin and U Nu, then the prime minister of Burma, invited Mahasi Sayadaw to come to teach insight meditation at the newly established centre in Rangoon. His teaching became very popular among Buddhist laity; and hence the centre became known popularly as the Mahasi Meditation Centre, bearing the personal name of Mahasi Sayadaw. The teaching of this form of meditation was introduced by the Sayadaw to a group of about 25 meditators at the centre later in the same year, and the technique became so popular that "[w]ithin a few years of the Sayadaw's arrival in Yangon [Rangoon], similar mediation centers sprang up all over Myanmar (Burma) until they numbered over one hundred... These were the consequences of opening the meditation centre in the Buddhist Retreat of the Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization. The next result was that the same centers were opened in the East and in several western countries too" (Mahasi Sasana Nuggaha Organization 2002).

Contemporary Mahasi Meditation Centre

Of the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha Jordt (2000:1) observed "The first impression striking the observer is the industrious preoccupation of hundreds of sangha (monks) and lay *yogis* (men, women, and in the months of April and May,

scores of children as well) sitting or walking in parallel, intensely undertaking practices of meditation". By 1994, Mahasi had 332 branch organizations scattered nationwide and over one million (1,085,082) meditators had taken part in a course of intensive meditation since the establishment of Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha in Rangoon in 1947 (Jordt 2001: 105).

The various Mahasi meditation centers in Rangoon as well as its affiliates around the country are regularly visited by many monks, nuns, laity, young and old alike, who come from various professions and all levels of society such as teachers, sales persons, medical doctors, politicians, and university professors as well as foreigners, among many others.[3] They practise Mahasi meditation in various times and places; individually at home, in groups in dedicated places in some quiet and isolated places beneath the cool shade of the trees, at urban pagodas amid the urban landscapes among the busy traffics of the streets, shops, restaurants, and pedestrians. Despite the obvious differences in settings, common to these meditators is their aim to have their mind and body purified, focused and calm, and to achieve peaceful spirituality and mentality. To an unfamiliar outside observer, such an attentive but composed meditator presents quite a contrasting impression against the background of the otherwise normal and bustling daily lives of the Burmese.

Why has the meditation movement assumed a role in the political and social process? Isn't the vispassana meditation movement about individual enlightenment and spiritual achievement, rather than mundane social progress

or political achievement? If so, what connection does the spiritual practice and its enlightenment quest have with secular politics, and the state?

Burma and Buddhism

Burma (also known as Myanmar)[4] is situated in the Southeast Asia region and neighbors Thailand, Laos, China, Bangladesh, and India. It occupies approximately 261,552 square miles and, in 2000, has a population of about 47.7 million (United Nations Population Division 2004). The country is composed of peoples of various ethnic backgrounds, speaking different languages and practising different cultures. Ethnically, the population of Burma speaks more than 125 different indigenous languages and they live in different parts of the country.[5] Burma is known to people around the world as the land of pagodas; its landscape is abundant with pagodas, monasteries, and shrines, and the religio-social daily life incorporates many monks, nuns, and laities. In the tradition of Buddhism, there are two well-known Buddhist schools, Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism, which were established about 500 years after the death of Buddha. Theravada Buddhism, also known as the Teaching of the Elders, is the traditional religion in Burma.[6] The Buddhist Burmese, estimated as about 85% of the total population, encompass many different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds.[7]

An ideal life for both the Burmese Buddhist Sangha and the laity has three phrases: young, middle, and elderly. An ideal life for a Sangha is to study and teach and then to retire and retreat to the forest to strive for self-salvation. In

contrast an ideal life for laity, in their spiritual quest to look for or accumulate *parami*[8] is to do *dana* (charity) and *sila* (moral restraint and observance), and in their later life do *bhavan*, meaning to be engaged in religious activity to gain good Karma and prepare for the next life.[9] The contemporary practice of Mahasi meditation, however, is not limited to age or life-styles but is a popularizing practice of many Burmese around the country.

Meditation: the Teaching of Buddha

In the teaching of Buddha, meditation is an essential practice to achieve enlightenment. Meditation is a practice of mindfulness, contemplation of mind and body in order to realize the truth about the impermanent nature of life and to be free from sufferings inherent in life. The practice and its meanings are situated at the centre of the Buddhist belief system, in particular The Four Noble Truths: the noble truth of suffering,[10] the noble truth of the origin of suffering,[11] the noble truth of the cessation of suffering,[12] and the noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering[13] (Collection of Long Discourses of the Buddha, *Digha-Nikaya*, in Nyanaponika Thera 1962: 127-32). Meditation is thus the essence of Buddhist philosophy about life and it is an essential religious practice.

The aim of meditation, in a way, is to purify the self from moral impurity, and to become free from the cycle of rebirth which is the root cause of sufferings, *dukkha.* According to Buddhism, life is full of crisis and suffering, and this belief is reflected in the Buddhist concept of Karma. Buddhists believe that the

mortal existence of a human is due to Karma (Spiro 1992: 75). In Burmese Buddhism, Karma explains the schematic order of beings and rebirth. In other words, Karma is the accumulated merits and virtues which operate at any order of beings. The higher Karma a being accumulated in the past, the higher stage the being will be reborn in at present, and the Karma accumulation and rebirth process, know as *samsara*, will continue along the order of beings, until with the highest Karma one finally attains the *nirvana*, an Enlightenment. In this life, Karma is related to two main features of Burmese Buddhist belief about life: the order of existence, and the cycle of rebirth. The order of existence recognizes thirty-one planes of existence and encompasses living animals, humans, and divine 'beings'. The mortal beings in the order of existence are deemed to be reborn unless they succeed in the redemption of their karma, the merit accumulated from this life as well as from past lives. Accordingly, the attainment of nirvana provides a (salvation) path from the continuing cycle of rebirth.

Suffering associated with this life is an "inherent characteristic of the human condition" and "redemption consists of deliverance from suffering" (Spiro 1992: 76). There are emotional sufferings that are caused by attachment to desire, clinging, and craving, while physical sufferings are the 'inescapable life-cycle crises of illness, old age, and death'. The root cause of suffering is attributed to the nature of existence and the attachment of desire itself, known as *kilaytha*, moral impurities, consisted of greed *(lawba)*, hatred *(dawtha)*, and ignorance *(mawha)* (Spiro 1982: 47).[14] Suffering that comes from existence in

the thirty-one planes of existence ceases with the cessation of existence, and one way to become emancipated from the Wheel of rebirth is through meditation. This is a practice in which monks and others can provide assistance but where one has to rely on one's own effort and action to attain the enlightenment.

The notion of *anatta*, literally meaning 'non-self' or 'no-soul' or impermanence, constitutes one of the essential doctrines of Buddhism (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 6, Spiro 1992: 74-8).[15] In Buddhist ideology, humans are composed of five material aggregates or *khandha*. The *khandha* is composed of matter (the body), feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness. The Buddhist law of impermanence states that nothing is permanent and everything including 'oneself' is subjected to the law of impermanence. The attainment of nirvana and of non-self can be realized through meditation. Thus for a Buddhist Burmese practising meditation together with making donations to acquire merit are the most important religious observances. The ultimate attaining of non-self and realizing the nature of impermanence is the highest aim for the Buddhist Burmese. Non-self is attained when one realizes Enlightenment, thereby one is able to escape from the circle of rebirth and also 'escape' from the crises and sufferings of the present life.

Meditation practice, both in the original Buddha teaching and in the written sacred text, is a recommended way to attain the non-self nirvana. Meditation is a contemplative practice leading to an understanding about phenomena,

particularly oneself, through the Buddhist moral, cosmological, and conceptual framework. The aim of the meditator is to attain the spiritual stage of non-self involving understanding the changing and impermanent nature of things, including oneself.[16] Meditation practice is popular among many Buddhist Burmese as well as non-Buddhists inside and outside Burma. In Burma, the Mahasi meditation centre in Rangoon is world-renowned and many thousands of meditators have been trained there. In the Mahasi tradition, a person who is practising the meditation is called *yaw-gi,* which can be translated into English as 'meditator'. In this thesis the term meditator is generally used but *yaw-gi* may be used in case of direct quotations. Also note that in Mahasi tradition, the term *yaw-gi* is suffixed to four main categories: they are monk *yaw-gi,* nun *(thi-hla-shin) yaw-gi,* lay male *yaw-gi,* and lay female *yaw-gi.*

Mahasi meditations

The Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma systematically developed the practice of Vipassana meditation, known also as insight meditation, which came to be identified with new practices of Buddhism focusing on individual oriented practice of contemplation. Mahasi Sayadaw states that the meaning and purpose of the meditation practice, according to true Buddha teaching, is "carried out for the purpose of realizing *Nibbana* [nirvana] and thereby escaping from the ills of life: old age, ill-health, death, and so forth" (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958:1).[17] In 1958 Mahasi Sayadaw wrote a treatise about the real purpose of undertaking meditation in accordance with the actual teaching of Buddha, after it was realized that although many thought they knew how to

practise meditation they actually lacked any real knowledge about it. Both the mental and physical suffering that one as a human being has to endure does not end only in this life as the being also will be subjected to sufferings in the next life since "there is no end in death" (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 1). Thus, the root cause of suffering is grounded in the teaching that "because there is birth there follows the chain of old age, ill-health, death and the other ills of life" (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 1) and the belief that the rebirth is influenced by the very attachment that is inherent in the present life. One can only be totally detached by realizing the *Nibbana* throughout the practice of meditation.

According to Mahasi Sayadaw, the two most recognized prescribed traditions of meditation in accordance with the teaching of Buddha are concentration meditation *(Samatha-kammatthana)* and insight meditation *(Vispassana-kammatthana)*.[18] Concentration meditation *(Samatha-kammatthana)*[19] is associated with the meditator trying to reach some supernatural powers such as being able to pass unobstructed through a wall, to walk on water, to dive into and out of the earth, to have super-human hearing, to know the mind of others, to recollect one's past existences, and to have superhuman eyesight. The concentration meditation, however, will not give oneself freedom from the cycle of rebirth and hence from the ills and sufferings of life (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 2). It is only "[t]hrough the practice of *Vispassana-kammatthana* one is able to realize *Nibbana* and thereby win absolute freedom from the ills of life" and sufferings (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 2). Mahasi therefore emphases the tradition of Insight Meditation with its spiritual goal of achieving nirvana or

enlightenment to escape from the cycle of rebirth and its practical goal of gaining relief from the sufferings and crises of every day mundane life. And, while insight meditation is a prescribed path to realize Nirvana *(Nibbana),* it can nevertheless be practised also by those who initially take the basic exercise of concentration meditation.[20]

Vispassana and its techniques

The significance of Mahasi vispasssana meditation, in comparison to the concentration meditation, is its outright recognition of body and mind as the realistic condition and as the subject of meditation. Vispassana necessitates a basic knowledge, "either in belief or *in extenso,* of the facts that living beings consist of the two constituents, of body *(rupa)* and mind *(nama),* that the body and mind are formed due to cause and effect and that, as they are in a constant state of changing process, they are impermanent, ill and devoid of *'atta'"* (original emphasis, Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 5).[21] Therefore for the meditator, "With the full development of the factual knowledge of *'Anicca* [impermanence], *dukkha* [suffering], *anatta* [non-self]' there arises the insight of *'Magga* and *Phala'* [knowledge of the Path and its Fruition][22] and he realizes Nibbana" (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 6).

Vispassana meditation is primarily about contemplating, concentrating, and becoming mindful particularly about one's own body and mind. It recognizes the ever changing and impermanent nature of body and mind such as ills from old age and crises of life. For instance, the physical experience of seeing

involves a 'physical group' including eye and retina, and an external object being seen as subject to rising and passing away, from one moment to another. Likewise, the mental experience of seeing, known as 'mental group', involves eye consciousness, feeling, perception and thinking about it as also subject to rising and passing away, at momentary notice.

Thus, wrote Mahasi, "At the moment of seeing, both the visual object and the eye, where seeing takes place, are perceived. These two things are of the material group". "Eye-consciousness, feeling, perception of visual object, and exertion to see visual object, mental activities are also distinctly perceived at the moment of seeing. They are merely of the mental group." Both physical and mental phenomenal experiences are "neither pleasant nor *'atta'* nor 'person'". Yet those who do not contemplate the very moment of their occurrence do not understand that "they pass away immediately and are not permanent"; that "they are origination and passing away without any stop and are therefore ill"; that "they are neither *atta* nor living entity but are *anatta* in that they are subject to cause and effect in arising and passing away". These phenomena are 'impermanent, ill and *anatta'*. "They egotistically consider 'I am seeing; I am feeling; I am perceiving; I am looking intently', and are attached to them" (Mahasi Sayadaw 1985: 6).

In general, vispassana states that body and mind and the combined subjective experiences undergo constant change. Thus because of their ever-changing nature they cannot be considered fixed permanently or belonged to T. In this

way, vispassana strives for non-self. The experiences (of body and mind) are changing according to the law of impermanence. Mahasi wrote, "one who desires to practice 'Vispassana' should retire to a quiet place and seat himself cross-legged or in any convenient manner so as to enable him to sit for a long time, with body erect, and then contemplate by fixing his attention on the physical and mental phenomena which are known as *'Upadanakkhandhas'* and which are distinctly arising in his body". The five combined physical and mental groups of the *Upadanakkhandhas*, "are those which are distinctly perceived at every moment of seeing hearing, smelling, knowing the taste, feeling the bodily-contacts and thinking of ideas, etc" (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 6).[23]

Mahasi Vipassana begins with two prescribed meditation techniques; abdomen meditation for the beginner, and breathing meditation for the advanced practitioner (Mahasi Sayadaw 1984: 3-13, 14- 41).[24] Abdomen meditation is practiced by observing, knowing, and focusing the consciousness on every movement of the abdomen caused by breathing; for example particular attention can be given to the actual movement of the abdomen, 'rising' and 'falling' (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 7, 1984: 3- 13). Breathing technique involves being aware and knowing when the meditator breathes air in and out through the nose. Both these techniques involve specific bodily postures such as keeping the body upright (straight back) when sitting, although the meditator can sit on a chair and the posture can be varied to a comfortable position as meditation is meant to be a relaxed practice. However, every bodily movement

of the meditator, i.e. the changing of the posture and, in particular, the accompanying mental thoughts, ideas, and consciousness have to be made with constant awareness and careful contemplation (Mahasi Sayadaw 1984: 14- 30). The meditation is commonly practised in a quiet and relatively isolated place such as a dedicated meditation hall or room. At the Mahasi Meditation centre, where the training is given by meditation teachers, there are short and long meditation courses as well as intensive meditation retreat courses which range from about ten days to three months.[25]

Concept and function of Vispassana

Meditation practice has certain characteristics, both at the individual and structure/system levels. The philosophical principle of meditation asserts that the individual is the ultimate agent that is responsible for his or her own action; hence, it is the individual that has to cope and take action in situations of crisis, conflict, and tension whether they originate within the agent or from external collective/social affairs. In this regard, tension and crisis are understood and perceived by individuals as being caused by unequal/unbalanced relations.

Meditation can be seen in many ways; many of its spiritual and mental benefits have been recognized. In the West, the site of globalization, "the final universalization frontier of Vispassana is that it has been taken to resonate with the rationalism of empirical science" (Jordt 2001: 330). Meditation is in line with medicine's acceptance of the "mind-body effect" in relieving stress. Meditation is widely practiced by prisoners world-wide, with the experiment

first conducted in Burma by the U Nu government in the early 50s. For psychologists it is recognized for its effect, "clarity of mind and even I.Q. rises with the effects of the sustained concentration in meditation" (Jordt 2001: 330). In some contexts vispassana is secular and in other aspects it embodies Buddhist ideas. "[T]he consequences of vispassana meditation practice and the assumed philosophy that underlies it has led to the threshold of still more deeply secular territory than medicine and institutional efficiencies. This is the realm of politics. In this encounter we can witness a still more complex and international framework for discourse over the underlying moral philosophy behind meditation, which is Buddhism" (Jordt 2001: 331).

