

Royal Patronage and the Spread of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar: A Historical Study

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Abstract: The evolutionary pattern of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar was closely linked with the patronage extended by several kings and ruling elites. From the Bagan and Pinya (Vijayapura) periods through the Inwa (Ava), Toungoo (Ketumati), and Kon-baung dynasties, monarchs sponsored monumental temples, promoted monastic reforms, and enabled missionary activities and literary production. The Order of Monks (Sangha) and political power both supported each other, resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship that influenced the cultural identity of Myanmar. This paper draws primary sources from inscriptions, chronicles, and other historical records to examine how royal support consolidated the institutional and organizational structure of Buddhism in Myanmar. Besides, this paper also examines how this patronage spread the religious organization's power to areas like Lower Myanmar, the Shan kingdoms, and Rakhine.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism; Royal Support; Myanmar; Monastic Reform; Buddhist Missionary Activity.

INTRODUCTION

This paper advances the premise that the consolidation of Theravada Buddhism (The teachings of the Elders) in Myanmar was facilitated by process of the establishment of strong monastic networks that served as both custodians of the faith, mediators of knowledge and disseminators of belief systems. This process, argued in this paper, is actively supported by the royal establishment. Generally, in Buddhism, monks were central to preserving sacred texts, conducting rituals, and educating both royalty and commoners. Their presence extended beyond urban centers into rural areas, where monasteries became the spiritual and cultural nucleus of local communities. The remarkable contribution of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar is that it allowed the tradition to become firmly ingrained in society by providing a uniting code of conduct that transcended political unrest and ethnic variety through the blending of spiritual authority with social life (Lal, 1982). While it is a complex process, the paper mainly focused on the way initially royal patronage and later on lay worshiper help enabled the Theravada Buddhist establishment to gain strong control over socio-cultural and spiritual system of Myanmar.

The Theravada Buddhism gradually became an integral part of Burmese cultural forms and social ethos. Interestingly, literary and architectural accomplishments

cemented and consolidated Theravada's spiritual authority as a central cultural influence (Indasiha1 and Kumar, 2026). Buddhist structures such as massive pagodas, monasteries, and inscriptions were, in a way, symbols of royal power and intense religious devotion, along with being practices of enlightenment. Similarly, the growth of Pāli and local Buddhist literary traditions made it easier for doctrinal teachings to be systematically recorded, transmitted, and evaluated across generations (Nay and Kumar, 2018). Theravada Buddhism was able to function as more than just a religious system because of these efforts. It eventually developed into a common cultural identity that influenced the Myanmar population's beliefs, goals, and historical knowledge (Ray, 1946).

The Political Legitimacy of Noble Benefaction

Viewed from a critical point of view, imperial support was not simply an act of devotion but a calculated form of state craft and a strategy of governance. The promoters of Kings Bagan (Arimaddanapura), Pinya (Vijayapura), Ava (formerly named Ratanapura), Sagaing (Zeyapura) in upper Myanmar and Bago (Hanthawadi), Toungoo (Ketumati) era lower Myanmar sponsored the construction of pagodas, monasteries, and literary workshops. They presented themselves as universal kings (skt-cakravartin)

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and righteous rulers (dharmarāja) by these gestures of support (Bischoff, 1995).

In Myanmar, the alignment between throne and monastery was crucial in stabilizing society. Monks provided spiritual legitimacy to rulers, and rulers in turn ensured material support for the Order of Monks (Sangha). This connection created a cultural context where Buddhism was a fundamental element of sociopolitical structure, intellectual development, and sense of community, in addition to being a tradition of religion. The functionalist role of religion as a phenomenon that addresses socio-political and cultural needs of society could thus be seen in the case of Myanmar (Indiasih and Kumar, 2026).

As promoters of Sāsana, kings in upper Myanmar in particular relied on Buddhist patronage to consolidate their power during times of political fragmentation and external threats. Through their self-representation as protectors and patrons of the Sāsana, rulers cultivated a perception of religious continuity that endured beyond the vicissitudes of dynastic change and political turmoil. At a symbolic level, religious monuments and literary projects served as visible reminders of royal merit and enduring authority, even when political borders were unstable. These expressions of support guaranteed that the king's power exceeded the strength of his military by securing royal authority according to the individual's moral and cultural traditions.

Besides, the mutually beneficial tie between the rulers and the community of monks was strengthened and institutionalized with their active patronage impulse. From a material point of view, the Order of monks (Sangha) benefited from land endowments, scriptoria for Pāli and vernacular texts, and royal protection, which elevated its intellectual and spiritual influence (Indasiha and Kumar, 2022). In return, the monastic community provided legitimacy to the monarch's authority through ritual practices and doctrinal endorsement, while alongside serving as custodians of moral and ethical order within society. The mutual reinforcement of authority established a model of governance in which spiritual and temporal power functioned in an interdependent manner. This context ensured the durability of the Pinya, Sagaing and Inwa (Ava) dynasties in upper Myanmar and secured Theravāda Buddhism (the teaching of the elders) as a central pillar of Myanmar's historical identity (Michael, 1985).

