



# REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631(UIF)

VOLUME - 13 | ISSUE - 12 | SEPTEMBER - 2024



---

---

## THERAVADA BUDDHISM IN MYANMAR: A SHORT HISTORY

**Tayzawbatha**

**Acharya Nagarjuna University , Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur,  
Andhra Pradesh, India.**

### ABSTRACT

Myanmar, or Burma as the nation has been known throughout history, is one of the major countries following Theravada Buddhism. In recent years Myanmar has attained special eminence as the host for the Sixth Buddhist Council, held in Yangon (Rangoon) between 1954 and 1956, and as the source from which two of the major systems of Vipassana meditation have emanated out into the greater world: the tradition springing from the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw of Thathana Yeiktha and that springing from Sayagyi U Ba Khin of the International Meditation Centre.



This booklet is intended to offer a short history of Buddhism in Myanmar from its origins through the country's loss of independence to Great Britain in the late nineteenth century. I have not dealt with more recent history as this has already been well documented. To write an account of the development of a religion in any country is a delicate and demanding undertaking and one will never be quite satisfied with the result. This booklet does not pretend to be an academic work shedding new light on the subject.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhism in Lower Myanmar: 5th to 11th Centuries, the Myanmar Build and Empire.

### INTRODUCTION:

The Burmese tradition that Buddhaghosa was a native of Thaton and returned thither from Sri Lanka merits more attention than it has received. It can easily be explained away as patriotic fancy. On the other hand, if Buddhaghosa's object was to invigorate Hinayanism in India the result of his really stupendous labours was singularly small, for in India his name is connected with no religious movement. But if we suppose that he went to Sri Lanka by way of the holy places in Magadha [now Bihar] and returned from the Coromandel coast [Madras] to Burma where Hinayanism afterwards flourished, we have at least a coherent narrative.

Acariya Buddhaghosa was the greatest commentator on the Pali Buddhist texts, whose *Visuddhimagga* and commentaries to the canon are regarded as authoritative by Theravada scholars. The chronicles of Myanmar firmly maintain that Buddhaghosa was of Mon origin and a native of Thaton. They state that his return from Sri Lanka, with the Pali scriptures, the commentaries, and grammatical works, gave a fresh impetus to the religion.

### ▪ Buddhism in Lower Myanmar: 5th to 11th Centuries

From the fifth century until the conquest of Lower Myanmar by Pagan, there is a continuous record of Buddhism flourishing in the Mon and Pyu kingdoms. The Mon kingdoms are mentioned in

travel reports of several Chinese Buddhist pilgrims and also in the annals of the Chinese court. In the fifth century, Thaton and Pegu (Pago) are mentioned in the Buddhist commentarial literature for the first time. They were now firmly established on the map as Buddhist centres of learning. Despite this, Buddhism was not without rivals in the region. This is shown, by the following event some chronicles of Myanmar mention.

A king of Pago, Tissa by name, had abandoned the worship of the Buddha and instead practiced Brahmanical worship. He persecuted the Buddhists and destroyed Buddha images or cast them into ditches. A pious Buddhist girl, the daughter of a merchant, restored the images, then washed and worshipped them. The king could not tolerate such defiance, of course, and had the girl dragged before him. He tried to have her executed in several ways, but she seemed impossible to kill. Elephants would not trample her, while the fire of her pyre would not burn her. Eventually the king, intrigued by these events, asked the girl to perform a miracle. He stated that, if she was able to make a Buddha image produce seven new images and then make all eight statues fly into heaven, she would be set free. The girl spoke an act of truth, and the eight Buddha statues flew up into the sky. The king was then converted to Buddhism and elevated the girl to the position of chief queen.

Until now, archaeological finds of Mon ruins in Myanmar are meager, but at P'ong Tuk, in southern Thailand, a Mon city, dating from the second half of the first millennium AD, has been unearthed. Here, excavations have revealed the foundations of several buildings. One contained the remains of a platform and fragments of columns similar to the Buddhist vihara at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka; another, with a square foundation of round stones, seems to have been a stupa. Statues of Indian origin from the Gupta period (320-600 AD) were also found at the site. The Theravada Buddhist culture of the Mon flourished in both Dvaravati and Thaton. However, the Mon civilization in Thailand did not survive the onslaught of the Khmer in the eleventh century who were worshipping Hindu gods. In Myanmar, the Mon kingdom was conquered by Pagan. The Myanmar were eager to accept the Mon culture and especially their religion, while the Khmer, as Hindus, at best tolerated it.