The meditation movement and social phenomena interact with each other in dialectic relationships. The meditation practices tend to respond to social phenomena of tensions, problems, and conflicts generated by social and political changes. The mediation practice allows an individual to relate to other individuals in an appropriate way, and it allows the meditation movement itself to play a role in society. In other words, the meditation movement has its own place and role in Buddhist ideology; and because of this it can play a particular role in secular society. The relations between meditation and political and social changes become more vivid when viewed from the perspective of Buddhist ideology about the individual and the world. I discuss this in Chapter 3.

Anthropology of religion and the changing practice of Buddhism

Buddhism can analytically be seen to consist of two dimensions: intellectual aspects and social aspects.[26] The intellectual dimension of Buddhism as a religious idea, according to Taylor (1970 [1871])[27] and others, rests on the claim that the function of religion is to explain intelligibly natural phenomena such as the origin of man and certain uncontrollable and unfortunate events in life. The role of religion then is to relieve anxiety by providing an explanation for (natural) phenomena that cannot otherwise be explained rationally.

The social dimension of religion, in the tradition of Durkheim and many others, on the other hand, is based on the view that specific social conditions, not the inner psychology of individuals, shape and influence the ideas, sentiments, and orientations of religion (Bowen 2005: 10-24). Religious ideas, sentiments, motivations, attitudes, and actions effect and reinforce social structure. Religion has a social foundation and is a collective representation of the society as a whole. Religion, thus, is a symbolic representation that collectively expresses and binds society together in homogenous communities where everyone has *similar* roles, duties, status, and feeling (Bowen 2005: 15). Religion is about social solidarity (Bowen 2005: 18).

Yet while in a homogenous society the social origin and function of religion may be related to social solidarity, when several groups whose ideas and interests are in conflict come together in a heterogeneous society, the role of

religion can be complex. The emergence of many religious cults and sects in modern times reflects the pluralist foundation of certain societies. For example, many contemporary religious activities are seen as vying for political interest or domination with other religious groups, and many of them either become integrated into the state project and program or else form an anti-social force that opposes the state, sometimes by violent means (Bowen 2005: 249-270). Max Weber combines both dimensions and argues that social action can best be understood "by, first, discovering the meaning of the action for the individual and, secondly, explaining it in terms of the social conditions and actions that preceded it" (Bowen 2005: 18-9).[28]

In general, these two aspects are intertwined and reflected in Burmese social life in the way of a 'cultural patterning of religion' (Bowen 2005: 14). Buddhist practice in the past and at present is concerned with individual enlightenment and in this sense it is about intellectual and psychological concerns. In Buddhist Burma, specific social conditions (state formation, colonization, nation building, the Burmese way to Socialism, military regimes, and democracy) shape and influence the religious ideas, sentiments, and orientations of Buddhist practice.

The meditation practice reflects both these analytical dimensions. The intellectual aspect of meditation is reflected in its aim and in the ideology of Buddhism which sees the nature of life on a cosmological plane. The social aspect is the collective achievement of individuals, the ways they interact, the

way meditation is practised by the Burmese Buddhists within society, and in the way Buddhist social norms and etiquette are accepted and applied in social relations. Buddhism can be individual practice, i.e. the meditation aims to achieve freedom from sufferings in sacred terms as well as in secular terms, by means of attaining non-self. In its social aspects, in terms of collective actions, it helps to maintain morality and develop moral citizens; it offers social 'emancipation' or political, social, and economic success, a kind of social enlightenment.

This thesis provides a case study of the Mahasi meditation centre and practice in order to demonstrate the new phenomena of the role of the laity and the new practice of Insight Meditation. It specifically examines how the quest for individual enlightenment and spirituality becomes collectively significant in political and social movements.

Endnotes

[I] Also known variously as the Mahasi Meditation Centre or Mahasi Retreat in English, and Mahasi *Thathana Yeikthar* or *Thathana Yeikthar* in Burmese. Literally, *yeik* in Burmese means shade and taking refuge, and *thar* means bliss, happiness, delight, clarity, and clairvoyance: hence, *Yeikthar* is translated as 'retreat'. Also, the various meditation centres around Burma that are affiliated to and follow the Mahasi tradition have their own centre names.

Sasana in Pali is *Thathana* in Burmese which means 'order, message, teaching' (of Buddha) (Davids and Stede 1972: 707). *Buddha Thathana* means Buddha's teaching or Buddhism. *Nuggaha* refers to the propagation and promoting of Buddhism.

[3] The location of the Mahasi Meditation Centre is No. 16, Thathana Yeiktha Road, Bahan, Rangoon (Yangon), 11201 Burma (Myanmar).

[4] Formerly, the country was known to international communities in English as Burma. In 1989, according to the United Nations, the government of Burma changed the name from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar'. Myanmar or Myanmar *Naing Ngan* (where *Naing Ngan* means country) is the term the peoples in Burma used to call their country long before colonial influence. The country of Burma is known commonly as 'Union of Burma' or *'Pyi Thung Zu Myanmar Naing Ngan Daw'* in Burmese, which literally can be translated as the 'union of thousand nations'. Also, *Bamar*, unlike Burma, refers to the ethnic *Bamar* who made up the majority of the populace. Houtman (1990: 266, index of terms in endnotes) uses the term Burmese for all those who speak the Burmese language.

[5] In the past, the various ethnic communities tended to group together and lived in specific parts of the country. The ethnic *Burman* tended to live in the lowland regions and others, such as Arakan, Mon, Shan, Karen, Karenni, and Kachin, and many smaller ethnic groupings, tended to live in highland regions. In the contemporary period, they have become increasingly intermingled, interacting socially and culturally with each other, and many of them are now concentrated in urban areas.

See also Houtman (1990a), "How a foreigner invented 'Buddhendom' in Burmese: from *Tha-tha-na to Bok-da' ba-tha"*, for some historical accounts about terms such as Buddha *Tha Tha Na* in Burmese (or Buddha *Sasana* in Pali) and *Bok-da' ba-tha* which denotes the cultural dimension of Buddhism (Houtman 1990: 114-7). Also, *ba-tha* can mean language, race, or subject, eg. Mathematics, Biology, etc.

[7] Other major religions in Burma include Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, and a few indigenous belief systems. See also Houtman (1990: 36).

[8] *Parami* (P, S) "'perfections'; virtues and faculties required for the attainment of Buddhahood" (Nyanaponika Thera 1962: 215).

[9] See Jordt (2001: 6) for details.

[10] The noble truth of suffering: birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair, and not to get what one wishes, all of these five aggregates of clinging are suffering (Nyanaponika Thera 1962: 127-8).

[II] The noble truth of the cessation of suffering: "It is that craving gives rise to fresh rebirth, and, bound up with pleasure and lust, finds ever fresh delight, now here, now there - to wit, the Sensual Craving, the Craving for (Eternal) Existence and the Craving for Non-Existence" and the craving arises and takes root in delightful and pleasurable senses of eye, ear, nose, tongue, visual forms, sounds, smells, tastes, eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness (Nyanaponika Thera 1962: 128-9).

[12] The noble truth of the cessation of suffering is "the complete fading away and extinction of this very craving" and this craving of body-mind may be abandoned and extinguished (Nyanaponika Thera 1962: 129).

[13] The noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering is the "Noble Eightfold Path, namely, [1] Right Understanding about suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering, [2] Right Thought that are free from lust, ill-will, and cruelty, [3] Right Speech is to abstain from lying, tale-bearing, harsh speech, and vain talk, [4] Right Action is to abstain from killing, taking what is not given, and adultery, [5] Right Livelihood is "When the noble disciple, avoiding a wrong way of livelihood, gets his livelihood by a right way of living", [6] Right Effort: "Herein a monk rouses his will to avoid [and overcome] the arising of evil, unsalutary states, he makes effort, stirs up his energy, applies his mind to it and strives", [7] Right Mindfulness: "Herein a monk dwells practising body-contemplation on the body - practising feeling-contemplation on feelings - practising mind-contemplation on the mind - practising mind-object-contemplation on mind-objects, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having overcome covetousness and grief concerning the world", [8] Right Concentration: "Herein a monk detached from sensual objects, detached from unsalutary things, enters into the *first absorption*, born of detachment, accompanied by though-conception and discursive thought, and filled with rapture and joy. After the subsiding of though-conception and discursive thought, and by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, he enters into a state free from thought-conception and discursive thought, the *second absorption*, which is born of

Concentration and filled with rapture and joy. After the fading away of rapture, he dwells in equanimity, mindful, clearly aware; and he experiences in his person that feeling of which noble ones say 'Happy is the man of equanimity and mindfulness'; thus he enters the *third absorption.* After the giving up of pleasure and pain, and through the disappearance of previous joy and grief, he enters into a state beyond pleasure and pain, into the *fourth absorption*, which is purified by equanimity and mindfulness. This is Right Concentration. This, monks, is the Noble Truth of Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering" (Nyanaponika Thera 1962: 129-31). The final cessation of suffering 'a state beyond the cycle of birth and death' is nirvana (Powers 1995).

[14] Spiro also notes that compared with certain forms of other religions which state that "suffering is itself a redemption", but in Buddhist belief is primarily concerned with "suffering and release from suffering" (Spiro 1992: 76-7). "If desire is the cause of suffering, then release from suffering can only be achieved by release from desire" (Spiro 1992: 78).

[15] *Anatta* (P) or *Anatma* (S), adj., is "'not-self'; egoless, impersonal, devoid of an abiding entity of description" (Nyanaponika Thera 1962: 213).

[16] In Buddhist Burmese attribution to the Three Gems, meditation is given a prior importance to praying or recitation (Pe Maung Tin 1964: 67). According to Venerable U Thittila, "an offering of flowers is an occasion not for praying, but for meditating on the real nature of things, in the sense that flowers are also subjected to passing away and change which is the nature of things" (U Thittila, quoted in Pe Maung Tin 1964: 67).

[17] Note that *Nibbana* (Pali), Nirvana (Sanskrit), Nirvana (English) and *Neik-pan* (Burmese) are spelt differently but denote a common meaning.

[18] Mahasi Sayadaw distinguishes between concentration and insight meditations. According to Mahasi, the former is about power and gaining some extraordinary quality, and the latter is focused on non-power and is associated with escape and relief from suffering by subjective contemplation and reflection, dwelling on and realising about the body and mind (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 1-3). See also relevant discussion about the Mahasi meditation method in Nyanaponika Thera (1962: 85-107).

[19] There are forty subjects in the basic *Samatha* meditation composed of: a) 10 contemplation devices such as *earth-kasina, water-kasina, dark-blue-kasina,* bounded *space-kasina* etc.; b) 10 kind of impurities such as bloated corpse, scattered corpse, worm-infested corpse, etc.; c) 10 reflections such as reflection on the attributes of Buddha, of dhamma, of sangha, of one's own *sila* or virtue, of *Nibbana,* of inevitability of death, of in-breathing and out-breathing, etc.; d) 4 sublime states, loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy (in the attainments of others), and perfect equanimity; e) 4 stages of *aruppas* such as dwelling on the contemplation of the realm of the infinity of space, of consciousness, of nothingness, and of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; f) 1 reflection on the loathsomeness of food, and g) 1 analysis of the four elements such as earth, water, air, and fire (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 2- 3).

[20] In other words, two types of Mahasi meditators are distinguished: "one who takes up the basic exercise of Samatha-kammatthana for realising Nibbana" and "one who directly carries out the practice of vispassana without the basic exercise of Samatha-kammatthana" (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 2). See also Mahasi Sayadaw (1957: 2-4) for details in particular about a *samatha* practice known as *anapana-sati-kammatthana* in which the mind is 'fixed on the aperture of nose' and contemplation by noting and saying mentally: 'coming, going' of the in-breathing and out-breathing *samatha* meditation. This is similar to vispassana breathing contemplation but the vispassana places distinct emphasis on the body-mind effects and their changing nature as the basic subject of contemplation. Their fundamental differences are discussed and described in detail by Mahasi Sayadaw (1958: 4-5).

[21] *Atta* means 'enduring entity or soul' (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 6).

Mahasi Sayadaw (1984: 30) translated *Magga* and *Phala* as knowledge of the Path and its Fruition. Also, *Anicca* (P) means "'impermanent'; together with *dukkha* (suffering), and *anatta* (not-self), one of the three characteristics of all conditioned existence" (Nyapaponika Thera 1962: 213, glossary).

[23] See details in Mahasi Sayadaw (1958: 5-12).

[24] Mahasi Sayadaw recommended the abdomen meditation practice for beginner because its bodily movement is easy to recognise (Mahasi Sayadaw 1958: 6-8). See also in Mahasi Sayadaw (1984) for details about the guidelines and techniques of the basic and advance meditations.

Generally, in Burma a meditation centre is part of a monastery complex, but not all monasteries have meditation centres. Meditation centres are managed by the monks and the meditation techniques and practices are guided and taught by monks. Virtually almost every Buddhist Burmese knows and practises meditation in various places and at various times. Many may prefer to practice at home or in some quiet place. A meditation centre is a formal place created to accommodate some intensive program training and it is frequented by the laity, especially the elderly.

[26] There are, according to Bowen (2005: 14), two distinct dimensions about of the role of religious ideas: 'intellectual dimension and social dimension'.

[27] Edward B. Taylor 1970 [1891], Primitive Culture.

[28] "Religion provides one major source of ideas and orientation for the actor" (Bowen 2005: 19).

Chapter Two

Buddhism and Buddhist practice in early Burmese Politics

Buddhist ideas and practices provided a blueprint for the organization of the early Burmese states. The significance of Buddhist practice in society is evidenced in the relations between laity and state. The main aims of state were to spread Buddhism and maintain the Burmese social and political organizations. Traditionally the Burmese king had a primary duty to propagate Buddhism, primarily by giving material support to the monks; and the role of monks was to preach. The propagation of Buddhism was thus largely conducted through maintaining and making the sacred canonical text, constructing religious buildings, pagodas, and architectures which were mainly donated by the kings, the queens, and the wealthy. Meditation as a personal practice may also have been practised by monks and a few laity.

Buddhism in early Burma

According to historical records, Buddhism was introduced into Burma after a 309 B.C. religious mission led by *Sona* and *Uttara* from the kingdom of Emperor Asoka in India to the Mon kingdom of *Thaton* (known also as *Ramanna* and *Suvannabhumi)* located in lower Burma. Buddhism reached central Burma in 1057 A.D. in the form of a sacred text by a Burmese king,

Annawratha, after his military conquest of *Thaton.*[1] With the sacred text and the help of a learned monk, *Mahathera Arahan* (known also as *Shin Arahan),* the king established Buddhism as the principal religion of the state and from there the religion was propagated to other parts of Burma.[2] With monarchical support, Buddhism gradually established itself over other existing religious beliefs and practices including the influential Brahmanism and the religion of the indigenous Pyu in Central Burma (Than Tun 1988: 23-6). Stone inscriptions *(kyauk sar)* provide evidence of religious practices in the first three periods: Pagan (1044-1354); *Myin-zaing, Sagaing* and *Pin-ya;* and *Ava* (1364-1555) (Hla Pe 1985: 36). Most of these inscriptions were set up by the rulers and ministers and their families, describing their good deeds and religious motives. With the proliferation of literature in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Buddhist teaching in the form of verse and prose genres gradually became available to the people through learned monks and the writing of scholars (Hla Pe 1971: 60-8, Than Tun 1988: 27-37, Houtman 1997: 324).