This article evaluates the patterns of royal patronage that contributed to the spread of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar from the Bagan (Arimaddapurā) era through subsequent dynasties. It highlights six major aspects: monumental architecture, literary and textual traditions, missionary activities, monastic reform, regional influence, and cultural integration to demonstrate the nexus between royal

power and Buddhism. Based on historical records, inscriptions, and comparative studies, the analysis demonstrates that royal patronage was instrumental in the development of Buddhism. This majestic support, if not exclusively, but importantly, enabled Buddhism to emerge as the mainstay of Myanmar's national and cultural consciousness. The study similarly evaluates and assesses how royal interventions designed Buddhist networks across Southeast Asia, emphasizing Myanmar's role as a key center of Theravada Buddhism (Tun, 1982).

Monumental Architecture and the Material Expression of Faith

The monumental architecture of Myanmar appears to have functioned as both a material expression of faith and a cultural mechanism for consolidating Buddhist identity across generations. These performative functions are important to understand the role of monuments in shaping the cognitive universe of the population in the form of collective mentalities. Each stupa (Cetiya), monastery, and temple (Gu Phayas) operated as both a sacred locus of devotion and a concrete expression of moral authority as well as communal piety. The scale, artistry, and sacred functions of these monuments demonstrated the profound interconnection between religious belief and political authority in a dynamic way. To develop them, kings are required to strengthen their worldly status and attain spiritual virtue. Architecture thus performed as a living text that embodied cultural meaning. It communicated the inseparability of Buddhist devotion and royal control within the historical landscape of Myanmar (Schober, 2006).

Once more, these landmarks' significance came beyond mere apparent grandeur since they functioned as hubs for education, pilgrimage, and a center for ritual production. In Bagan, Sagaing, Pinya, Ava in the medieval period (A.D1100-1400) and Mandalay emerged as important centers of Buddhist activity where monastic scholarship, artistic expression, and popular devotion converged. These areas were essential for maintaining and passing down Theravada customs in the following centuries. The embedding of Buddhist doctrine (Buddha Dhamma) in stone inscriptions and architectural symbolism created a durable medium of preservation. This helped Sāsana to survive even during times of political confusion. The Myanmar nation's spiritual and cultural landscape was formed in large part by monumental architecture. In various local and regional contexts, it additionally acted as an essential pathway for the continued development of Buddhist philosophy and practice (Spiro, 1970).

Literary Production and the Preservation of the Pāli Canon

During the Bagan to Kon-boung period, the preservation of the Pāli Canon was a cultural and political effort along with a religious mission. The state

in Myanmar is apparently reaffirmed its power as a protector of the Sāsana through promoting duplicated reading, recitation, and transmission of texts. Manuscript libraries were crucial centers of study. Scholars, monks, and lay authors worked together to preserve canonical and extra-canonical literature in these areas. This collective engagement demonstrates that the maintenance of the Buddhist tradition was deeply embedded within the wider social matrix of the time. It brought together royal authority, monastic scholarship, and lay devotion, uniting them into a coherent cultural consciousness and fostering national unification (Tun, 1988).

The dual history of Pāli and common traditions can be seen in systematic literature works. Pāli remained the most reliable medium for scholarly papers and theological accuracy and spiritual purity. Together with, dialect Myanmar writings simplified the wider diffusion of Buddhist teachings (dhamma) among the general populace. Jātaka tales, poetic renderings, and didactic works were increasingly translated or composed in Myanmar, making complex doctrinal ideas accessible beyond the monastic elite. This interplay of languages armored the vitality of Buddhist literature, positioning the Pinya, Sagaing and Ava courts as both a preserver of accepted traditions and a facilitator of cultural adaptation.

The continuation of such literary activity also demonstrates the interconnected character of Myanmar's Buddhist world. Learned monks of Bagan, Pinya, Ava, Sagaing, Nyaung Yan and Kon-boung actively participated in the exchange, transcription, and preservation of texts. With this, they made sure that the Pāli Canon and the commentaries that followed together with it continued to be respectable and consistent throughout the kingdom. This scholarly endeavor elevated Ava's prestige as a center of Buddhist learning and underscored its role in maintaining the integrity of the Buddha's dispensation (Buddha sāsana). During this time, the creation of literature was a part of a larger philosophical and religious context instead of a single phenomenon of culture. It assisted to link monastic communities across regions, thereby reinforcing both the local vitality and the wider cohesion of Theravada Buddhism (Michael, 2012).

