

History of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar: A Study of the Bagan Period

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Abstract: Several research works on history of Buddhism in Burma have appeared in the past and are still continues to come up. However, studies on history of Theravada Buddhism in the Bagan period are continued to be scant. Most probably, this study is the first full-length study of such nature which tries to present history of Buddhism in early Burma. The main objective of this paper is to analyze and document the history of Theravada Buddhism in the early period in the upper Burma Bagan kingdom. This attempt is useful to capture the historical trajectory of Buddhism in Myanmar from an evolutionary perspective.

Keywords: Konbaung kingdoms, Theravada Buddhism, Contribution of Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar happens to be predominantly a Buddhist nation along with several other belief systems. Buddhism has been a foundational value system with which the civilization in Myanmar evolved. In view of this, it is critically important to assess the evolutionary trajectory of Buddhism from a historical perspective. Several serious attempts in this direction have already been made by studies. What distinguishes this study from others is that it focuses on the Bagan period, which is relatively less explored by the existing scholarship. This endeavor is useful as it enables us to comprehend multiple factors that influenced the development of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar.

General Historical Background of Myanmar

The terms "Burma or Myanmar" first appeared in inscriptions about a millennium ago, probably indicating a group of people who lived in the Irrawaddy River region and the language they spoke. In the due course of time, rulers of the region started referring to their kingdom as the Myanma pyi (the Myanma nation) or the Myanma naing-ngan and themselves as Myanma kings (the Myanma conquered lands). The word was often pronounced "Bama" by the 17th century. Adjectives of "Myanma" and "Bama," were both used frequently. The first Europeans began to arrive around this time and gave the nation various names that were variations of "Burma," such as "Birmanian" for the

Portuguese and "Birmanie" for the French. The origin of these names is almost certainly from the word 'Bama' or 'Burma', which served as the nation's official English name while it was ruled by the British. The name remained Myanma pyi in Burmese. Until 1989, when the country's governing army junta formally changed the name of the country to Myanmar (the final "r" was intended to extend the vowel, as it would when spoken in the southeast of England and not be pronounced), none of this raised a lot of controversy. The argument put out was that the word "Myanmar" included all of the original peoples of the nation. This paper uses "Burmese" to refer either to the ethnic majority people, who speak the Burmese language and are overwhelmingly Buddhist. Most Burmese people simply have first names. These are typically picked by parents with the help of monks or astrologers, and they frequently depend on the child's birthdate as well as the letters of the Burmese alphabet that correlate to that day of the week. [1] 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 and other meditation rainier. [2]

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There are four dominant ethnic groups in the recorded history of Myanmar. The Mon's ancestry is unknown; however, it is certain that they are linked to the Khmer at least linguistically. [3] What is known is that they made southern Myanmar and Thailand their home, whilst the Khmer settled in northern Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Aside from Indian traders who founded trading colonies along the coast, these two groups are likely the earliest immigrants to the area. The Mon, who had a unique language and culture, battled the Myanmar for generations. However, today only isolated southern regions still speak their language. Similar to the Myanmar, the Pyu are a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group with a unique culture and tongue. Long before Myanmar advanced into the plains of Myanmar from the north, they lived in the vicinity of Prome. They later assimilated their language, which was closely linked to the language of Myanmar. Up to the thirteenth century, their writing was in use but was thereafter forgotten. Only towards the middle of the first millennium AD did the Myanmar people start to colonize the country's plains. They may have come from the Central Asian plains, but they were from the rugged north. The Shan invaded from the North after the Myanmar and eventually conquered the entire territory of Myanmar and Thailand. The Shan tribes are the ancestors of the Thai people. Shan tribes continue to make up the majority of the population in the northeastern part of modern Myanmar. [4]