Theravada Buddhism influenced the foundation of early Burmese society in some very specific ways (Hla Pe 1971, 1985, Than Tun 1988, Mendelson 1975, Spiro 1982, Furnivall 1956: 17), similar to other Theravada Buddhist countries (Tambiah 1976, Gombrich 1988a, Bentley 1986: 290-3).[3] The traditional Burmese states exhibited unique symbolic and functional relations between Buddhism and society, with their history dating back perhaps more than a thousand years.[4] Buddhist ideas, belief systems, and practices are

transparent in the social and political organizations of the sacred Burmese kingdoms.

Theory of the early Buddhist state

Tambiah describes early Southeast Asian kingdoms as galactic polity states, with particular features.[5] For example, the function, administration, and palace of the last Burmese kingship, Mandalay, in the nineteenth century resembled the 'galactic polity' which was organized in a *'mandala'* pattern based on Buddhist cosmology (Tambiah 1976: 102).[6] "[T]he mandala pattern serves as a conceptual and practical model for center-periphery relations" (Bentley 1986: 293).

The prototype of the Buddhist polity state originated from the classical Asokan model of the political and social organizations associated with early Buddhism in India (Tambiah 1976: 61), and the historical emergence of Buddhist polity states in Southeast Asia initially came about with local adoption as well as adaptation of the Asokan conception of state.[7] These Theravada urban centers were characterized as "centralized political communities based on rice agriculture and... capitalizing on maritime trade and thereby reaching a certain level of demographic and sociopolitical density" (Tambiah 1976: 74). Gradually these communities evolved into larger organized polities such as the Burmese kingdoms (as well as the Mon, Sinhalese, and Thai kingdoms).[8] The conception and development of these polities could thus be attributed to Buddhism, in particular its conception of Buddhist polity states which "first

espoused by king and his court and functionaries must have spread outward to the subjects at large" incorporating and organizing the mass public (Tambiah 1976: 74).

The philosophy of the Asokan polity state derived from the original teaching of Buddha of an individual and cosmological belief system, and under the polity state these ideas merged with practice. The sacred Buddhist idea is congruent with the state, its political and social organization, as well as the elementary social units. Buddhist polity can be analyzed in terms of its ideology contained in canonical texts (from the sacred Three Baskets) and the practice evidenced in historical Buddhism, later developed in Southeast Asia after Asoka (Tambiah 1976: 518, 1987: 5-6). At a theoretical level, the concept of a polity state is derived from Buddhism, in which individuals are seen as discrete entities but bonded and related to each other under an overarching structure of 'world process' or 'law of interconnexion' conceptualized in its cosmology (Stcherbatsky 1923, in Tambiah 1976: 35-6).

Traditional ideas of individual and society

According to Buddhist belief, an individual is composed of an atomic element or Dharma.[9] The idea of non-self can be best apprehended in comparison to the idea of self, known as *atman*, in Brahmanism (just as Buddhism originally evolved out of Indian-influenced Brahmanism).[10] In brief, the existence of an individual or self (or the atomic element) is constituted by its own history of karma.[11] Self is subjected to change due to the law of impermanence, and

hence a Buddhist individual is thought of as a non-self individual. An individual thus is seen as an autonomous and discrete atomic element, and in their collectives they constitute a kind of 'atomic pluralism'[12] in which they are bound together and linked to each other by collective moral responsibility in accordance with the teaching of Buddha. Theoretically the Buddhist polity state can be analysed in terms of a 'total phenomenon' (Tambiah 1976: 35), consisting of elementary relationships between the individual (conceptualized in Buddhist non-self individuality and meditation) and the prevailing law of Dharma that governs social and political organizations (as conceptualized in Buddhist cosmology).[13]

Buddhist ideas about individual and society vested in its 'total' system have significant implications in the symbolic function of the Buddhist polity state, primarily involving the roles of king and monk.[14] Symbolically, the 'construction of social reality' of the polity state reflects a "Buddhist cosmology - in terms of the periodical creations and resorptions of the universe as an ordered set of events", which are in line with "the basic philosophical propositions of the Four Noble Truths, in particular the suffering and its removal" (Tambiah 1976: 35-6). This pivotal notion of suffering, embodied in Buddhism, is exemplified within the polity in the 'pulsating' pattern of the king's power, as the king alternatively expended his potency (merit), withdrew into ascetic practice in order to recoup his power, and then "emerged from solitude or from ceremony charged with potency only to demonstrate his virility and to expend his potency in the harem or in war" (Bentley 1986: 293).

This pulsating pattern is "a realistic reflection of the political pulls and pushes of these center-oriented but centrifugally fragmenting polities" (Tambiah 1977: 74, in Bentley 1986: 293),[15] involving the king at the power centre and contesting alliances of princes who controlled the peripheral regions. This pulsating character of Southeast Asian polity can be attributed to 'structural constraints' on royal power due to low population density, inefficient taxation, dependence on foreign trade monopolies and 'centrifugal pressures' on king which inevitably gave rise to factionalism, typically "resolving into a contest between the king and his following, the princes and their clients, and the nobility/officials and their circles" (Bentley 1986: 293).

The symbolic function of the polity state is significant in particular in the ceremonial and functional role of the king.[16] Traditionally, a Buddhist kingship is the nexus from which the total Buddhist social and moral revolutions are projected out to the mass public.[17] Both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions have developed long-held beliefs about Bodhisattva, the future Buddha (Lehman 1972: 374): in the Mahayana tradition, the Bodhisattva has deferred enlightenment and is currently helping the people, while in the Theravada tradition Buddhists are encouraged to do good deeds and merits so that they will be reborn in their later life and be blessed by the future Buddha. The idea of Bodhisattva, originating in early Buddhism, is the origin of ideas about kingship (such as the king's righteous conduct) and he is also seen as the one who has the most promising quality of the future Buddha, who has good karma but delays in this world to help others (Tambiah 1976:

38-9). "Theravada Buddhism..apart from its reverence for the Buddha as the compassionate teacher, assimilated ideas of bodhisattva [the future Buddha] to kingship and concentrated on the theory and norm of its *cakkavatti* and the righteous ruler (and through it toward actual historical kingship itself)" (Tambiah 1976: 39).[18] Thus, the underlying philosophy of the polity state was the co-existence or juxtaposition of Buddha and *cakkavatti* (Tambiah 1987: 4-6). In both symbolic and functional terms, the monk and king relation defines the unique feature of the Buddhist polity, termed by Tambiah (1976) as 'the world renouncer and world conqueror'. In Burmese *cakkavatti* is known as *Setkyar Min,* meaning 'a universal monarch who rules over the entire world' (Tambiah 1987: 2).

Classical Burmese states

Burma clearly exhibits characteristics of galactic polity state in that the function and the religious practice of the early Burmese kingdoms have a defining feature, termed variously by Burmese scholars as 'symbolic bonds between king and monk' (Ferguson 1978: 66), 'the Buddha and world emperor' (Reynolds 1971: 23, quoted in Ferguson 1978: 66) and 'Buddha as a prince would be king' (Sarkisyanz 1978: 87). More significantly, the function and the aim of the Burmese polity is directed towards the propagation of Buddhism. These ideas are reflected in the interrelating dependency relationships between institutions of state and Sangha, where monks were world renouncers and the laity lived and engaged in worldly affairs. The king relied on monks for moral/political legitimacy, because he was regarded in

polity tradition as universal righteous ruler and his claim to such political and moral authority as head of the sacred state was legitimized principally by monk. The king in turn provided material support to monks for their perpetuating of the *thathana.*

According to records in Burmese chronicles[19], however, the lineages of Burmese kings generally referred to two mythical ancestors. In the pre-Pagan period (up to 1044) they referred to *Pyu-zaw-di,*[20] and in post-Pagan dynasties they referred to *Maha Thamada,* 'the first elected king of this world cycle' (Hla Pe 1985: 49-50). In any case, Sarkisyanz (1978: 87) states that the relational reference that post-Pagan Burmese kings made to Buddha constitutes a formation of Burmese political culture, for example, kings in the Pagan dynasty claimed to descend from the Buddha lineage, and such claims conferred on kings the 'absolute rights' to rule.[21]

The structure of the state constituted in the Pagan period was regarded as the model for the function of later states (Aung-Thwin 1994: 22, Hla Pe 1985: 189-192). Since its establishment, the 'structure' remained as a static principle influencing the traditional function of pre-colonial Burmese states up to late nineteenth century British colonization, spanning over ten centuries (Aung-Thwin 1994: 22-3). In essence, the prevalent and prototypical practice of Buddhism was identified with the practice of a few powerful and wealthy rulers at the helm of the consolidated and centralized state structure.[22] Their model of Buddhist practice resonated down to other lower levels, just as their

monopoly over the function of the state flowed down to other levels of political and social organization.[23]

Lay practice of Buddhism: king and sangha

The early practice of Buddhism was nicely summed up by Hla Pe, a Burmese scholar: "The kings of the Pagan dynasty [and other members of royal families and *officials]..expressed in concrete form* their observance of the three primary Buddhist duties - charity, *dana;* morality, *sila;* and meditation, *bhavana.* They built pagodas, monasteries and ordination halls. Dedicatory inscriptions on stone in Burmese - transcribed to writing at the beginning of the twelfth century -were set up alongside these sacred edifices. Many of these buildings contain paintings depicting scenes from well-known Buddhist works" (emphasis added, Hla Pe 1985: 191). In addition, Buddhism was propagated through teaching and mural representations of the *Jatakas,* the legendary 550 life stories of Buddha. The *Jatakas* not only taught about the life of Buddha, they also served multiple purposes in providing examples of successful lives of the kings (Lu Pe Win 1966: 102-3). *Jatakas* presented an ideal life to the people; its stories were to be emulated or to be felt and followed by readers (Lu Pe Win 1966: 108).

The religious practices of monk and laity in propagating Buddhism were conducted in specific ways. When Buddhism was introduced into Burma it was mainly propagated through text and poems and pagoda building. The religious practice for a monk was to preach. Monks learnt texts, specialized in

Buddhist literature, and taught laity. At that time the Buddhist practice of meditation was engaged in mainly by a few monks who sometimes taught it to laity. The main role and religious function of laity was to give material support, to listen to teachings, and build pagodas.

The main reason for the static and fixed bonding between monk and king was political legitimacy, from which the king could claim a legitimate moral right to rule as well as to legitimate a symbolic 'power'. Because he was presented as Bodhisattva, a future Buddha, he had to reaffirm his legitimacy (Ferguson 1978: 66, Tambiah 1988). "The supporters of Buddhism, *sasana-dayaka*, in Burma up to 1886 were kings and...people of high status" (Hla Pe 1985: 189). The reason for the bonding relation was the 'special legitimation that each can give the other': the state, through the king, supported the Sangha with material support to the monks as well as engaged in 'actions against the monasteries and monks who did not conform to *vinaya* rules'. In turn the Sangha provided the king, along with their mass followers, with moral legitimacy affirming the royal authority (Ferguson 1978: 66, Tambiah 1976: 521).

The Sangha or the monastic order was a formal institution recognized and supported by the incumbent Burmese king. The king also enforced religious rules about the conduct and practice of monks, sometime resulting in disrobing or outlawing particular sects. The monks, on the other hand, had at their disposal numerous citizen followers due to the fact that they were religiously respected and revered by the laity who also sought their advice and moral

support. According to Ferguson (1978: 70), Sangha was composed of different sects, and the rise of a particular sect was often correlated with the rise of new kings. In other words, a new king would nominate a new sect, rather than the one sponsored by the previous king, and both king and Sangha found their respective legitimation in this new cycle.

When a new sect came to be associated with the powerful, its rival would 'respond' in opposition by retreating into the forest and adopting different monastic rules and norms. Similarly, with his rise to political power, after nominating the official Sangha, the Burmese king would construct and reside in a new city, donate new pagodas and monasteries, and appoint new ministers, both at court level and as representatives in remote regions (Ferguson 1978: 67-83). The advent and subsequent growth of the *Shwegyin* sect, contended Ferguson (1978: 71-5), in Burma in 19th- 20th centuries was due to the political process of the quest for legitimacy associated with the accession of King Mindon, who reigned from 1853 to 1878.

The survival and maintenance of Buddhism depended on king and his polity. King and Sangha interacted and related to each other in reciprocal as well as antagonistic relationships. In the reciprocal relationship "Kingship, as the crux of order in society, provides the conditions and the context for the survival of *sasana* (religion). They need each other: religion in being supported by an ordered and prosperous society is able to act as the 'field of merit' in which merit making can be enacted and its fruits enjoyed, while the king as the

foremost merit maker needs the sangha to make and realize his merit and fulfill his kingship" (Tambiah 1976: 41-2).

The antagonistic relationship "stems from the early Buddhists' envisaging the state or polity as concerned with the promotion of righteousness, a concept universal in its implications. The symbol of dharma in political life for the Buddhists was the wheel *(cakka)*.... It is this total application of dharma to politics that in theory insisted on the principle of nonviolence *(ahimsa)*, noninjury and compassion *(karuna)* in statecraft, an ideal that sometimes collided with the practicalities of statecraft. It is perhaps this tension that finds expression as an 'identity crisis' among the great kings of Buddhist polities - and its resolution in terms of the renunciation of violence *after* accomplishing conquest and empire building" (original emphases, Tambiah 1976: 41-2).

Historical records show that the Burmese king and monk relation, in particular the monk as head of monastic orders and the king as head of the state, had been documented over many centuries. As early as in the reign of King Annawratha (11^{th} century) the state exerted control and influence over Sangha, due perhaps to its incorporation of monks in its ambitious propagating of Buddhism (Mendelson 1975: 53), and Theravada Buddhism had become firmly established by the end of the thirteenth century (Hla Pe 1985: 191).

Roles of laity and monk

There were various levels of monk and laity. In the reigns of Pagan kings, the role of young monks was to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the learning of *vinaya* (the monastic rule or code of conduct) (Than Tun 1988: 45). The elder and learned monks delivered the preaching, or *taya haw,* of Buddha's teaching to the congregation of laity. At that time monastic schools were the only place that provided education for monks and ordinary students, of whom many came from well-to-do families (Than Tun 1988: 32).

Meditation as a religious practice was not popularly practiced among monks or the laity. Nevertheless, in the 10th and 12th centuries there were records of the practice of a form of meditation known as "the meditation on love", which mainly was practised as part of a ritual in merit-making charity and observing precepts. Another known practice of meditation, preached by monks, was *satipatthana [Samatha] sutta.* The main aim of both the practice and donation activities was to improve one's *parami.*[24] A scriptural account, from 1000-1300 AD, of the religious duties of Buddhist monks during the period of Lent *(wa)* described monks as teaching four methods of *satipatthana sutta* meditation, preaching dharma *(tayar haw),* and giving sermons to their congregation (Than Tun 1988: 32).

