

<研究ノート>

Roles of Monasteries in the Society of Rakhine State

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There are a lot of roles being played by the Monasteries toward the Arakanese society. In this paper I would like to take an example the Monastery schools. Monastery schools have a long history in Myanmar and they continue to play an important role as education providers, especially for children from needy families and orphans as well as monks, novices and nuns (*Mae-thila* or *Thila-shin*, possessors of the precepts).⁽¹⁾

In Myanmar most of the Nuns (*Mae-thila*) have their own institutions. Nuns are living in independent nunneries called *Mae-thila* or *Thila-shin kyaung* (monastery) which are quite often of large size. Their present well-established place in Myanmar is a result of Royal Patronage by the queens of the *Alompra* or *Alaungpaya* Dynasty (1752–1885), as well as of course, of their learning and good practice. Originally, as in Thailand, nuns wore white robes but in course of time these have changed to the pinkish-brown ones worn now, together with a brown ‘shoulder-cloth’ in Myanmar. Quite a number of these nuns can be found in Yangon but their real center is in the *Sagaing Hills* where there are many famous nun-teachers both of learning and practice.

Hanthawady Thila-shin-kyaung is one of the best nunneries around Yangon. When one sees the considerable area covered by the buildings, pleasantly shaded by many flowering trees and bushes, it is not hard to understand that this nunnery is very well supported. Many nuns living in smaller institutions have a much harder time, some being really very poor. Those in this nunnery are well provided for and well educated. The main building with classrooms and two large halls, the one downstairs for

ordinary gatherings, the upstairs one for a shrine-temple, would have been a substantial structure in any educational institution, if one accepts the shrine. Separate buildings are the dormitories, kitchen and dining-hall. Nuns, or ladies who help them, maintain the grounds and see to the preparation of food.⁽²⁾

A nun's day begins with the rising gong at 4 a.m., with morning chanting half an hour later. Early breakfast is served as soon as it is dawn, about half past five. During the morning the nuns study Buddhist subjects until half past ten when the main meal is served. On some days this is provided by lay donors who supply enough food for all the nuns in residence, one hundred and fifty during the period of Rains-residence and a hundred or so at other times. More study follows in the afternoon with evening chanting at six o'clock. The nuns at *Hanthawady* practise no formal meditation since those who wish to practise can easily go to a meditation centre. The shrine-hall where their chanting was done is very beautiful and evidence of their great devotion.⁽³⁾

The Buddhist monastic school system in Myanmar is an old educational system with a very long history, dated back to 11th Century King Anawrahta period. The schools provided important educational needs throughout Myanmar's history and they were the only source of education for all sort of lives range from royal princes to unskilled workers. The Buddhist monastic schools helped to give Myanmar a rate of literacy considerably above those of other Far Eastern countries in early 1900s. In 1931, 56 percent of the males over the age of five and 16.5 percent of the females were literate approximately four times as high as those reported for India at the same time.⁽⁴⁾

The hundreds of monastery schools throughout the country have enabled tens of thousands of children, monks, novice and *mithilas* to acquire literacy and numeric skills as well as knowledge of the Lord Buddha's teachings.

In the 2004–2005 academic years, there were nearly 1190 monastery

schools, providing primary and secondary education to more than 100,000 children.⁽⁵⁾

The Rakhine state is ruling by the direct command of the central government through by the monk's administration.⁽⁶⁾ All over the country monks have a very strong power and roles to play towards the society. In my present paper I would like to continue my research works on the field of "Roles of Monasteries in the Society" as a Contemporary Buddhism in Rakhine State (Arakan) of Myanmar.

Rakhine State (Arakan) is a state of Myanmar. Situated in the western coast, it is bordered by Chin State in the north, Magway Division, Bago Division and Ayeyarwady Division in the east, the Bay of Bengal to the west, and the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh to the northwest.

The Arakan Roma mountain range, which rises to 3,063 m at Victoria Peak, separates Rakhine State from Myanmar proper. Its area is 36,762 km² and its capital is Sittwe (formerly also called Akyab). The estimated population in 1985 was 2,698,000 and it is inhabited primary by one main group of people—the Rakhine ethnic group. The remaining ethnic groups are *Mro*, *Khami (Khum)*, *Kaman Muslim*, *Rohingya*, *Dienet*, *Marmagri* and a few others. The majority of people are Buddhists, followed by Muslims.