Missionary of the Buddha's Savaka

Most of what is now Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia was sparsely populated in the sixth century BC. While immigrants from the east coast of India had established commercial settlements along the Gulf of Martaban, the Mon also lived in these coastal regions of Myanmar and Thailand. Laos, Cambodia, and northern Thailand were likely under Khmer rule at this point, while Upper Myanmar may have already been partially overrun by Myanmar tribes. We still know very little about the early settlers' civilization since they did not build using durable materials. We do know, however, that their manner of life was extremely straightforward as it is still in rural regions today and most likely just called for wooden huts with palm-leaf roofs for occupancy. We can assume that they did not have a written language and that they were not organized into groups that were larger than village communities. The more isolated tribes in the area still practice some type of animism or nature worship, therefore, this was their religion. [5] There were also more highly developed communities of Indian origin, in the form of trading settlements located along the entire coast from Bengal to Borneo. In Myanmar, they were located in Thaton (Suddhammapura), Pegu (Ussa), Yangon (Ukkala, then still on the coast), and Mrauk-U (Dhannavati) in Arakan, [6] probably along the Tenasserim and Arakan coasts. These settlers had mainly migrated from Orissa on the northeastern coast of the Indian subcontinent, and also from the Deccan in the southeast. In migrating to these areas, they had also brought their own culture and

religion with them. Initially, the contact between the Hindu traders and the Mon peasants must have been limited. However, the Indian settlements, their culture and traditions, were eventually absorbed into the Mon culture. G.E. Harvey's [7] *History of Burma*, relates a Mon legend which refers to the Mon fighting Hindu strangers who had come back to re-conquer the country that had formerly belonged to them. This Mon tale confirms the theory that Indian people had formed the first communities in the region but that these were eventually replaced by the Mon with the development of their own civilization. As well as the Indian trading settlements, there were also some Pyu settlements, [8] particularly in the area of Prome where a flourishing civilisation later developed. [9]

Buddha's teaching in Early Burma

For the Fifth Buddhist Council held in Mandalay in 1867 [10]. The Sasanavamsa is a chronicle written in Pali by a Bhikkhu Pannasami. The History of the Buddha's Religion it draws on both written records, some of which are no longer available, and on the oral tradition of Myanmar, and of course legends and myths do play a crucial role in the making of history. This fact would explain the visits of the Buddha to Thaton and Shweseetaw in Mon preserved in Myanmar oral tradition, and the belief of the Arakanese that the Buddha visited their king and left behind an image of himself for them to worship. Modern historiography will, of course, dismiss these stories as fabrications made out of national pride, as the Myanmar had not even arrived in the region at the time of the Buddha. However, it is possible that the Myanmar and Arakanese integrated into their own lore the oral historical tradition of their Indian predecessors. The Sasanavamsa mentions several visits of the Buddha to Myanmar and one other important event: the arrival of the hair relics in Ukkala (Yangon) soon after the Buddha's enlightenment. [11] These narratives may not historically be accurate, but what they offer is that collective imagination of Burmese cultural with the Buddha.

Refuge in Buddha and Dhamma

As per legend, the Buddha had just come out of seven weeks of meditation after his awakening and was sitting under a bodhi tree. Tapussa and Bhallika made an offering of rice cake and honey to the Buddha. Further, they took refuge in the Buddha and the refuge in the Dhamma. It is also widely believed that they got eight head of hairs from the Buddha. After the two returned from their journey, they enshrined the three hairs in a stupa which is now the great Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. The original stupa is said to have been 27 feet high. Today the Shwedagon Pagoda has grown to over 370 feet. We can see the model of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Angkor Cambodia, Sanchi in India and Thuparamaya in Sri Lanka. [12]

Contribution of Buddha's teaching in Bagan

Chronologically, the Bagan period in Myanmar belongs to the 8th-13th centuries AD. The Myanmar oral tradition speaks of four visits of the Buddha to the region. The Visit to Central Myanmar regarding to the Sasanavamsa [13], the city of Aparanta is situated on the western shore of the Irrawaddy River at the latitude of Magwe. These were well known and could be read in the Tripitaka and the commentaries. Historically, in 232 BC, the Third Buddhist Council was held in the reign of Emperor Asoka in order to purify the Sangha. In fact, the work of the Council did not stop there. He sent several missionaries to border regions in order to spread the teachings of the Buddha. This dispersal of missionaries is recorded in the Mahavamsa, on the history of Buddhism.