In this period the religious activities of the laity mainly involved listening to the preaching of monks and giving material support and building pagodas and shrines. The three primary duties of the laity were religious offerings,

observing precepts, and listening to the teaching of meditation by monks (Hla Pe 1971: 60). The religious activity at that time was intimately associated with building religious edifices; the Pagan period (1044-1364) was the 'age of Temple Builders' (Hla Pe 1971: 60). With the introduction of the sacred religious text and with some alphabet borrowing from the Mon language, the donors recorded their merit making in the building of religious edifices and their donations of paddy-fields, slaves and animals.[25]

Apart from making donations, a considerable portion of religious activity was devoted to observing, writing, making and reciting Dharma recorded in text (Than Tun 1988: 30-1). Making a copy of *pitaka* was found to cost more than building a pagoda or a monastery (Than Tun 1988: 63-4); for instance, in 1273 a set *of pitaka* could buy about 5250 acres of land (Than Tun 1988: 31). Particularly significant among religious constructions was a separate monastic building used as library to store *pitaka* (Than Tun 1988: 59), seen as the most important means of merit accumulation. "Having built a library, the donor's next concern was to provide it with attendants and necessary funds so that the repair of the building, preservation of the manuscripts, and new acquisitions to the library would be possible" (Than Tun 1988: 32). More significantly, the main aim of all the religious activities was to be reborn in the time of the future Buddha, *Maitreya*, or even to attain Buddha-hood (Than Tun 1988: 29).

Purification and dependency between king and monk

The relation between the leading monk, who would normally have been the king's teacher, and the king created the 'balance of power': "The stronger the king, the more likely he would be to impose his choice; the stronger the Sangha, the more likely they would be to impose theirs on the king" (Mendelson 1975: 53-4). Nevertheless, it cannot readily be assumed that *thathanabaing*[26] was a single voice representing all the sects in Sangha. There were complex relations within the monk organization; Mendelson thus summed up: "The monastic lineages...cut across other factional divisions in the Sangha, just as the holders of the office of *thathanabaing* represented different points of view either promoted by the royalty or supported by the monkhood at large" (Mendelson 1975: 57).

Mendelson, who has studied the history of Sangha from medieval times to the present, observes that over time two important factors determined change in Sangha (1975: 25). First, there was the "splitting off of sectarian groups from the main body of the Sangha" when "these new groups justify the split...in terms of a redressal of laxity which creeps into the Sangha at large". The splitting group usually cited 'reassertion of *Vinaya'* (i.e. for a purer or cleaner monastic rule of conduct) as the main reason for the breakaway. Second, depending on the 'strong' or 'weak' lay authority, the lay would usually react in one of two distinct patterns: a weak lay authority [weak king] might "try to manipulate the sectarian break to its own advantage...favouring and even creating a sect out of incipient dissatisfactions", while a strong lay authority

[strong king] might "attempt and even succeed in forcing the whole Sangha into one pattern, with one head, and simply defrock or disbar those monks who do not conform. Turning over the whole Sangha to a new form giving extra stress to *Vinaya* may be part of this purification process" (Mendelson 1975: 25). The main reason given for changes within Sangha and between laity-Sangha relations was 'purification' which had "been both a laymen's task and internal monastic concern since Buddhism began" (Mendelson 1975: 25-6).

In a way the process of purification was to reaffirm the king's authority and sovereignty that he was the Buddhist king and a morally righteous ruler in accordance with the tradition, and in some cases this resulted in different kings linked with different sects of monk. Monks also played important roles in this process of legitimization. The first tentative evidence of the state's attempt to control Sangha, and hence religion, was found during the reign of *Dama-ze-di* (1460-92 A.D.), an ex-monk, who through the state controlled religion by introducing reforms aimed to eliminate the 'evils' of the Order and reinstitute *Vinaya* rules associated with the sacred place for monk ordination.[27] His reform set a precedent for the state control of the religion in later states (Hla Pe 1985: 193).

Further, during the reign of King Thalun (1629-48), the state-religion relation centered on disputes between the king and monks over landownership; the land then either belonged to a monastery or pagoda (under the management of the monks) or to the state (under the absolute king) (Hla Pe 1985: 194). He was

also involved in the purification of the order and defrocked those monks who were found to break the strict monastic rules (Than Tun 1988: 130), and setting up a monastic hierarchy consisting of *thathabaing* (Primate) and a council of abbots (Hla Pe 1985: 195). Further reform in the reign of *Bodawphaya* (1789-1819) required monks to follow the Three Refuges as a condition of entry to the Order and, following a rebellion by some monks, several were defrocked, became laymen, and left for the forest (Hla Pe 1985: 196).

The king had a traditional duty to purify the Sangha, and successive Burmese kings (i.e. from the 13th century to the late 17th century) modeled themselves as the 'defenders of the faith' (Than Tun 1988: 130). In times of peace and prosperity, as in Burmese kingdoms in 14th- 15th centuries, arts and literature flourished, and poetry and stories based on *Jataka* were the most popular form of religious literary activity that the majority of the Buddhists would engaged in, learn from, enjoy, and be entertained by (Hla Pe 1971: 60-8).

Conclusion

In summary, traditionally monk and laity in the Pagan period engaged in different religious practices and had different roles. The lay practice focused on religious buildings, donating pagodas and shrines, and supporting religious education in the form of sponsoring, producing, and maintaining religious scripts known as *Pitaka.* The Buddhist practices of monk were preaching and teaching, though a few engaged in meditation. In early Burma, between the 10th to the 14th century, the two most widespread meditation practices were

parami meditation and *satipatthana sutta,* composed of four methods of meditation. However, meditation was mainly practiced by monks while the laity's religious activities and practices were directed to making merit or accumulating *parami.*

The lay practice of religious donation and making merit, mostly in the forms of making texts and building pagodas, required considerable wealth and the supply of necessary resources such as labour and building materials. The written sacred canons and texts, then the prime source of Buddhism, were very expensive to make and produce. The role of the monk, in contrast, was to be religiously literate, including maintaining and producing text, as well as preaching, with the financial sponsorship of those who held the power (kings) as well as the wealth, as evidenced in the historical inscription of queens and kings in various ancient religious places.

Buddhist practice, in a relatively homogenous Burmese polity state, was as much about intellectual belief and ideas and desires as it was about social solidarity, evidenced in the consolidated and rigidly hierarchical political and social (slave and owner) organizations. The intellectual ethos, belief, and desire reflected the Buddhist cosmology, and Buddhist practice was informed by the belief in donation and making merit in the form of building pagodas, maintaining texts and religious building, and the belief in future re-birth in the time of Maitriya. These practices were intimately linked to the consolidating function and maintenance of the status quo of an economic organization

involving landowner, wealthy and slaves, and a political organization involving an absolute king, a unilateral descent lineage, Buddhist law, and a political hierarchy of princes and strongmen.

Endnotes

[I] There are two major different accounts, according to Mendelson (1975), between lower and upper Burma chronicles relating to the introduction of Buddhism. According to the chronicle tradition of Lower Burma, Buddhism was introduced to Burma with "a trip to Lower Burma by the Buddha himself ... with 'many hundred monks', in 536 B.C., followed in 309 B.C. by the arrival of the missionary monks *Sona* and *Uttara* with five others from the kingdom of Emperor Asoka in India. However, "Chronicle traditions for Upper Burma tell of missionizing in 523 B.C. and of a holy sage, or *arahat,* who lived atop a mountain where he received the teachings of the Buddha in person. Upper Burma also claims to have received in 309 B.C. a full mission from Asoka" (1975: 31). Burmese scholars, in particular Than Tun (1988), similarly give two different accounts about the historical introduction of Buddhism in Burma. One is that Buddhism was introduced to Burma via lower Burma. The other account states that well before the said Annawratha military conquest, there existed a mixture of various beliefs and practices of religions in which Buddhism was said to be practiced side by side with other influential religions such as Vishnuism, Mahayanism, and the worshipping of *Naga* among the *Pyu*, the indigenous people of central Burma (Than Tun 1988: 23-4, Hla Pe 1985: 190). See also Min Si Thu (1992) for the early introduction of Brahmanism into Burma, supposedly before Buddhism, especially in ancient 'legendary' towns in central Burma such as *Baid-thaa-no* and *Tha-yae-hkit-da-yar*, and the migration of Hinduism from the Ain-du delta in India and the cultural exchange of language and beliefs with the locals since about AD 300 (Min Si Thu 1992: 14, 105-6).

The king became an ardent Hinayanist, involved heavily in building pagodas and shrines, and spread the faith in the wake of his military excursions. This propagation resulted in the popular acceptance of the authority of the canonical text, the 'Anawratha Pali Buddhism' (Eliot 1954: 82, quoted in Tambiah 1970: 27). Historical records also mentioned that as early as in the reign of Annawratha the king exerted control and influence over the Sangha through the monks (Mendelson 1975: 53).

[3] For details about similar influences of Buddhism in other Theravada Buddhist countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, see, for example, Tambiah 1976 and Gombrich 1988. Also for discussions of other native polities in Southeast Asia, see Bentley (1986: 292-7).

[4] For example, for other details of the relationship between king and monk, and Buddha see The Glass Palace Chronicles of Burma, translated by Pe Maung Tin and Gordon H. Luce (1923).

A galactic polity is realized when the ideas of a righteous and world emperor as a religio-politico-moral conception of kingship is transformed and fully implemented into a concrete model of the polity. It is a state structure where Buddhist cosmology and practice are merged together to form a blueprint for a polity state, especially in terms of politics (Tambiah 1976: 32-42, 102).

According to a common Indo-Tibetan tradition, the mandala is composed of two elements - a core (manda) and a container or enclosing element (-la) (Tambiah 1976: 102).

[7] Bentley, however, commented, "Theravada Buddhist states are made to appear as if they emerged full-blown from the head of Indian King Asoka Maurya and never changed thereafter" (Bentley 1986: 293).

[8] The intimate relationship between urbanisation and Buddhism can also be found in canonical documents. The study of the social and economic status (or social composition) of Sangha and laity in early Sri Lanka, who contributed to a Buddhist canon of commentaries, revealed that more than two-thirds of them were educated, urban dwellers, land owners, and merchants (Gombrich 1988a: 55). "There is some evidence that the Buddha's message appealed especially to town-dwellers and the new social classes" (Gombrich 1988a: 55). Gombrich also argues that the rise of the laity movement, particularly during colonial times, was inspired by the western educated classes who delivered Buddhism through a filter of western ideology as well as using English translations of Buddhist texts to study and to propagate Buddhist teaching; and in this process they incorporated a 'western way of thought' in expounding Buddhism. In particular in terms of the social function of Buddhism, the 'new social classes' were educated and involved in textual aspects whereas the majority of peasants involved in ritual processes were involved with symbols in their religious participation (Gombrich 1988a: 55).

[9] Theravada Buddhism is, emphasized Spiro (1992: 74), based on "a materialistic metaphysic that denies the existence of a soul or self".

[10] In Brahmanism, *atman* denotes self or super-self that has 'extended or joint personality' that accounts for 'collective responsibility' (Tambiah 1976: 35), and in this sense 'self' extends to the constructed world and to the society. The self-extension form of Brahmanism constitutes the basic family and social foundation/relation (Tambiah 1976: 33). In alternating the self-centre and its social caste system of Brahmanism in India, the theoretical structure of Buddhism became formed (Stcherbatsky 1923: 11, in Tambiah 1988: 35).

[II] Kamma (P) or Karma (S) denotes 'action; rebirth-producing good or evil volition; the moral law' (Nyanaponika Thera 1962: 214). The Buddhist belief of Karma is an accumulation of merits and good deeds especially at present as well as in the past including one's previous life. One can improve further on karma by doing good deeds and thereby accumulating good merits. For example, the Buddhist

cosmological scheme lays out different stages of lives and celestial beings, through the process of birth and rebirth, revolving around the Wheel of Life.

[12] "The crucial problem Buddhism has to face is that of moral responsibility..." for collective social actions to account for social collectiveness or social relations (Tambiah 1976: 35). Buddhism, in its full historical significance, is not just a psychological... [it is] a social as well as a moral revolution" (quoted in Tambiah 1976: 35). According to Tambiah, theoretical formation of the polity state is built up with the Buddhist ideas where the "[e]xistence is an interplay of a plurality of subtle, ultimate elements called dharmas; these elements "alone are realities"; they have no duration but manifest as momentary "consecutive appearances" and flashings of new elements; they however cooperate with one another, and the "laws of interconnexion" prevailing between them (by which some elements appear accompanied by others in close contiguity with them) produce the world process" (Tambiah 1976: 36). This holistic Buddhist teaching is contrary to the assumption that the social projection of the Buddhist non-self ideas produces unrelated and un-connected pluralist atomic elements (Tambiah 1976: 35).

[13] Tambiah states, "...the Buddhist doctrine of nonself was not of importance at a philosophical and personal level only - it could act as the dissolvent of a system of social forms as well" (Tambiah 1976: 34). In other words, an individual Buddhist is believed to have non-self because he or she is subjected to change due to dharma, the law of impermanence. And in their collective terms, individuals and their relations are thought to be governed by a Buddhist cosmological structure (Tambiah 1976: 34-5).

[14] The "Asokan mythology is well entrenched in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, particularly the formula that the king is the patron and protector of the religion, that he must be necessarily be a Buddhist himself, and that such a king is an embodiment of dharma" (Tambiah 1976: 520).

[15] Tambiah S. J. 1977, "The galactic polity: The structure of traditional kingdoms in Southeast Asia". Ann. NY Acad. Sci. 293: 69-97, in Deducing patterns of Southeast Asia statecraft from the Buddhist theory of kingship.

[16] The conception of universal Buddhist kingship, according to Tambiam (1976), is derived from the notion of *mahapurusha* (involving the great man and the man total) as recorded in canonical literature. It is said that Buddha is *mahapurusha* par excellence and the role of the Buddha in the cosmological process is to 'reveal' it; while the second *mahapurusha*, also known as *cakkavatti*, is "the virtuous wheel-rolling world ruler who is a manifestation of the same incomparable perfection and who in his exalted capacity maintains in human affairs as much of the dharma that remains amid the general degradation of things" (Tambiah 1976: 38).

[17] The political structure was "pyramid and bureaucratic... built upon an ascending series of institutional patron-clientelistic ties.... At the very top of the pyramid was the court and king, a paradigm of pour points around the center, resembling the cosmic *mandala* reiterated in Burmese religious and state architecture". The political power of the king rested on hereditary basic and this applied similarly to the bottom of the pyramid such as headman (Aung-Thwin 1994: 30-1). And also despite change in administrative structure Burmese king remained as the traditional head of the state; in early times, "the Supreme King ruled the country through subordinate kings or vassals governing large provinces". From the mid-seventeenth century this evolved into a more distinct dual system where "[t]he Crown, with an Advisory Council, serving also as a High Court, was the centre from which there radiated an official administrative organization linking up through the hereditary petty chieftains with local affairs" (Furnivall 1956: 14).

[18] According to Tambiah, *Cakkavatti* (Pali), or *setkya-min* (in Burmese), *cakkraphat* (in Thai) and *cakravartin* (in Sanskrit) means "a universal monarch who rules over the entire world" (1987: 1- 2).

[19] Major Burmese chronicles include U Gala's Great Chronicle (a chronicle from beginning of the world to AD 1730), the 18th century Royal Celebrated Chronicle *(Yazawinkyaw)*, the early 18th century Great Royal Chronicle *(Mahayazawindawgyi)*, and the early 19th century Great Royal Chronicle of the Glass Palace *(Hmanan Mahayazawindawgyi)* (Hla Pe 1985: 41, Aung-Thwin 1982: 82). See also Hla Pe (1985) for lists of Burmese history written in various forms and styles such as stone inscriptions, verses and proses, and chronicles.

[20] *Pyu-zaw-di* is 'the egg-born child of the solar king and a female *naga* (serpent)' (Hla Pe 1985: 50).

[21] Pagan was built to house ruling class or aristocracy while mass of people lived outside the walls. Pagan was a centre or nucleus of Burma; it was sacred, protected, and supported by surrounding different races (Daw Thin Kyi 1966: 187).