Missionary Activities and Cross-Regional Exchanges

The rulers of Myanmar during the Inwa (Ava) period regarded the propagation of Buddhism as an essential instrument for consolidating internal specialists. Together, they regarded it as a calculated tactic to extend religious and cultural influence outside of their own spheres of influence. Missionary undertakings were directed toward neighboring regions such as Bago (Hanthawadi), the Mon communities (Ramañña) of Lower Myanmar, the coastal polities of Arakan (Rakhine), and the upland Shan states. These efforts were intimately linked to royal measures aimed at

unifying various Buddhist practices (Pativeda) under one common doctrine and promoting the purity of the Sangha (Bhikkhus). The period of Bagan, Pinya and Ava (Ratanapura) court dispatched learned monks and supported the construction of monasteries and shrines to strengthen the Buddhist order in different parts of Myanmar. These programs created a network of religious interchange that strengthened the legitimacy of the dynasty and encouraged integration of cultures (Ray, 1939).

The circulation of monks, manuscripts, and ritual practices across borders created a dynamic religious sphere in which Myanmar obliged as both a source and recipient of influence. Missionary monks carried with them Pāli texts, exegetical traditions, and disciplinary codes (Vinaya), thereby shaping the doctrinal foundations of Buddhist communities in adjoining regions. In response, these engagements exposed Myanmar's Sangha to diverse external practices and interpretations. This connection encouraged the growth of its ritual collection and worked to develop philosophical traditions. The relationship between missionary activity and mutual exchange underscores the bidirectional nature of Buddhist transmission. It was not a one-sided imposition but a negotiated process characterized by adaptation and mutual reinforcement in wider regional spaces.

Imperial support of these missions was inseparable from broader political objectives. From Bagan (C.849-1297) to Kon-boung (1752-1885) monarchs presented themselves as protectors and promoters of the Buddha's dispensation beyond their own frontiers. In doing that, they aimed to elevate their stature and establish Myanmar as a key hub for Theravāda Buddhism in the region. As depicting the head of state was the global ruler of the kingdom Sāsana compared to just a political leader, such international actions enhanced the symbolic power of the position of king. As therefore, missionary work during the Myanmar era helped both countries spread Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia and articulate a religiously based conception of kingship that spread across national borders (Naidu, 2008).

Monastic Reform and Sangha Regulation

Several monastic reforms during the Ava period were closely tied to the consolidation of political authority and the preservation of religious custom. Kings regarded the Sangha as both a spiritual institution and a social force, whose integrity was essential for maintaining order within the kingdom. When monastic practices were perceived as fragmented or inconsistent, rulers undertook measures to regulate ordination, enforce stricter discipline, and eradicate heterodox customs. Such initiatives reflected the view that a unified and disciplined monastic body served as a guarantor of moral order, royal legitimacy and smooth functioning of the kingdom (Jagaralankara, 2017).

The regulation of the Sangha also extended to the establishment of administrative hierarchies within the monastic community. Rulers designated official positions for senior monks and entrusted them with authority over regional monastic affairs. This measure established a structured framework that more closely integrated the religious order with the state. This process enabled kings to monitor religious practices, settle disputes within the Sangha, and ensure conformity with accepted doctrinal standards. These reforms at times created tensions between the independence of the monastic order and the authority of the crown. By working together, they promoted the cohesiveness of the Buddhist community and preserved the state's role as the cultural custodian and political master.

The standardized implementation of rituals and textual traditions, which endeavored to eradicate regional differences and promote a consistent religious identity within the kingdom, was also crucial. Royal support provided support for the compilation of authoritative texts, the regulation of ordination lines, and the preservation of Vinaya principles. These measures contributed significantly to strengthening the institutional integrity of the Sangha. In unison, they helped to establish Buddhism as a shared cultural foundation that transcended local divisions and diversities. Therefore, monastic reform and regulation functioned as a crucial mechanism through which kings maintained both religious purity and political stability (Mendelson, 1975).

Royal Support and Cultural Integration

Theravada Buddhism's institutional authority was strengthened by royal patronage during the Inwa dynasty. Besides, it made it easier for religion to become part of Myanmar's general social and cultural life. The monarchy supported the construction of monasteries, sponsored recitations of the Tipiṭaka (Skt. Tripiṭaka) also known as Vinaya, Suttan and Abhidhamma), and organized large-scale religious ceremonies. These initiatives established a framework in which Buddhism permeated both public and private spheres. These acts of generosity extended beyond the pursuit of spiritual merit-making. They also assisted as visible demonstrations of royal authority, thereby linking the legitimacy of kingship to the preservation and expansion of the Sāsana. Rulers were able to successfully integrate Buddhism into the systems of social order and a system of government with their persistent efforts (Sarkisyanz, 1965).