Emperor Asoka is believed to have send Buddhist missionaries to nine countries including the Suvannabhumi (Burma). Persons who accompanied Buddhist missionary to Suvannabhumi are Thera Majjhima, Thera Uttara and Thera Sona. The Sasanavamsa mentions five places in Southeast Asia where Asoka's missionaries taught the Buddha's doctrine, and through their teaching many gained insight and took refuge in the Triple Gem. They deliver the brahmajala sutta [14] in Suvannabhumi (thaton.) The Brahmajala Sutta, which the arahats Sona and Uttara preached in Thaton, deals in detail with the different schools of philosophical and religious thought prevalent in India at the time of the Buddha. The fact that Sona and Uttara chose this Sutta to convert the inhabitants of Suvannabhumi indicates that they were facing a well-informed public, familiar with the views of Brahmanism that were refuted by the Buddha in this discourse. There can be no doubt that only Indian colonisers, Chinese Buddhist pilgrims in the fifth century, Thaton and Pegu (Pago) have been mentioned in the Buddhist commentarial literature for the first time. [15] Early the Pyu culture of this period is well documented because of archaeological finds at Muanggan, a small village close to the ancient ruins of Hmawza. There are two perfectly preserved inscribed gold plates were found. These inscriptions reveal three texts: the verses spoken by Assaji to Sariputta (ye dhamma hetuppa bhava...), a list of categories of the Abhidhamma (cattaro iddhipada, cattaro samappa dhana...), and the formula of worship of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha (iti pi so bhagava...). [16] It contained texts such as the paticca-samuppada (dependent origination), the vipassana-nanas (stages of insight knowledge), and various other excerpts from the Abhidhamma and the other two baskets of the Buddhist scriptures. The scripts in all these documents are identical to scripts used in parts of southern India, and can be dated from the third to the sixth century AD. The script used by the Pyu is indicative of major links with Buddhist kingdoms in South India rather than with Sri Lanka. And it can be surmised that the bhikkhus of the Deccan and other regions of southern India were the

teachers of both the Mon and the Pyu in religious matters as well as in the arts and sciences.

Relate to between the King and Ashin Arahan in Buddhism Bagan period

The Pagan era is believed to have been founded in the years 849-850 AD, by the Mans who had already established themselves as rice growers in the region upper Burma. King Anawratha began to unite the region by subjugating one chieftain after another and was successful in giving the Myanmar a sense of belonging to a larger community and eventually a nation. The religion prevailing among the Myanmar before and during the early reign of Anawratha was some form of Mahayana Buddhism, which had probably found its way into the region from the Pala kingdom in Bengal. Anawratha continued to cast terracotta votive tablets with the image of Lokanatha even after he embraced the Theravada doctrine. [17]

Shin Arahan played a crucial role in the introduction and propagation of Theravada doctrine. As per legend, he was arrived in the vicinity of Pagan and was discovered in his forest dwelling by a hunter. The hunter, who had never before seen such a strange creature with a shaven head and a yellow robe, thought he was some kind of spirit and took him to the king, Anawratha. Shin Arahan naturally sat down on the throne, as it was the highest seat, and the king thought: "This man is peaceful, in this man there is the essential thing. He is sitting down on the best seat, surely he must be the best being." The king asked the visitor to tell him where he came from and was told that he came from the place where the Order lived and that the Buddha was his teacher. Then Shin Arahan gave the king the teaching on mindfulness (appamada), teaching him the same doctrine Nigrodha had given to Emperor Asoka when he was converted. Shin Arahan then told the monarch that the Buddha had passed into Parinibbana, but that his teaching, the Dhamma, enshrined in the Tipitaka, and the twofold Sangha consisting of those who possessed absolute knowledge and those who possessed conventional knowledge, remained.

King Anawratha had now found the religion he had been yearning for, and he decided to set out and procure the scriptures and holy relics of this religion. For he wished his kingdom to be secured on the original teachings of the Buddha. [18] Anawratha is mentioned in the Myanmar, Mon, Khmer, Thai, and Sinhalese chronicles as a great champion of Buddhism because he developed Pagan into a major regional power and laid the foundation for its glory. He did not, however, build many of the temples for which Pagan is now as famous, as the great age of temple building started only after his reign. It is important to realize that his interest was not restricted only to Pagan. He built pagodas wherever his campaigns took him and adorned them with illustrations from the Jatakas and the life of the Buddha. [19]

Anawratha was succeeded by a number of kings of varying significance to Buddhism in Myanmar.