Why I undertake the state as a research field? According to the Rakhine Legend Buddha visited to that state during his life time and where he resided two weeks⁽⁷⁾ People believe that they are really blessed by the Buddha. They never get shortness of food, disaster and any kind of miserable life in Rakhine State. Therefore, I am keenly interested to know more details of their way of life and as well as Roles of Monasteries in the contemporary society of Rakhine State.

Exploring of Rakhine State is not an easy task. Linguistic problem, political instability, shortness of resources makes my research works complicated. I hope my exploration of the field will be more expanded for the interested young researchers and scholars in future.

Let me take this opportunity to explain the education vital roles of

the monasteries in the Rakhine society which were based on field works, interviews and some rare reference materials.

1. Education

Education is free, although informal fees were increasingly imposed in the late 1990s. Primary education is compulsory for five years, although observers estimate that between two-thirds and three-fourths of students drop out before completing five years. Generally, Burmese is the language of instruction, and English is taught in the secondary schools.

Burma General Education System⁽⁸⁾

| | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Ph. D. | | Years 6–9 |
| Master's or M. B. B. S. | | Years 5–6 |
| University | degree-oriented | Years 3–4 |
| | regional college | Years 1–2 |
| Upper secondary | | Standards 9–10 |
| Lower secondary | | Standards 6–8 |
| Primary | | Standards 1–5 |
| Kindergarten | | K1–K3 |

Note: Engineering takes 6 year study and Distance Learning degrees last five years in length, while Medicine is a six and half year long study, with a separate degree.

The system of education initiated by the Ne Win government in 1964 equates learning with livelihood. At that time, the government announced its intention of opening at least one agrarian high school and one technical high school in each district. By 1967 there were six agricultural high schools, seven industrial trade schools, and one technical high school in the country, and the government had taken over about 880 private schools. In 1996, Myanmar had 35,752 primary schools with 5,413,752 students. In the same year, secondary schools had approximately 107,000 teachers and 1,923,323 students. The pupil-teacher ratio at the primary level was 33 to 1 in 1999. In the same year, 83% of primary-school-age children were enrolled in school.

Primary education lasts for five years followed by four years of secondary education at the first stage and two years at the second stage. There are 101 universities, 12 institutes, 9 degree colleges and 24 colleges in Myanmar.

The literacy rate of Myanmar, according the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2005) stands at 89.7% (males: 93.7%, females: 86.2%), although there is dispute over the accuracy of the provided literacy rates. The annual budget allocated to education by the government is low; only about 1.2% is spent per year on education. English is taught as a second language from Kindergarten.⁽⁹⁾

In Rakhine State, a large number of students are reportedly leaving government schools to enroll in schools run by Buddhist monasteries. Many people in this area believe that monastic education is better quality and less expensive than education at state-run schools. There were approximately 500 students enrolled in just one monastery in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State. Only a small percentage of people in Rakhine are able to continue their higher education that passed high school. The majority of students are unable to pursue higher education for economic reasons.⁽¹⁰⁾

2. Monastic Education System in Monasteries

The British colonial education system destroyed the centuries old monastery education indirectly, and thus impeded the growth of literacy among the masses, especially among people in rural areas. They did this by creating three kinds of schools—Vernacular Schools for the rural masses, Anglo-Vernacular Schools designed to produce clerks for trading firms with a smattering of English and knowledge of accounts, and English Schools run by missionaries who made it mandatory for students to study Christianity with their school work. Of course it was gone through Rakhine State in the beginning.⁽¹¹⁾

Rakhine as well as Burmese also send their children to the monastery

to receive a Buddhist education, learning the Pali Canon, *Buddhawin* (the life story of the Gautama Buddha), *Nga-ya nga-ze nipattaw* (the 550 Jataka Tales) —most importantly *Zatkyi sebwè* (the Ten Great Incarnations), and *Thonze shihpya mingala* (the 38 Buddhist Beatitudes) as soon as they have a good grounding of the three Rs. Monks were the traditional teachers of the young and old alike until secular and missionary schools came into being during the British colonial administration. The Burmese word *kyaung* for school is derived from *Hpongyi kyaung* (monastery).