### ▪ **The Myanmar Build and Empire**

The beginning of the sixteenth century was one of the most difficult periods for Buddhism in Upper Myanmar. While the religious fervour of Dhammazedi still lived on in the kingdom of Pago in Ava, Shan rulers were endeavouring to bring about the destruction of the Sangha. A Shan king named Thohanbwa (?1527-1543) was particularly well-known for his barbarity. He destroyed pagodas and monasteries and robbed their treasures. Although he was a king, he was uneducated and ignorant. Hence fearing the influence of the bhikkhus and suspicious of their moves, he brought about the massacre of thousands. Under these terror regimes of the Shan rulers the Myanmar did not feel safe. Many, including learned bhikkhus, fled to Toungoo, the stronghold of the Myanmar race in the south. Despite the anarchy prevailing, some respected treatises on Pali grammar were written in Upper Myanmar in these years.

Better times, however, lay ahead for Buddhism in the Golden Land. Two successive kings of Myanmar origin from Toungoo would unite the country and fulfil the duties of Buddhist kings. The wars fought by these two kings, King Rainswept (1531-50) and King Bayinnaung (1551-81), were long in duration and exceedingly cruel. They succeeded in gaining control of the Mon kingdom in Lower Myanmar and the kingdom of Ava. They conquered all of what is today Myanmar including the Shan states as far east as Chiang Mai, and made incursions into lower Thailand and Yunnan where some kings paid tribute to the Myanmar court.

Bayinnaung deferred to the Mon as far as culture and religion were concerned and dressed in Mon style. Under his royal patronage, the Mon Sangha produced scholarly works on grammar and the Abhidhamma and also helped with the collection and standardisation of a code of law based on the old Mon code compiled during Waweru's reign.

Beginning not only unified the country politically, but also made Buddhist principles the standard for his entire dominion. He forbade the sacrificial slaughter of animals, a custom still practiced by the Shan chiefs, the worshippers of certain spirits, and the followers of some other religions. He built

pagodas and monasteries in all the newly conquered lands and installed learned bhikkhus in order to convert the often-uncivilized inhabitants to gentler ways. The main religious building of his reign is the Mahadevi Pagoda, a majestic monument to the Buddha in the capital, Pagan. He also crowned the main pagodas in Myanmar with the jewels of his own crown, a custom practiced by many rulers of the country. He continued in the tradition of Dhammacedi, in supporting the Sihala Sangha and in sponsoring the ordination of many bhikkhus in the Kalyani Ordination Hall near Pagan. It is said that he built as many monasteries as there were years in his life.

It remains a mystery how a king who had such deep devotion to the religion of the Buddha and who was so generous towards it could spend his life fighting campaign after campaign to expand his realm. He caused bloodshed and suffering in the conquered regions and at home people starved because farmers were drafted into the army. However, this may be, Bayinnaung seems to have been able to reconcile fighting expansionist wars with being a pious Buddhist.

After King Bayinnaung, Pagan rapidly lost its significance. Bayinnaung's son persecuted the Mon and consequently re-ignited racial tensions that would plague Myanmar for centuries. Later, Pagan was to fall into the hands of a Portuguese adventurer who pillaged the pagodas and monasteries. Eventually the whole of Lower Myanmar, already depopulated by the incessant campaigns of Bayinnaung and his successors, was pillaged by all the surrounding kings and princelings. The country was devastated and people starved.

The *Sasanavamsa* records one major problem of the Vinaya during the sixteenth century. At the beginning of the century, the bhikkhus of Toungoo were divided over whether or not bhikkhus could partake of the juice of the toddy palm which was generally used to prepare fermented drink. The dispute was settled by a respected thera who decided that toddy juice was permissible only if it was freshly harvested.

## ▪ CONCLUSION

From the fifth century until the conquest of Lower Myanmar by Pagan, there is a continuous record of Buddhism flourishing in the Mon and Pyu kingdoms. The Mon kingdoms are mentioned in travel reports of several Chinese Buddhist pilgrims and also in the annals of the Chinese court. The beginning of the sixteenth century was one of the most difficult periods for Buddhism in Upper Myanmar. While the religious fervour of Dhammacedi still lived on in the kingdom of Pagan in Ava, Shan rulers were endeavouring to bring about the destruction of the Sangha. This is shown, by the following event some chronicles of Myanmar mention.

## REFERENCES:

- Translated by B.C. Law: The History of the Buddha's Religion. London 1952. Recueil des Inscriptions du Siam. Part II. G. Coedes. Mahavamsa.
- Barua, Beni Madhab. Asoka and His Inscriptions. Reprint: Calcutta 1968.
- Barua, D.K. Buddha Gaya Temple: Its History. Buddha Gaya 1981.
- Bechert, Heinz. Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft. 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1973.
- Stargardt, Janice. The Ancient Pyu of Burma. Vol. I. Cambridge 1990.
- Bode, Mabel Haynes. The Pali Literature of Burma. Reprint: London 1966.
- Old Burma, Early Pagan. 3 vols. New York 1969-70. Maung Htin Aung.
- Burmese Monk's Tales. New York and London 1966. Maung Htin Aung.
- The Burman. Reprint: Scotland 1989. Stargardt, Janice.