The Bagan period continued to be ruled by efficient rulers. Kyanzitta (1084-1113), who had been Anawratha's commander-in-chief and had succeeded Anawratha's son to the throne, consolidated Theravada Buddhism's predominance in Pagan. He was built important shrines such as the Shwezigon Pagoda, the Ānanda, Nagayon, and Myinkaba Kubyauk-gyi temples etc.,. Kyanzitta's efforts for the advancement of Buddhism were not limited to his own country. For in one of his many inscriptions, he also mentions that he sent craftsmen to Bodhgaya to repair the Mahabodhi temple, which had been destroyed by a foreign king. The upkeep of the Mahabodhi temple became a tradition with the kings of Myanmar, who continued to send missions to Bodhgaya to repair the temple and also to donate temple slaves and land to the holiest shrine of Buddhism. [20]

Rajakumar's nephew was King Alaungsithu (c.1113-67), who continued the tradition of his dynasty of glorifying the Buddha's religion by building a vast temple, the Sabbannu Temple, probably the largest monument in Pagan. During his many travels and campaigns, he built pagodas and temples throughout Myanmar. After the death of Aalonsithu, the new king, Narapati (1174-1210), blessed the country with a period of peace and prosperity. This conducive atmosphere was to allow outstanding scholarship and learning to arise in Pagan. [21] Kyawswa (1234-50) was a king under whom scholarship was encouraged even more, undoubtedly because the king himself spent most of his time in scholarly pursuits including memorising passages of the Tipitaka. He had relinquished most of his worldly duties to his son in order to dedicate more time to the study of the scriptures. Two grammatical works, the Saddabindu and the Paramatthabindu, are ascribed to him. It would appear that his palace was a place of great culture and learning as his ministers and his daughter are credited with scholarly works as well. During the twelfth century, a sect of forest dwellers also thrived. They were called arannaka in Pali and were identical with the previously mentioned Ari of the later chroniclers of Myanmar. [22] This was a monastic movement that only used the yellow robes and the respect due to them in order to follow their own ideas.

The last king of Pagan, Narathihapate, whom the Myanmar know by the name Tayoupyemin [23] repeatedly refused to pay symbolic tribute to the Mongol emperors in Peking who in 1271 had conquered

neighboring Yunnan. He even went so far as to execute ambassadors of the Chinese emperor and their retinue for their lack of deference to the king. He became so bold and blinded by ignorance that he attacked a vassal state of the Mongols. The emperor in Peking was finally forced to send a punitive expedition which defeated the Pagan army north of Pagan. The news of this defeat caused the king and his court to flee to Patheingyi (Bassein). As the imperial court in Peking was not interested in adding Pagan to its possessions, the Yunnan expedition did not remain in the environs. When the king was later murdered, and the whole empire fell into disarray, the Yunnan generals returned, looting Pagan. The territories were divided amongst Shan chiefs who paid tribute to the Mongols. A total of 55 kings ruled the Bagan Empire.

CONCLUSION

Theravada Buddhism developed in Myanmar over more than two millennia. The visits of the Buddha were the first brief illuminations in a country that was shrouded in darkness. The worship of the Buddha that is thought to have resulted from these visits and from the arrival of the hair relics may have been merely part of a nature religion. The pure religion could not endure for long in a country which was yet on the brink of civilization. Later, however, the teachings of the Buddha were brought repeatedly to those lands by various people. The visits of the *Arahants* sent out after Emperor Asoka's council are historically more acceptable than the visits of the Buddha. Their teachings were understood and perpetuated possibly in Indian settlements along the coast and later in communities of people from Central Asia such as the Pyu. Through their contact with India, these cultural centers of the Pyu and Mon could remain in contact with Buddhism. At first, the important centers of Theravada Buddhism were in northern India and later in South India and then Sri Lanka. Through repeated contact with orthodox *bhikkhus* abroad, the understanding of Buddhism grew ever stronger in the minds of the people of Myanmar. The religion was distorted dozens of times through ignorance and carelessness, but someone always appeared to correct the teachings with the help of the mainstays of the *Sāsana*. Gradually the role was reversed: instead of traveling abroad for advice, the *bhikkhus* of Myanmar became the guardians of Theravada Buddhist teaching and their authority was respected by all. Eventually, when Theravada Buddhism had long been lost to India, and its future was uncertain in Sri Lanka, it found a secure home in Southeast Asia, especially in Myanmar.

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