The traditional Burmese legal structure consisted of civil and criminal laws. Civil law was known as *dhammathat*, and in civil law "no evidence for witness were available, trial by ordeal was sometimes resorted to, for after all, the whole cosmos was governed by karma and one's karma would surely reveal guilt or innocence regardless of the legal procedure used" (Aung-Thwin 1994: 34). "Not everyone was created equally under Burmese-Buddhist law...Punishment for a perpetrator of a crime was meted in accordance not only with that person's status, but also that of the victim. Someone hitting a person of high rank received more severe punishment than for hitting someone of equal or lower rank" (Aung-Thwin 1994: 33). Criminal law was known as *rajathat*, king's law, and was "more political in nature and dealt largely with crimes against the state, such as arson, murder, and rebellion" (Aung-Thwin 1994: 34)

[23] Furnivall described the life style of the medieval Burmese society: "The whole kingdom...was governed by the pen. No one could move without permission from one village to another. No one could transfer to another regiment or group, nor could anyone marry outside the regiment or group without paying a fine. No one could build a house, or dress, or even be buried except in a style appropriate to his rank... And anyone of the humblest birth... could aspire to the highest position, one broad avenue to promotion being the monastery. This complex social organization, medieval in character, was based almost entirely on agriculture" (1956: 15).

[24] *Parami* (P, S) means "'perfections'; virtues and faculties required for the attainment of Buddhahood" (Nyanaponika Thera 1962: 215). The fulfillment of *parami* is one important prerequisite to fulfill one's praying. "An inscription dated 1179 gives the time required as four *asankheyya* plus one hundred *kappa"*, where *asankheyya* means incalculable and *kappa* means earth or world; together it means 'the life of the earth' (Than Tun 1988: 29).

Than Tun also commented that most donors 'prayed for nirvana with no specifications', however there were some, like kings, great ministers, and learned scholars, who are said to have prayed for Buddhahood. And to attain a Buddhahood, it believed that one "must necessarily meet *Maitreya* Buddha so as to receive the actual prophecy from his lips as to the time when he would become a Buddha, so they were anxious to meet the Bodhisattva Maitreya" (Than Tun 1988: 27- 28).

[26] *Thathanabaing* is the Primate or official head of Sangha, chosen by the incumbent king (Hla Pe 1985: 195). The term *Thathanabaings*, heads of the Order, first appeared in records in the time of *Bodawpaya* (19th century). Previously there were only references to royal preceptors, who would tutor the king and would themselves be princes. "The role of thathanabaing is best seen...not so much in terms of the headship of the Order as in terms of a bridge between the royal power and the Order" (Mendelson 1975: 53).

[27] In *Dama-ze-di's Kalyani* inscriptions: "There were monks who practiced medicine and astrology; monks who made a living by embroidering the borders of women's skirts, or by carpentry and by ivory carving; monks who visited the harvest field and extracted offerings by loud voiced recitation of the law; monks who owned male and female slaves, cattle and buffaloes; monks who associated with gamesters and dissolute servants of the king" (Hla Pe 1985: 192).

Chapter Three

Mahasi vispassana in the modern nation state of Burma

In the past, Buddhist practice took an institutional form and was informed by Asokan ideas, but in contemporary times the practice of Buddhism has become focused on individual practice and informed by modern political ideas. Buddhism was modernized within the secular modern nation state of Burma particularly after Independence in 1948.

The beginning of lay meditation practice in the colonial period

The ideal of Theravada Buddhism striving for the Enlightenment individually and collectively had been an ultimate tradition of successive Burmese societies. Mendelson, the author of Sangha and State in Burma: a study of monastic sectarianism and leadership (1975), thus wrote: "If I say that Burmese Buddhist life as manifested both by Sangha and state constantly strives *toward* the highest ideals of Theravada without always achieving them, it should be remembered that such striving may be the best that mankind can expect and that, today, the striving is no longer even true of the largest area our species inhabits on this earth" (original emphasis, 1975: 30).

Vispassana emerged in response to colonial domination, when colonialism severed the traditional structure based on the king-monk bonding wherein the sacred state is headed by the king who legitimates his moral authority from the guidance of monks. The structural breakdown resulting from colonial rule generated the spread of vispassana from the centre to the general public and led to the initial popularisation of vispassana (Houtman 1990, Jordt 2001).

It has been argued that the history of Buddhist practice "… 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. Only in the course of this [19th] century did Buddhist texts come alive by having been put in practice" (Houtman 1997a: 323). Furthermore, this transformation of Buddhist practice had over-ridden the "conventional history of Buddhism [which] was a history of scriptural learning, where Buddhist 'practice' *(pa-di-pat-ti)* and its fruits 'remain hidden'" (Houtman 1997a: 323) to develop a new form of practice.

The practices of the Buddhist laity, which had remained relatively unchanged since the Pagan era, were significantly transformed in the 19th century, most specifically in the reign of Mindon (1853-1878). This king pioneered the introduction of meditation practice among laity in addition to his energetic supporting, promoting, and sponsorship of Buddhism and the Sangha. For example, the king undertook many royal projects to propagate Buddhism: in

1856 he passed the Royal Order on the Purification of the Religion that effectively began the transformation process. By 1868 the inscription of the sacred *pitaka* onto 729 stones and the copying onto palm-leaves in gold and ink were completed. In 1871 the King successfully organized the Fifth Synod of the Buddhists in the royal capital of Mandalay (Houtman 1990: 29).

More significantly, the practice of lay meditation became popular with Mindon's royal sponsorship and the spread of personal practice and involvement (Houtman 1990: 25-7). He not only practised the meditation himself but also sponsored and propagated it throughout monasteries and monks to be practiced by others, including his own families (Houtman 1990: 26). The meditation was concentrated at the court, being incorporated into royal discipline particularly in the 1840s- 1850s. It was, however, "very much an aristocratic technique intended for the royal court and the monks" (Houtman 1997: 311).

The reason Mindon (1853-1878) shared an interest in meditation was due to his experiences during the Anglo-Burmese wars. "[T]he interest by Mindon in meditation on impermanence fits in with the enormous changes his kingdom were subject to, and in coping with his own sufferings as a result" (Houtman 1990: 39).[1] His personal interest was evidenced in a royal commission on literacy about ancient literatures on meditation, including *Thathana Wuntha*, an important Buddhist history and practice written by Pyinnya Thasi (1861), the *thathanabaing* of Mindon. Pyinnya Thasi wrote: "He [Mindon] himself also

always made an effort toward calmness and intuition. But as the kings who are lords of countries have many legitimate duties, sometimes they do not get a chance to give themselves up to meditation. As such he would give himself up to meditation even at the time of letting out the excrement from his body. He would not spend time in vain. He would also bring from the cemetery the bones of human heads, skulls, and the like that were called inauspicious in the world, and having had them turned into tooth-picks or other similar things he would place them near him and accumulate the merit produced by the meditation on the bones and the like" (Houtman 1990: 39).

The gradual spread of meditation from the royal court to wider society came about with the British intrusion that saw a diminishing of the traditional Burmese polity. It was within "the gradual contraction of the 'monarchical' universe at the beginning of the 19th century, and with the expansion of the 'foreign' universe through the encroachment of the British" (Houtman 1990: 30) that some prominent monks, including Ledi Sayadaw, left Mandalay, the centre of Buddhist learning, to go to other peripheral parts of the country. Monks moved to regions where Buddhist support was not yet infiltrated by the 'foreign universe'.

This movement was epitomised by Ledi Sayadaw (b.1846) who studied Buddhist philosophy in Mandalay during the Burmese-Anglo wars. Soon after upper Burma was colonised, the monk reportedly responded to the invasion of the British by giving up cow meat, because the foreigners were renowned for

their indulgence in meat, and then eventually retreated into the forest (Houtman 1990: 29-30). The retreat of Ledi Sayadaw was "to eventually inspire Burmese Buddhists to take more than a passing interest in meditation" (Houtman 1990: 30).[2] In addition to vispassana, Ledi Sayadaw was expert in Buddhist literature and produced numerous comprehensive Buddhist treatises.

Thus the eventual popularization of vispassana among the Burmese mass laity could be attributed to the movement of monks to the peripheral areas due significantly to the breakdown of the tradition of interdependency between king and monk after the imposition of British colonial rule. The complete British annexation of upper Burma and the rest of the country in 1885, following two Anglo-Burmese wars in 1826 (western Burma) and 1852 (lower Burma), symbolized a drastic transformation of the old function of the Burmese state,[3] which was transformed from political power centering and resting on one individual to power vested in the impersonal institutions of a Westernised state structure (Houtman 1990: 26).

Aung-Thwin (1992: 22-3), likewise, states that the 19th century colonialism caused "fundamental change in structure", specifically of king and monk relations, that had been the defining feature of successive Burmese kingdoms since its first inception in Pagan during the 13th century, spanning over 600 years. The colonial administration replaced the unchanging tradition of 'structure', characterized as consolidation of power and wealth based on principles of'hierarchy and centricity'.[4]

With the breakdown of the traditional structure of the Burmese polity, the Buddhist practices of monk and king also underwent changes and reforms. The structural, intimate, and interdependent relationships between religion and state were severely weakened after the 1885 British colonisation of Burma, and the core traditional monarchical support was severed, which resulted in the weakening of the formal *sangha* institution but also encouraged and spread Buddhism to other peripheral areas of Burma.

Colonialism, Buddhism, and Vispassana

In the colonial period Buddhism underwent significant changes (Mendelson 1975, Smith 1965, and Cady 1958, Houtman 1990: 36). Buddhism was no longer part of the formal function of the state under the British colonial administration: the British government introduced a secular administration based on a colonial policy of bureaucratic and economic efficiency (Furnivall 1956: 278-9). Yet, the tradition of Buddhist influence still continued to shape not only the worldview of the Burmese but also almost all their political movements found their motivation, ideas, resources, and inspiration from Buddhism (Tambiah 1976: 520).

In the Burmese struggle for Independence, Buddhism provided a common resource for a united, harmonious, singular, and undifferentiated force, combining different classes, ethnicities, as well as socio-political backgrounds. Buddhism provided "a very powerful idiom of opposition to foreign rule. Theravada Buddhism unites Burmans, who constitute approximately three-

quarters of Burma's population, with the Shan and the Mon, the largest indigenous ethnic groups" (Houtman 1990: 36). Significantly, the Thakin nationalist movement and YMBA (Young Men's Buddhist Association) emphasised a common Burmese national identity and united different classes, the educated urban as well as rural, and for them Buddhism served as a source for national unity and identity (Houtman 1990: 36, Jordt 2001: 316).

Some movements against colonial domination aimed to restore the Burmese monarchical state characterised by the tradition of state-religion binding. For example, the millenarian movement of *weiksa* whose aim was to bring back kingship and hasten the arrival of the next Buddha. With their belief in the 'end of world age', the *Samata Weiksa* cult followed the Asokan paradigm in which the king was the protector of the faith and state, 'taking care' of the religion through paternalistic and authoritarian action, and the perpetuation of the *thathana* (Jordt 2001: 18). The later *Saya San* revolt occurred against the background of the economic depression in 1927-30 during which numerous peasants, particularly in lower Burma, suffered. A major cause of the depression was the fall in the price of rice and subsequently many peasants lost their mortgaged land to *chettyar* moneylenders.

Although vispassana meditation commonly shared many values with the *Thakin* nationalist movements, the *Saya San* peasant revolt and the YMBA (Young Burman Buddhist Association) in that it associated with the continuing influence of Buddhism, yet vispassana Buddhist practice and ideas remained

very distinctive. "Unlike the newly formed Buddhist associations such as the YMBA and the GCBA, the WM [vispassana] meditation traditions emerging during the colonial period were not implicated in the struggle for national Independence" (Houtman 1990: 44).

The first-known vispassana contemplation centre for the masses was established in 1911 in Myo Hla, under the teaching of Mingun Sayadaw, the teacher of Mahasi Sayadaw (Houtman 1997a: 311). Although in the 1930s, vispassana movement grew in response to economic depression, it continued to put emphasis on taking care of individual wellbeing, which was in contrast to the unsuccessful *Saya San* peasant rebellion which was engaged in politically and violent with the authority. Maung Maung (1980: 109) thus commented: the disappointment of "the people with their heroes of the 1920s created a deep and lasting distrust of politicians and a distaste for politics...The aspirations and energies of the people became redirected towards the improvement of their individual physical needs and spiritual well-being...in the 1930s people ignored erstwhile leaders, and devoted their energies and wealth in single-minded pursuit of Buddhist sanctity".

The outcome of this disillusionment, however, had far-reaching consequences: "[I]t seemed as though the whole nation was going into training in mental health, spiritual strength, and intellectual discipline,...this period of single-minded Buddhist studies would seem to be one of strengthening the national

will for the forthcoming decade-long struggle for Independence" (Maung Maung 1980: 113).[5]

To summarise, there were two reasons for the popularity of meditation. The early stage of the popularity of the vispassana meditation was due to the formal support (or the formal role of the king) inherent in the structural relationship between the Burmese Kingship and the Sangha, until the king's authority was undermined by the colonial authority. In the later phase, the emerging 'popularity' of the vispassana meditation was due to the efforts of some prominent monks especially on the eve of British colonization.

The initial vispassana movement originated in response to encroaching colonialism which had created a separation of Sangha and state; the practice then shifted to peripheral remote areas and was further spread by some prominent monks who taught it to the mass laity. This shift gradually altered the traditional roles of monks from preaching Dharma to practising Dharma through vispassana meditation. In a way, colonization created the decentralization of Buddhism and the consequent generalization of vispassana practice among laity.

The vispassana movement in the colonial period had a non-political character, with its emphasis on individual spirituality and well-being, and it sought to transform society by reforming the individual laity (Jordt 2001: 16). In essence, vispassana had neither political nor social connotations; it was an

individual practice to cope with the crisis and suffering of life by "means of purification of the laity's own actions and mental intentions" (Jordt 2001: 17-8).[6]

Post-Independence Burma and Buddhist Revivalism

A newspaper article entitled the 'Foundation of Worldly Nirvana' *(Lawka Neikpan Ei A-chae Hkan)* published on the front page on the day of Independence, 4th January 1948, demonstrated the relevance of Buddhist ethics in the newly independent nation state. The article basically conferred the rights of the individual to enjoy personal freedom after Independence but condemned unruly behaviour based on *lawba* (greed), *dawtha* (hatred), and *mawha* (ignorance); civilised behaviours, which are to be promoted, are those characterised by moral citizenry (Myanma Alin Newspapers 1948, in Dagon U Hla Paw 1956: 80-1).

This article exemplified the continuing influence of Buddhist values on Burmese ideas about individual actions and their relation to society. Not only did a Buddhist ethos continue to inform the new society, it was within the local Burmese Buddhist terms that so-called 'western imported ideology' was accepted, comprehended, and acted out. According to Sarkisyanz (1978: 94): "Though democracy and socialism were adapted by Burma from Britain, they were accepted within the context of a Buddhist social ethos... Independence from England increased the dependence of Burma's politicians upon the traditionalist majority for which the unfamiliar abstractions of "democracy" and

"socialism" could become comprehensible only in the familiar Buddhist context. Thus Buddhism had to leave deep imprints on the absorption of borrowed Western political concepts by the Burmese public". More recently Jordt (2001: 329) has similarly observed that vispassana provided a local way to talk about democracy, in particular the ideas about individuality and modernized society.