In addition to religious and political functions, Buddhist patronage shaped artistic and literary expression. Artistic forms such as murals, sculptures, and inscriptions commissioned by the Ava court often conveyed Buddhist narratives that instantaneously reflected cosmological teachings and celebrated royal virtue. Literary works, including Buddhist treatises, chronicles, and poetic compositions, were supported by

the monarchy as vehicles for both religious instruction and cultural consolidation. This intertwining of sacred themes with royal imagery emphasized that the authority of the throne was sanctified by its role as protector of the Dhamma (teaching of the Buddha). Over time, literature and visual art developed into important symbols of Myanmar's cultural identity, expressing the relationship between social relationships, the authority of royalty, and dedication to faith.

The integration of Buddhist principles into law and daily practice further illustrates the depth of cultural transformation fostered by royal benefaction. The dhammathats, which blended traditional legal codes with Buddhist ethical standards, regulated social conduct in a way that reflected the moral teachings of the Dhamma. Almsgiving ceremonies and pagoda festivals, which were endorsed and often initiated by the monarchy, provided shared spaces where the sacred and civic dimensions of life intersected. The traditions developed a common identity based on loyalty to the monarchy and devotion to Buddhism as also promoting moral discipline among those in power. Thus, the Inwa (Ava) era can be characterized as a period in which religion, governance, and social life were integrated into a cohesive cultural synthesis (Maung, 1967).

The Decline of Royal Support and Rise of Lay Buddhist Movements

The decline of royal backing following the British annexation of Upper Myanmar in 1885 marked a decisive turning point in the history of Myanmar Buddhism. The traditional system in which kings acted as defenders and benefactors of the sāsana collapsed with the abolition of the monarchy, leaving the Sangha without its most powerful source of material and institutional support. This rupture revealed the extent to which monastic life, religious rituals, and Buddhist education had depended upon the monarchy for legitimacy and sustenance. The Sangha confronted both material insecurity and a significant symbolic decline, since the monarch had traditionally been venerated as the dhammarāja, the righteous self-determining responsible for preservation and upholding the Buddhist order (Winfield, 2017).

One of the important trends in modern Burma is that lay Buddhist organizations arose as crucial actors for preserving and reviving the faith due to this void. Lay meditation groups, Buddhist schools, and reformist societies gained prominence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These organizations provided alternative structures that compensated for the decline of royal sponsorship. These movements supported religious ceremonies, encouraged good conduct among the laity, and made it easier for Buddhist education to continue. A more democratic framework for spiritual engagement was encouraged with a rise of lay activity, and this was crucial in growing access and involvement in the practice of religion. The guardianship

of Buddhism was transferred from the privileged position of royal rule to a wider social basis as a result of this evolution. As Buddhist identity became a focal point for cultural and political reaction to foreign control, this change ultimately transformed into an anti-colonial emotion expressed in the movement for decolonization (Frasch, 2014)

The resilience of Buddhism in the colonial period highlights the adaptability of the tradition in the face of structural upheaval. Even if the decline of the monarchy brought an end to the centuries-old model of centralized religious patronage, the profound integration of Buddhist values within the social and cultural fabric of daily life ensured the continued resilience of the religion. Lay-led initiatives did not merely replace royal benefaction but redefined the relationship between Buddhism and society, enabling it to function without dependence on centralized authority.

This development ensured that Buddhism functioned as both a spiritual force and a central pillar of cultural continuity and national identity. The shift from royal to lay supervision thus illustrates the dynamic capacity of the *sāsana* (the Buddha's dispensation) to persist and thrive amid political and social transformation. It also underscores the fact that religious values are capable of adapting to ever-changing circumstances with a view to not only surviving but also remaining relevant to society.

CONCLUSION

The growth and expansion of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar were not exclusively, but significantly influenced by imperial patronage. Myanmar's monarchs employed monumental architecture, literary preservation, missionary outreach, monastic reform, and cultural integration as strategies to not only to promote Buddhism but also consolidate their power. By taking these steps, they solidified Buddhism's place at the center of the country's identity. The decline of royal/noble support in the colonial era only highlighted its previous centrality, as lay-led movements sought to fill the void left by the monarchy. In due course, the symbiotic relationship between the crown and the monastery played a decisive role in shaping the contours of Myanmar's religious history. This dynamic process ensured that Theravada Buddhism retained both resilience within the kingdom and influence across Southeast Asia. Any study of Buddhism in Myanmar must therefore acknowledge the important role of royal benefaction in sustaining its vitality and seminal its multinational legacy.

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