The state in post Independence Burma preserved a special place for Buddhism. In particular, the state saw the revival of Buddhism as part of its nation building process because Buddhism was seen as providing the social solidarity it needed, as it had done in the case of Burmese nationalism. "[I]ndeed most politicians, even the ardent reformers and modernizers, have felt the imperative need to ally themselves with the revival of Buddhism and to declare their political aims as being consistent with Buddhism" (Tambiah 1976: 521). The revival of Buddhism in the newly independent Burma took the form of practice-oriented Buddhism, and since then it has dominated the political discourse about nation building, in particular in relation to economic development. For example, leading up to Burma's first democratic election, U Nu, a politician as well as a devout and pious Buddhist, campaigned to have Buddhism recognised as the state religion (Spiro 1982: 385). He subsequently won the election and became the Prime Minister of Burma.

The newly elected Nu government shaped the Buddhist revivalism in line with prior endeavours of the state to build a new nation. Subsequently, the

government in 1954 hosted the international Sixth Buddhist Synod in Rangoon[7] with much public ritual and celebration, lasting almost six years and involving the energetic participation of Buddhists all around the country. The future Burma, according to the Nu government, was to construct *Pyi Taw Thar* (a welfare state) based on Buddhist ethos. According to a report about public policy by the Nu government, published in 1954: "Buddhism (its belief and practice) is no obstacle to development rather it is complementary... the government endeavors to build a successful nation state free of problems and obstacles to livelihood, economy, health, security and mental and physical strength... so that after their hardwork people are able to engage in Buddhist practice *'thila'* with peace of mind (translated from, U Nu, Union of Burma, 1954: 12).

The incorporation of practice-oriented Buddhism into the social and economic projects of the Nu government specifically highlighted the meditation practice: the government encouraged people to work hard so that once economic prosperity was achieved everyone would be able to enjoy the fruit of Sansana. In some ways, according to Spiro, U Nu's inspiration was similar to that of Asoka in that he saw the aims of the state as setting up a provision for Buddhist practice; that the state was to create conditions, beyond material prosperity, conducive for people to engage in religious/spiritual practice.[8] In addition, U Nu's state development policy could be seen as 'Asokan Buddhism' in that it "attempt[ed] to forge a bridge between Buddhism and the world" (Spiro 1982: 429).

The "Asokan Buddhism has had a strong advocate and a relentless promoter [in the Prime Minister]...in moving the adoption of the parliamentary act which would make Buddhism the state religion of Burma. U Nu's first argument was in the classical Asokan mode: If the government provides for the welfare of the people in such matters as education, health, and economic prosperity in the short span of life of this existence, it should [also] provide for their welfare in the inestimably long future existences *[The* (Rangoon) *Nation*, May 24, 1961]" (Spiro 1982: 430).[9]

Moreover, the Buddhist revival was reflected not only in the political project of the state but also in donation activities, essential Buddhist obligations, of U Nu and his government who "sponsored the restoration and construction of pagodas, the translation of Buddhist texts, and the creation of the Ecclesiastical Courts and of Pali Buddhist universities [and] devotional acts such as the freeing of animals on Buddhist holy days" (Spiro 1982: 385).

Mahasi and Buddhist Revivalism: the establishment of practice-oriented Buddhism

U Nu's personal support, as well as that of his government, of the practice-oriented Buddhism identified with vispassana practice led to the Mahasi Centre being incorporated into the function of the state. In other words, Mahasi and the state interrelated with each other through their respective promotions of revival Buddhism. The Centre's aim to promote practice-oriented Buddhism was consistent with the aim of the newly independent state in its utilisation of

Buddhism as the essential social and political force in the nation building process.

It was also within the process of Buddhist revivalism, and in particular through the key involvement of Mahasi Sayadaw, the preceptor of the Centre, in the 1954 Buddhist Synod that the Mahasi Meditation Centre came to embody and represent practice-oriented Buddhism.[10] The centre had earlier been founded by laity, including U Nu, a year before Burma gained Independence from Britain in 1948. Houtman (1990: 50) claims that "vispassana was exploited by the Nu government in order to exercise indirect influence over the many private Buddhist societies which had already appeared, and from which it hoped to derive some general legitimacy".

The Nu government was associated with Mahasi vispassana in that both emphasised and promoted the meditation practice as a masterpiece of modernity in post-Independence Buddhism. Not only were government officials urged to participate in meditations but many of them were encouraged in the form of leave, enabling them to take part in meditation courses (Spiro 1982: 273). It was also widely known that U Ba Khin, then general accountant of Burma and a lay meditation teacher, even set aside a separate room in his office suite for meditation. Thus vispassana practice in the 50's was "part of an integrated solution of setting up an independent nation state" (Houtman 1990: 45).

The Mahasi lay association, BTNA (Buddha Thathana Nuggaha Association), was crucial in promoting the Mahasi centre and, through its institutional link with government departments, it enabled the government to draw upon the existing popularity of this meditation. "This organization [BTNA] did a great deal more than propagating meditation: it promoted activities central to the Revival and the Sangayana... and it fathered the Government *Naing-nagn-daw Bok-da-ba-tha Tha-tha-na A-hpwe* (NBTA) set up in the 1950, the leadership of which was, with minor modifications, the same as that of the BTNA" (Mendelson 1975: 267, 271, quoted in Houtman 1990: 46). Within a few years vispassana became so popular that its networks were extended at the village level (Jordt 2001: 318).

The state's support for vispassana practice also focused on the morality of government officials. For example, it was said that government officials who practiced meditation would be un-corruptible and hence the practice could be used to fight against corruption and immorality (Jordt 2001: 320). U Nu himself also "frequently retreated for long periods of meditation, especially when faced with political crises" (Spiro 1982: 273).

The Nu Government's vision of a Buddhist 'welfare state' *(Pyi Thaw Thar)* was concerned primarily with creating material conditions such that people could engage in Buddhism, in particular meditation practice. However, a major concern of the Socialist government was to create a secular Burmese socialist state. It aimed to achieve a socialist 'utopia' state in which capitalism

and its economic enterprises were to be regarded as the root of immorality and obstacles to the achievement of the utopian goal.

Mahasi Vispassana after 1962

The Mahasi Centre, which had been so ardently supported by the state under the Nu government, experienced a setback under the regime of the Revolutionary Council headed by General Ne Win who, in 1962, staged a military coup, citing political instability (Steinberg 1981: 24-5). The military regime immediately nationalised almost all major private industries and businesses and that affected the laity significantly, "depriving the Sangha of independent support" (Houtman 1999: 309). The Ne Win regime in 1965 also repealed Nu's policy of Buddhism as a state religion; the public policy of the post-1962 military government was "no longer to put Buddhism or the meditation centre in the forefront of government policy" (Houtman 1990: 52).

The popularity of Mahasi meditation during this period, nevertheless, continued unabated.[11] A few years later Mahasi was approached by Ne Win when he "had become acutely aware that [the Burmese] socialist ideology could not...operate entirely as a secular ideology" (Houtman 1999: 309). In 1965 Mahasi was invited to speak on the state radio for "four successive rainy seasons between 1965- 68, addressing the general public in Burmese on each of the four individual *Byama-so taya"* (Houtman 1999: 309).[u] Instead of vispassana teaching, the Sayadaw addressed *byamaso taya* because, stated Houtman (1999: 309), the Sayadaw believed that the people might had have

difficulty with meditation and "not every one could practise it". Houtman, thus, argues that "an idea that Burma was on the move from Buddhist 'tradition' to secular 'ideology' after 1962 is deceptive... socialism has mostly not been conceived as an ideology at all, but as a typically Burmese Buddhist practice, namely as *byama-so taya,* a kind of social meditation" (1999: 309). It founded on building social relationships as a moral practice.

The *Byamaso taya* idea was derived originally from *brahma-vihara,* the meditation practice of Samatha. As preliminary stages of vispassana, the *Samatha brahma-vihara* meditation consists of four kinds of sublime states: loving-kindness *(metta),* compassion *(karuna),* sympathetic joy *(mudita),* and equanimity *(upekkha),* collectively characterized by Mahasi as '*Brahmavihara Dhamma'* (Houtman 1999: 313). "Commonly translated as 'the Four Divine Abodes' or 'the Four Sublime States', these are identified as Brahma practices and as leading to the Brahma heavens, the top heavens in Buddhist cosmology (which has thirty-one planes of existence). Their cosmological reach and positive influence on the world, from a Buddhist and a socio-political point of view, means they are sometimes designated as 'the Four Guardians of the World'" (Houtman 1999: 313). According to Houtman (1999: 313), *metta* and *karuna* meditations are popular in Burma. *Byamaso taya,* in particular its *metta* and *karuna* meditations, was thus advocated as individual practices necessary for a Burmese vision of social and political foundations.

The first known reference to the idea of 'Socialism underpinned by *byama-so taya'* was made in a speech by Aung San, the father of the Independence of Burma, before he was assassinated in 1947. It was later adopted by U Nu (1949-62), whose primary aim in building a prosperous welfare state was to create favourable conditions for vispassana meditation. Some termed the policy as 'no full stomach, no morality' or 'one can meditate only if the stomach is full' (Houtman 1999: 310).

From 1962 until 1971, the Nu maxim of 'no full stomach, no morality' was further incorporated as a core idea into the military regime's political vision of Burma (Houtman 1999: 309-10). For instance, the first document, produced on 30 April 1962, envisioned the military's project of the *Burmese Way to Socialism* as: "The Revolutionary Council of the Union of Burma does not believe that man will be set free from social evil as long as pernicious economic systems exist in which man exploits man and lives on the fat...of appropriation. The Council believes it to be possible only when exploitation of man by man is brought to an end and a socialist economy based on justice is established... *for an empty stomach is not conducive to wholesome morality..* only then can an affluent stage of social development be reached and all people be happy and healthy in mind and body" (emphasis added, Houtman 1999: 310).[13]

The Burmese Way to Socialism and Mahasi meditations

From 1971 onwards, the newly founded BSPP (1974-1988) (Burma Socialist Program Party, in Burmese *Myanma Socialist Lanzin Party)* dropped its policy reference to 'full stomach first, morality second', after Ne Win realized that the slogan "had became associated with, and was an excuse for, corruption", and replaced it with *byamaso taya* as the core of their socialist ideology.

Thus, barely three years after Mahasi had completed his popular radio preaching, *byamaso taya* officially became BSPP's objective, 'characterizing this practice as the foundation of socialism' (Houtman 1999: 310) as seen in 'Our Belief', the socialist policy statement printed in the preface of every party document: "We seriously believe that people cannot be emancipated from their suffering because of the prevalence of the evil economic systems controlled by unjust and avaricious people, who rule the roost and have disheartened the peoples of the world by overturning noble qualities... We believe that it is a serious matter that people cannot free themselves from suffering. That is why this Union of Socialist Burma wants to silence such an avaricious system which seeks unjust prosperity, and which unjustly oppresses people. We seriously believe that we can build a socialist economy.. in which the *Byamaso taya* can flourish, permitting people to liberate themselves from suffering" (Houtman 1999: 3).

In the 80's, the public policy of Ne Win's government focused on the alleged exploitative and immoral behaviors that were considered obstacles to its

socialist economy. In the same way as *byamaso taya* became the core of socialist ideology, a social norm of conduct, namely *Lu Kaung Lu Daw* (good and holy first [Buddhist morality and meditation], bright and skilful second [secular education]) was subsequently adopted and replaced *Lu Daw Lu Kaung*, 'bright and skilful first, good and holy second' which had been the military's government policy since the early 60's (Houtman 1990: 53). The re-orientation of the government's policy towards Buddhism was also made to accommodate the personal interests of Ne Win as well as those of General San Yu, the President of the socialist government (1981-88);[14] at least "the military Government began to pay lip service to Buddhist morality as a positive qualification for Burmese citizens" (Houtman 1990: 53).

In any case, the political re-orientation can be considered as an attempt by the socialist government to use the popularity of Mahasi (through his earlier teaching of *byamaso taya)* and, on a broader scale, the popularity of Buddhism to exert control over the population. The Mahasi centre throughout the socialist era was in effect controlled by the government. The Ne Win government, for example, obliged the Centre "to put their liquid assets in government banks" (Houtman 1990: 53)[15] in addition to controlling it through "an elaborate *state sangha council*- one that mirrors sangha organization down to the village tract level - so that at every level sangha and the state would be integrated and intertwined" (emphasis added, Jordt 2001: 325-6).

In the periods leading up to the collapse of the socialist government in 1988, Ne Win was seen by many as acting like a terror 'king', who would not tolerate any dissent or hesitate to arrest and jail anyone who dared raise their dissident political views. Ne Win, the first military ruler, "sought to act as kings do in the sangha-state pattern, recognizing that if he controlled the monks he also therefore controlled the people, through various purifications of the sangha. Ne Win began purification with the burning of non-Orthodox books, disrobing monks and throwing them into hard labour" (Jordt 2001: 325).

Ne Win also was infamously denounced for his belief in and practice of black magic; he was said to employ, on a full time permanent basis, experts in black magic. He strongly believed his lucky number was number nine and with this belief he was involved in acts of *yadaya chae;*[16] a kind of black magic employed to undo or get rid of one's bad omens or misfortune, usually on the advice of a magician. Significantly from the mid-80s, many major changes undertaken by the Ne Win government were alleged to be associated with his acts of *yadaya chae,* including a demonetisation of Burmese currency in 1987 which introduced new 45 and 90 banknotes, which were obviously based on the number nine denominators (Lintner 1990: 192). This demonetisation, though aimed to deal with uncontrollable inflation and the alleged illegal circulation of fake banknotes, added to the already existing economic underperformance and had a devastating effect on the economy and the livelihood of the people.

Under the socialist regimes, specifically during politically and economically unstable times, religious riots frequently occurred, usually between Buddhists and Muslims in urban areas. Many saw these as deliberate attempts by the government to shift the public's attention away from the economic hardship embedded in the socialist government mismanagement of the country; for example, "thousands of Muslims are believed to have died in bloody ethnic riots involving Buddhists and Muslims in 1958, 1961 and 1974" (SA, 'Myanma', pp. 165-6, in Selth 2003: 10),[17] in addition to "violent anti-Muslim demonstrations in both Lower and Upper Burma in the mid-1980s".

By the mid-80s cracks in the Burmese socialist economy under state controlled enterprise appeared in the forms of hyper-inflation, shortage of rice and other essential commodities such as oil, high in-kind tax on rice products on farmers, widespread black markets, and rampant corruption which already had taken root for quite some years. In many ways, while the majority of people in Burma were economically, socially and even educationally disadvantaged, the socialist ministers and their families benefited and lived lavish lives. Public disaffection and resentment took various forms; from outright armed resistance movements by ethnic groups since 1962, and, more notably, student demonstrations such as the 1974 U Thant (the former UN General Secretary) funeral affair, and finally the 1988 student-led nationwide public demonstration, known also as the 8888 uprising, that toppled the Ne Win socialist government.[18]

Buddhism, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (1988-97)/ the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (1997-) military regimes

In post 1988 politics, Buddhism significantly came to assume a more distinct role in Burma. Specific Buddhist idea of *byamaso taya* was energetically revitalized and emphasized as essential practice, mainly to morally justify claims to political legitimacy, albeit in different ways, by both the military regimes and its political opposition, the NLD (National League for Democracy). The popular practices of metta and karuna[19] had particular political importance in that they "primarily serve as a way of forming bonds between individuals so as to make possible a sense of groupness" (Houtman 1999: 316).[20] Also the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council), immediately after its military coup in September 1988, incorporated into its program the *Thirty-Eight Mangala Sutta*, the 38 auspicious Buddhist guides to moral conduct of which *byamaso taya* formed a part. The regime since then regularly has publicised these Mangala Sutta slogans in daily official newspapers.[21]

The regime, in particular, utilised the *byamaso taya* to emphasize the concept of group or social solidarity to support its claim for the newly invented but exclusive Burmese national identity (Houtman 1999: 316- 9).[22] The regime, in addition, used it sceptically to criticise democracy and to specifically target Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of democratic movement and the general

Secretary of NLD. They alleged she symbolized foreign elements due to her marriage to a British husband, being educated overseas, and advocating foreign principles of democracy. These attitudes of the regime were evidenced in its official policy, the People's Desire, which was publicised on signposts in major public places as well as in government dailies (Houtman 1999: 382-3).[23]

In addition, personal criticisms of Aung San Suu Kyi and democracy also took the form of cartoons, articles, and books and one of them is What is Aung San Suu Kyi? Whither does Aung San Suu Kyi go? by Pe Kan Kaung (Houtman 1999: 279-80). An article in the New Light of Myanmar newspaper (1996) reflected the regime's interest in *byamaso taya:* "We Myanmar have *Byamaso Taya* the four cardinal virtues or sublime states of mind. These, namely metta, karuna, mudita, and upekkha are so deeply profound that they cannot be defined by such little words as love or kindness... However deep and profound they *[brahma-vihara* practices] are to us, they may not be so for those who have forsaken their own lineage and origin, having a high opinion only of foreigners and taking them as their spouses" (Houtman 1999: 319), a comment undoubtedly directed against Aung San Suu Kyi for marrying a foreigner and forsaking her own Burmese racial lineage.

Thus for the SLORC, the *byamaso taya* was manipulated to reinforce its own political objective: to discredit NLD and the democratic movement which they alleged were infiltrated with 'destructive foreign elements' peculiar to the Buddhist foundation of Burma (Houtman 1999: 320). NLD (specifically its

senior members), in contrast to SLORC, interpreted and emphasised *byamaso taya* not only as individual practice but also incorporated it into its non-violent political strategy.

The vispassana meditation practice had a long and significant tradition among prominent politicians in Burma: for example, U Nu who emphasized *byamaso taya* in his advocacy for vispassana for national development, U Tin Oo (of NLD) who recently used it to criticise the SLORC regime, saying that if they practise vispassana the generals will be able to 'foster metta that way', and finally Aung San Suu Kyi who through her personal advocacy of *brahma vihara,* "aims to bring the military 'into the fold' of peaceful and harmonious government" (Houtman 1999: 315).[24] In general, the NLD, and especially Aung San Suu Kyi, identified its practical embodiment of *byamaso taya* with *metta* meditation, and through its collective practice the meditation movement came to be known as a 'social meditation'- to cope with fear generated by the oppressive military regime and hence to be free from political and social constraints.

Vispassana was known to be practiced by Aung San Suu Kyi and U Tin Oo, among many others, especially during their frequent imprisonments and when under house arrest, notably since the early 1990s. Commented Houtman: "In the face of... difficult personal circumstances, she [Aung San Suu Kyi] began to take a greater interest in the development of 'inner spiritual strength' and in the practice of Buddhist techniques of mental culture" (Houtman 1999: 291).[25]

Aung San Suu Kyi practiced vispassana, under the guidance of the new preceptor of the Mahasi Meditation Centre, Sayadaw U Panthida (Jordt 2001: 321).[26] U Tin Oo had also long been practising vispassana in the Mahasi tradition.[27]

For individuals, vispassana practice produces 'moral citizenry', and for collective individuals vispassana relates to the foundation of a society based on morality and *metta* (Jordt 2001: 319). The individual practice of vispassana, in particular *byamaso taya metta* meditation, was the basis of political legitimacy for the NLD (Jordt 2001: 313- 4, 328). Under the dominion of the military oppression, *metta* meditation provided protection for the individual from the danger and fear which had been prevalent since Ne Win's BSPP regime (Houtman 1999: 330). Aung San Suu Kyi once commented that *if metta* was indeed practised by the generals there would no longer be military governance - the generals were criticised for lack of *metta* towards the Burmese people.[28] The practice, subsequently, was incorporated as a principle into the NLD's non-violent resistance strategy for democracy (Jordt 2001: 328).

The three functions of *metta* meditation showed, according to Houtman, how this meditation practice is an individual religious practice as well as a social and political instrument forming social solidarity: The function of *metta*, firstly, is "a very powerful mental process which.. removes all kinds of danger and [thus] copes with fear. And secondly, in mental culture, it leads to *samadhi* (concentration) and is also "an important departure point for the

practice of vispassana". And thirdly, it "stresses the social elements of Buddhism and permits the emergence of feelings of solidarity and the formation of a society" (Houtman 1999: 14).

Political and moral legitimacy

Schober has recently observed that the contemporary politics of Burma could be characterized as being related to two distinct versions of Buddhism; "[t]hey are the nationalist, centralized, and ritualistic patronage of Buddhism by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) on the one hand, and the socially engaged Buddhism advocated by Aung San Suu Kyi that emphasizes personal, social engagement, ethics and meditation, on the other" (2005: 2). These two Buddhist versions result from the "competing claims about moral authority, political legitimacy, and national community" (Schober 2005: 1- 2) and they, according to Houtman, are rooted in the Burmese traditional notions of power and legitimacy. The Buddhist practice of the military regimes is associated with *anna* (authority) and the practice of its political opposition, the NLD, is associated with *awsa* (influence) (Houtman 1999: 319).

Anna/ Awsa and ritual hierarchy/ individual spirituality

According to Houtman (1999: 161), there are two models of political action in Burma: authority *(anna)* and influence *(awsa)* models. The authority model is 'centralized' and contemporarily associated with the military regimes whose leaders 'operate on the basis of authority and they have no interest in transforming their subjects into active citizens'. By contrast the influence

model, which is associated with NLD, is related to idea of 'dispersal' and 'function on the basis of more than just duties or obligations on the part of its citizens' (Houtman 1999: 161).

The authority model, according to Houtman, originated in the Asokan charity of building pagodas and having the scriptures copied, especially at the beginning of a new reign when it is considered a required act of charity, or *cetana,* which is one of the first duties of a king (first of the Ten Royal Duties) as well as of laity (first of the Ten Parami) (1999: 163). Houtman notes that this concept of charity has other implications in that it also can build or extend 'domains of social, political and economic transactions and relationships' (Houtman 1999: 164). In other words, the authority model of political actions, rooted in obligation for charity, is also associated with 'spatialising, territorializing, and placing' of political authority (Houtman 1999: 161).

On the other hand, the influence model of political action is driven by *metta,* 'the unbounded love for all creatures without preference' (Houtman 1999: 165). In particular, *metta* as a vispassana practice 'longs for representation of diversity and for self-empowerment that elude the boundaries of State' (Houtman 1999: 165). Houtman argues that the 1988 events and 1990 election are evidence that "Burma had outgrown the authoritarian mode of government" (1999: 165). Aung San Suu Kyi, because of her advocacy of *metta* practice as well as domestic and international influences, is a model for "women [in Burma who] have increasingly been portrayed as exercising major influence in

Burma, in particular on men with formal authority over the house....[and she herself] is portrayed as responding to these alien values like a puppet on a string" (Houtman 1999: 165).

The government regularly and publicly engaged in the donation (public ritual) on the basic of patron-client relations, with the funds mostly contributed by private businessmen (Jordt 2001: 279-280).[29] Those businessmen who made these financial contributions then received favors such as business contracts, state concessions and privileges (logging or monopoly trade rights etc.) from government officers. This patron-client relation between state officer and businessmen is a distinct feature of ritual practice Buddhism.

After 1988 SLORC/SPDC was involved extensively in 'public' rituals such as donating; "...SLORC government has made even more assiduous efforts to be seen as foremost among the laity in propagating dhamma (the traditional role of the kings). SLORC is not just concerned with controlling the religious practices of the laity; they have also sought to use the monastic order to further the state project through a 'conquer, pacify and convert' program" (Jordt 2001: 326).

News about the senior government ministers and officials, many of them high ranking military, making donations, building and renovating pagodas, and engaging in other so-called auspicious activities such as restorations of pagan ruins, renovation of pagodas such as the world famous Shwedagon Pagoda, and

having the 'white elephants',[30] have become a daily function and duty of the state and is frequently published on the front pages of state controlled newspapers. The regime bases its solidarity on force and seeks political legitimacy by means of 'purification' involving public ritual (Jordt 2001: 325-6).

The alter tradition of political legitimacy is based on *metta.* The mythical *Mahadamada,* the first elected king who is assimilated to Bodhisattva and whose political legitimacy rested on moral conduct and higher forms of mental culture; and the tradition carried into modern political tradition where legitimacy is derived from righteous moral conduct (of individual action), vispassana, and legitimacy rooted in office, as with U Nu and Aung San Suu Kyi. The popularity of early Burmese kings and of the Prime Minister U Nu was "largely based on his supportive work for the higher forms of Buddhist practice instead of charity alone" (Houtman 1999: 285).

The religious roles of a Buddhist laity consist of *dana, sila,* and *bhavana.* Dana basically is about donation, *sila* is about observing and keeping moral precepts and conducts, and *bhavana* is practicing meditation towards enlightenment or for a better next life. These in current life cumulate in a quality known as *parami.*

Within the 'merit field', meditation gives spiritual status whereas donation relates to social status. "In Buddhist Burma it would be impossible to have

high social status *without* participating in sasana *[thathana]* directed donation" (Jordt 2001: 198). Ritual donation can be regarded as a kind of reinforcement of social status and social hierarchy, in a process of ritual exchange. Social hierarchy based on the donation reinforces a donor's social status, but the ritual process which involves individuals engaging in meditation, as in the distribution of *metta* [to beings in the spiritual and the mundane world], frees the individual from the constraints of social strata.

In Gombrich's analytical distinctions about Buddhism (1988: 26), the Buddhist ritual is regarded as communal and the spiritual *metta* contemplation and the vispassana meditation represent the individual soteriological aspect of Buddhism.[31] In the context of donation, the two institutionalized structures of the monastery are the monastic hierarchical order and the individual spiritual 'status', known respectively *asparamattha* and *sammuti* (Jordt 2005: 43). The traditionally subordinate role of female laity *parami* highlights the issue of rigid formal membership in a monastic institution, where the male is the sole legitimate member of sangha.

The Mahasi, by comparison with the hierarchical monastic order, symbolizes a non-gender idea of vispassana and of *parami,* the quality of spirituality. This quality of *parami* as a prerequisite for achievement of spirituality challenges the traditional concept of female inferiority, based on their lack of *phon,*[32] whereby the best that they can achieve spiritually is to be reborn as male in their next life. The non-gender category of vispassana reorients the meaning of

parami, and therefore redefines the status of females and nuns. This shift also explains the disproportionate numbers of nun and female meditators in Mahasi. U Pandita, the new Mahasi preceptor, explains that females are accorded higher *parami* and ability to apprehend the dharma of vispassana because they experience more sufferings due to their inherent physical properties. It is *parami* achievement rather than gender hierarchy that conditions a successful meditation (Jordt 2001: 319). So the concept of *parami,* associated with modernity in Buddhism, challenges in particular the traditional role of female laity and nuns in monastic institutions as well as in society; the rise of the Mahasi meditation movement is consequently associated with increasing numbers of female meditators and with the ordination of nuns.

Mahasi and Buddhism in contemporary Burma

Mahasi exemplifies an historical shift away from monks associated with the king and sectarian rivalries "to a situation in which meditation is directed toward the masses in a new institutional form" (Jordt 2001: 318). Mahasi embodies and symbolizes the newly oriented Buddhism with role of the laity changed from material support to monks, listening and observing precepts to an emphasis on individual practice.

In the history of Buddhism, although insight meditation might have at times been emphasized by certain monastic sects and practiced by individual monks, it had tended "…to take second place to the study of the scriptures" (Houtman 1990: 38).[33] The aim of the Mahasi movement is clearly stated, for example, in

the preface of 'The tradition of practice of the Ma-ha-si Hsa-ya-daw' (Ma-ha-si pa-di-pat-ti tha-tha-na-win): "Ma-ha-si's vigor in energetically achieving the brilliance of *practice-oriented Buddhism* (pa-di-pat-ti tha-tha-na) to reach beyond Burma- such as Asia, America, and Europe- and... it is the responsibility of present Buddhists to advance Buddhism *(taya)* for the benefit of those who come later... in order to establish and prolong *practice Buddhism"* (emphases added, Houtman 1997a: 343).

Mahasi's original ideas about *patipatti* and *pariyatti* not only cut across different sects (Jordt 2001: 118) but also create a new foundation for the modern practice-oriented monastic institution of the laity. Mahasi, by changing the emphasis on the role of the monk from scripture study *(pariyatti)* to teaching meditation practice *(patipatti),* has generated a mass laity (Houtman 1990, Jordt 2001).

In an interview with Jordt about the reason why there were more laity than monks involved in meditation, Ye U Sayadaw, one of the centre's teachers, stated that "[m]ost monks indulge in the learning of the Tipitika-pariyatti. Also some are interested in patipatti. Of course, laymen outnumber the monks. The lay people cannot afford time to study pariyatti like the monks. So the practical thing is only to give a short a period - so for them it's alright to give one or two months in the meditation centre" (quoted in Jordt 2001: 117).[34] So the Mahasi Meditation centre represents the critical changing attitudes about *parami* and meditation; it is said that nowadays urban monks

had parami as teachers to give guidance to lay meditators who have *parami* to practice (Jordt 2001: 119).

The lay vispassana practice can be seen as a type of ascending grassroots movement or process rather than a hierarchy, and the 'purification of the state occurs by means of the purification of the citizenry' (Jordt 2001: 19) rather than purification of the state being achieved through a single powerful person such as the king. Vispassana has a distinctive notion of individuality which is encapsulated within the relation between Buddha and his order and followers (Jordt 2001: 18-9); for Buddha 'went out into the world to enlighten all those whom he encountered' and hence, through Buddha's teaching and individual practice, 'the sasana transforms individual, collectivities, the state and, beyond that, the rest of the world'.

Endnotes

[I] Commented Houtman (1990: 39) regarding the experience of King Mindon; "[I]f there is too little suffering, conditions for WM are not optimal because they cannot realise impermanence - this is the case in the upper heavens too. On the other hand, if there is too much suffering, people cannot concentrate sufficiently to meditate - this is the case in the lower realms. In fact, only the human condition is truly suited to WM [vispassana] meditation". See also in Thant Myint-U (2001: 154-5) about related issues.

[2] The vispassana movement began as an exclusive activity of monks: Ledi Sayadaw and Mingun Sayadaw are regarded as leading founders in the lineage of the tradition of meditation in contemporary Burma. See details in Houtman (1990, appendixes).

[3] Burma was completely annexed in 1885, and the Burmese king, Thi Paw, the successor of Mindon (1853-1878), was sent into exile in India.

[4] The Burmese 'structure' of state and society was seen as static because, despite changes in kings, its systems such as polity state function and politics, wet rice economy, and conditions of land remained largely stable. See Aung-Thwin (1992: 35-6) for details.

In addition, the individual practice of monk meditation must be contrasted with the activities of those so-called political monks who were actively and publicly involved in politics in colonial period. "Because these political monks have been both visible and articulate, the impression has sometimes been created that the Burmese Order was highly politicized, more concerned with political than with religious goals. In fact, these political monks (almost exclusively urban) have always comprised a small minority of the total monkhood" (Spiro 1982: 378).

[6] See in Houtman (1997: 3-4) about the political tradition of samatha and vispassana meditation practices.

[7] The Sixth Buddhist Synod was held in Rangoon from 17 May 1954 to March 1960 (Houtman 1990: 45).

[8] "[C]ertain social conditions are more conducive than others to attaining detachment, certain Buddhist political rulers (from Asoka to U Nu) have attempted to institute governmental policies which would create such conditions: economic welfare, social justice, impartial administration, and so on" (Spiro 1982: 429).

[9] Citing the indistinguishable economic and social developmental programs and policies of Nu and his political opponents, Spiro states, "... it is impossible to know which of his political and economic policies followed from his belief that government should be concerned with the welfare of the people in their "inestimably long future existences". We know that he [U Nu] wished to create a welfare state so that, free from worry and insecurity, people could devote their energies to meditation" (Spiro 1982: 430).

[10] "During the Sixth Buddhist Sangayana (1954- 60), the so-called Burmese Satipatthana Method spread to Thailand and Ceylon. It was not because it was a Burmese invention but because it was in Burma that this meditation was revived noticeably ever since the beginning of the twentieth century" (Mahasi Sayadaw 1979: i-ii).

[II] In addition, Jordt (2001: 128) observed that during the 1970's the Mahasi centre became a refuge for ex-Nu politicians as well as many young college students especially after the Rangoon Student Union building was blown up by General Ne Win in 1962. For details about the student protest in 1962 see Silverstein(1977:49).

[12] The Mahasi's 1965- 68 radio preaching was later published in 1985 as *The Preaching on Byamaso taya* (Houtman 1999: 309).

[13] In addition, a Burmese Socialist Party's declaration in the early 80s read: "We believe in the maxim that wholesome morality is possible only when the stomach is full... The program of the socialist economy is to establish a new peaceful and prosperous society by filling the stomach of every one and raising his standards" (Jordt 2001: 282-3).

[14] "Some Burmese Buddhists have suggested that this change in policy towards Buddhism was also made for personal reasons: Ne Win, the President under the military regime until the 80's, and Chairman of the Burma Socialist Party after that, expressed little desire for WM [vispassana]. But with his age mellowing him, some thought his new interest in Buddhism in the 80's to be genuine" (Houtman 1990: 53). Also see Lintner (1990: 185- 190) for biographies of Burmese politicians.

[15] The combined capital and liquid assets of the Mahasi centre in 1981was roughly equivalent to about '0.5 percent of the total output value of the Burmese agriculture sector' for the same financial year (Houtman 1990: 53).

[16] *Yadaya chae,* a type of black magic, is considered to lead to an inferior form of political behavior: it takes the *"loki paññ̃a* path, based on low and 'dirty' opportunist practices of astrology, magic and wizardry, that leave the selfish mind intact with its defilements". In contrast, "the highest politics is historically *lokuttara* politics, which takes as a reference point the attainment of *nibbana,* conceived in terms of monastic support and pagoda building, but primarily as personal practice of mental culture. This is based on the view that if mental defilements are reduced throughout the country, then people will prosper and there will be no disasters" (Houtman 1999: 246).

[17] "Since 1988 over 5,000 Burmese Muslims have been killed in religiously inspired civil violence" (quoted in Selth 2003: 10). In 1997 "the regime used anti-Muslim sentiments in Mandalay to deflect criticisms of Rangoon's pro-China policies (and the influx of illegal Chinese immigrants into upper Burma)", and also in 2001 "there was a sharp rise in anti-Muslim violence, with riots in Sittwe, Taungoo and Prome" (Selth 2003: 10). In 1995 approximately four percent of the total population in Burma (or 2 million) officially were Muslims, while others claimed it was about 16 percent of the population (see details in Selth 2003: 5).

[18] See details about students and Burmese political movements in Lintner (1990).

[19] The four samatha meditation practices, namely *metta, karuna, mudita,* and *upekkha* are included in *byamaso taya* (or *brahmaso taya).* In Burma only *metta* and *karuna* are popularly practised (Houtman 1999: 312). *Brahmaso taya,* according to Houtman, is also interchangeably used with the *brahma-vihara.* Both are derived from *brahma cariyaca,* meaning the 'practice of pure life', which is part of the Thirty-Eight Mangala (38 mingala taya, 38 auspicious dharma) in *Mahamangala Sutta* (Discourse of the Supreme Blessings) (Houtman 1999: 311).

[20] In the past, the *byamaso taya* played "an important role in [crises in] Burmese politics, as underlined by its frequent use in the speeches of kings and politicians". In the past, King Kyanzitha who reconquered Pagan from rebels promised to 'remedy the crisis by his superior loving-kindness and compassion so that the refugees could safely return to their homeland". It was also used 'as a political instrument...by the monk U Wisara in his quest for national independence and the restoration of Buddhism' during British colonisation of Burma (Houtman 1999: 315).

[21] Some of the published Mangalar Sutta include "Virati papa, to refrain from sin; this is the way to auspiciousness", "Appamado ca dhammesu, to be diligent in laws; this is the way to auspiciousness", "Garavo ca, reverence; this is the way to auspiciousness", and "Puja ca pujaneyyanam, to honour those worthy of honour; this is the way to auspiciousness" (The New Light of Myanmar newspaper, published on 1 January; 22, 25 and 29 September; and 5 October 2004, in www.burmalibrary.com).

The post 1988 SLORC regime extensively engaged in inventing a new national identity in a process of what Houtman called, "Myanmafication'. Its 'Myanmafication' project included changing the names of the country, of streets, and even of towns, and building museums and restoring pagodas etc., all things that were considered to strengthen 'Myanmar'. See details in Houtman (1999: 15-121).

[23] SLORC/SPDC's official political policy, the People's Desire: Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views; Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation; Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State; and Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy (The New Light of Myanmar, 19 June 1998 and 25 September 2004, in Houtman (1999: 382-3). Also see details in www.burmalibrary.com).

[24] Jordt states that Aung San Suu Kyi's state project is to complete the 'unfinished renaissance' and to join east and west together, to bring the country in contact with universal forms of politics, arts, and economy (Jordt 2001: 327).

[25] An explicit statement by Aung San Suu Kyi about vispassana practice was given in her 11th Pope Paul VI Memorial Lecture entitled 'Heavenly abodes and human development' presented on 3 November 1997: she stated that "true development should also comprise spiritual cultivation" not only socio-political factors (Aung San Suu Kyi 1998, in Houtman 1999: 314).

[26] In 1997 Aung San Suu Kyi expressed her personal views about Buddhism and politics. "I don't think of myself as either a Gandhian or Buddhist politician. I am Buddhist of course, and I would be guided by all the Buddhist principles that I have absorbed throughout my life" (Aung San Suu Kyi 1997: 79).

U Tin Oo began to practice vispassana at the Mahasi Thathana Yeikthar in Rangoon as a monk for two years after he was released from his political imprisonment in 1980 (Houtman 1999: 303).

[28] "Metta 'casts out fear' in the hearts of people under the regime... she discovered the practice of metta during her period of incarceration... she relates it to the spirit of friendship with her colleagues and friends in the face of adversity and hardship" (Houtman 1999: 326). "Fear is rooted in insecurity and insecurity is rooted in lack of metta. If there is a lack of metta, it may be a lack in yourself, or in those around you, so you feel insecure. And insecurity leads to fear" (Aung San Suu Kyi 1997: 4-5).

"The military governments of Ne Win and SLORC have been very effective in bringing the sangha under the control of the state and in engaging monks in the state project of unifying the nation through conversion of the hill tribe areas. However, this is not to say that the sangha has become entirely an extension of the government's policies...In fact, traditionally, the people looked to the sangha as the institution that could save them from oppressive regimes" (Jordt 2001: 326).

[30] White elephant symbolizes power, prosperity, and royalty in Burmese Buddhist tradition. Also, see details about the renovation of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon in http://www.myanmar.com/shwedagon/index.html.

[31] Gombrich states that the "Buddha preached a soteriology" (1988: 28), in particular the teaching of Buddha is to 'reform individual' by offering solution to suffering for instance through preaching to

Sangha, Order of monk (1988: 30-1). That "...in Burma...Buddhism was the only 'way' to salvation [and]... in all these countries Buddhism was adopted as their personal faith by the rulers, and court patronage developed into state patronage and so acquired great wealth, power and prestige, as well as a monopoly of education and spiritual life" (Gombrich 1988: 29).

[32] *Phon*, in Burmese belief, is associated with the idea of male superiority which regards female as associated with inferiority and inherently impure because of their genital sex, see detail in Spiro (1992: 223-6). See also in Schober (1989: 128-137) about *phon* and cultural and political hierarchy.

[33] A-shin Pyin-nyar-zaw-da comments that the basic understanding of vispassana dharma (*vipathanna thayadaw*) came from the life experience of the monk and that meditation teaching came from practice not from text learning. Thus only those who have experience can effectively explain and teach succinctly to others the practical knowledge of the meditation (1976, pp. nya, dha).

[34] According to Mahasi Sayadaw a meditator can attain *sottapatti*, the first stage of enlightenment, by two months of practising (Jordt2001: 120).

Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the changing character of Buddhist practice in Burma. It posits that individual practice is informed by changes in both Buddhist ideology and Burmese social and economic organization. These changes are demonstrated in the rise of Mahasi Vispassana Insight Meditation.

Within Burmese Buddhist culture ideas about personality, individuality and self relate to the supreme Buddhist ideal of 'non-self'. Traditionally Buddhist Burmese gave high value to ideas of non-self, in accordance with ideas that the individual strives for enlightenment or nirvana through the realization of non-self. In earlier times Buddhist practice was motivated mainly by idea of reborn in the time of future Buddha. In contemporary times the practice of Buddhism has involved a lay focus on the individual and self-realization. The modern Buddhist practice is motivated by ideas of enlightenment in this life through individual vispassana practice.

In social terms lay practices have also changed. In the past lay practice of Buddhism centered on providing material support to monks and propagating the religion by building pagodas. The king and the Burmese elite took a foremost role in this. The relation of the king, and secondarily the political and social elite, to the monks provided a legitimation for the political and social structure and strengthened the moral legitimacy of the Buddhist sangha within Burmese society. This was seen as a relatively static and fixed socio-religious

order, so that even since independence all governments, including the military ones, have attempted to justify their regime according to a traditional Buddhist concept about political and moral legitimacy. The legitimacy of a politician requires that he or she, like the king in former days, satisfies certain moral behaviours and conducts.

During the course of colonization and then after Independence the Burmese laity began to incorporate vispassana into their Buddhist practices. In the modern nation state politicians no longer rely on monks for legitimacy; instead, they seek legitimacy through their own moral behaviour. This modern lay practice is also intimately related to the contending notions of legitimacy within the continued framework of Burmese traditional ideas of political/moral legitimacy. For example, the traditional idea of legitimacy, byamaso taya ideology influences the practice of both SLORC/SPDC and NLD. SPDC seeks its legitimacy through public ritual, authority, and hierarchy. By contrast, the NLD seeks legitimacy through morally righteous vispassana and metta meditation practice. The individual vispassana meditation movement through its emphasis on transforming society from grassroots level is thus associated with social and political changes.

Mahasi inevitably became a social and political 'force' in Burmese nation building and national identity, particularly in the 50s and 60s. From the 60s to the late 80s its social ideas became embedded in and were used by the government project. From the early 90s onwards, social and political ideas

were increasingly aligned with social meditation and modern versions of Buddhism. Through all these social and political changes, Mahasi has emphasized that vispassana is individual practice, changing and transforming society from the grassroots.

The modernity of Buddhism in turning to practice-oriented Buddhism is not entirely independent of the state; it continues to inform the very beliefs, behaviours, and actions of the Burmese. One main reason that political authority is attracted to Buddhism is its quest for political legitimacy; in the history of nation state in Burma "there is no palpable historical separation of Church and State [therefore it] is not surprising to learn that each post-Independence government's effort to establish grounds for its own legitimacy has been constrained by this fact [and] several governments... set out to found a new political society based upon modern principles which has therefore also become commingled with Buddhist cosmology" (Jordt 2001: 282, 321, 557).

Vispassana is relevant to politics because it represents morally righteous individual behaviors, which are the basis for state legitimization. Legitimacy can also be ascribed to ritual, as with the donation and public ritual of SLORC/ SPDC, in that it reinforces the social hierarchy. The lack of any formal constitution to provide a secular framework means that both the regime and the NLD have both resorted to traditional forms of political legitimacy, although they seek it different ways and with different ideas about both the state and Buddhism.

Within the context of modernity, both the regime and NLD are concerned about the political and moral legitimacy that are rooted in traditional Burmese notions. While the military has emphasised hierarchy, the use of force, and oppression, Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD-led democratic movement symbolize the use of non-violent struggle, human rights and freedom. Significantly, from the late 1990s vispassana, especially through the practice of the NLD, came increasingly to terms with politics, democratic ideas and values, through the individual politicians practicing vispassana. Not only has the vispassana meditation had significant meanings for the individual, it also has become, through the principles of the non-violent movement, related to the state and society in the manner that Houtman (1999: 307) termed as 'social meditation'.

In sum, this thesis discusses the historical transformation of the practice of Burmese Buddhism. The case study of the rise of Mahasi Vispassana meditation, especially among Burmese laity, tentatively suggests that the changing Buddhist practice is best appreciated within the transforming Burmese cultural, political, and social contexts - that the intellectual and social dimensions of religious practice are meaningfully interrelated to each other and that these relations are manifested at various levels. This is due to the unique characteristics of Vispassana meditation, as is discussed in Chapter One. Vispassana practice has a certain meaning, place, and function in the modernised practice-oriented Buddhism as well as in the boarder Burmese society, in particular in the realms of politics where political and social changes

seemed to be accompanied by more than desirable tensions, sufferings, and crises.

While Vispassana meditation, in essence, is ultimately about individual practice, it also relates to society through its monastic institution, the participatory practice of individuals, and their associated moral, ethical and philosophical behaviours. In addition, the belief, action, and behaviour of meditation individuals can be regarded as agencies for social/cultural action and they in turn shape the role of Buddhism in modern Burmese society. These factors point to tentative links between individual Vispassana practice and the conception of meditation as social movement.

The rise of Mahasi Vispassana meditation as well as the Buddhism modernization have coincided with significant changes in Burmese politics; for example, the end of the Burmese monarchical polity state, colonialism, introduction of modern nation-state, Buddhist revivalism, Burmese socialism, militarisation, introduction of market economy, democracy and human rights. Individuals, including monks and laity, perceived, adapted, involved, acted out and responded to these political and social changes in various ways and Vispassana meditation has, among these, come to be constituted as the most significant Burmese cultural response.

In the contemporary period, the role of Vispassana in providing refuge, consolation, and solution to human crisis and suffering allows it to relate to

political changes which, most commonly, came about with conflicts, oppression, and tensions (as discussed in Chapter Three). In these ways Mahasi Vispassana is *engaged* in society (as opposed to the traditional notion of monks and the monastic establishment as asocial or as being marginalised), and the complexity of such an engagement can be seen in the meditation practice of politicians, in Burmese ideas of morally righteous conduct, and the traditional Burmese notion of legitimacy. The Mahasi meditation practice of the Burmese laity not only reinforces its unique philosophical and spiritual significance but also relates individuals in meaningful ways to the social and political reality in contemporary Burma.

Burma (Myanmar), from the U.S Department of State, in Silverstein (1977).

The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw

(U Sobhana Mahathera, 1904-1982)

Sources: http://www.mahasi.com

The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw

(U Sobhana Mahathera, 1904-1982)

Sources: http://www.mahasi.com

Mahasi Thathana Yeikthar

Rangoon (Yangon), Burma (Myanmar)

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မဟာစည်ဆရာတော်ဘုရားကြီး၊ စံကျောင်းတော်

Source: http://www.mahasi.org.mm/, © 2002 Mahasi Sasana Nuggaha Organisation

နာယက (၁) (၂) စံကျောင်းတော်

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Source: http://www.mahasi.com/

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