There has been a revival of monastic schools since the 1990s with the deepening economic crisis. Children from poor families that can ill afford fees, uniforms and books have renewed the demand for a free monastic education, and ethnic minorities such as the Shan, Pa-O, Palaung, Lahu and Wa are benefitting from this revival.⁽¹²⁾

The present monastic education systems are as follows⁽¹³⁾:

- 1.1.1. Mūladaṅ (basic): The rules of training (*sekhiyā dhamma*), Pali Grammer, and Abhidhamma
- 1.1.2. Aññedaṅ (1 year course): Grammer, Vinaya piṭaka, Abhidhamma (citta-cetasika, pakinna), Dhatukathā mātikā and 1–30 Jātāka
- 1.1.3. Aledaṅ (1 year course): 1.1.2. and Bhikkhu-bhikkhuni Vi-bhaṅga, Paccāya, kamaṭṭhana, Yamaka, and Jātāka 31 to 70
- 1.1.4. Ajidaṅ (1 year course): Paṭṭhāna, Whole Abhidhammā-tthasaṅgaha, and Jātāka 71 to 550
- 1.1.5. Dhammācariya (4 years course): Whole Tipiṭaka studies

Monastic routine of Shwejedi Kyang, Sittwe⁽¹⁴⁾

| Time | activities |
|--------|-----------------|
| 4:30am | Wake up |
| 5:00am | Morning praying |
| 5:30am | Breakfast |
| 6–7am | Cleaning |
| 7–8am | Aññedaṅ |

| | |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| 8–9am | Aledaṅ |
| 9:30am to 11am | Collecting alms |
| 1–2pm | Ajidaṅ |
| 2–3pm | Anṇedaṅ |
| 3–4pm | Aledaṅ |
| 5–6pm | Abhidhamma for all class |
| 7–8pm | Evening praying |
| 8–9pm | Groups study |
| 9pm | Sleeping |

Rakhine State is extremely deprived of high level of illiteracy among the children as well as adults in compared with other state of Myanmar. Most of the village tracts have at least one primary school (class 1 to 4). But in remote areas; most of the classes are taken weakened by distance and lack of communication during the rainy season. Hence, widespread poverty keeps many children have to leave school as they are compelled to support to their families. Most of the students have to give up their schools during the winter and summer seasons to provide helps to their parents in their croplands. Many of the parents send their children to monastery for Pali and Buddhist studies and monastery school for study basic education for primary school.

All the classes begin at one o'clock in the afternoon until sunset. The monastic education concentrates on the study of religious scriptures to cover the three Canons of Buddhist literature; *Suttanta* (discourses), *Vinaya* (disciplinary rules and regulations), and *Abhidhamma* (philosophy doctrines).

A common average monk must study the *Pariyatti* (Scriptures, or practice the Insight), *Patipatti* (meditation), in order that he may gradually developed and advance his *Pativedha* (realization of the Perfect Truth).

During the three-month Buddhist Lent,⁽¹⁵⁾ all monks have to remain within the monastery and they are not supposed to travel anywhere. Only at the end of the Buddhist Lent which usually falls in October, they are

permitted to visit other monasteries, make pilgrimages, attend meetings and conventions, and deliver sermons in other villages as well as in towns. They can even transfer from one abode to another, because the Buddhist monk does not take a vow of stability to be attached to a particular monastery forever. After the Lenten period he may leave for any monastery of his choice, to pursue further study of the scriptures, or to learn in practice more about the Insight meditation, or even for general knowledge and new experience of monastic life in other places.

The senior monk or the Abbot of the monastery has little interaction with the village. Occasionally, however, on Sabbath days⁽¹⁶⁾ and on special festival days he leads the devotees in recitation of the discourses, or administering the precepts. On special occasions such as weddings, funerals and some other notable events, he chants the Eleven Holy Discourses of Protection (*Paritta*).⁽¹⁷⁾ He presides over the Initiation ceremony of novices and higher ordination ceremony of monks. Sometimes he accepts the special meals served by his devotees during the Lenten season either in the monastery or in the village houses. He preaches sermons at appropriate occasions, and gives advice and admonitions to his devotees when they come to the monastery for spiritual help.

The teaching staff in the Monastic Education institution is usually recruited and organized from the learned members of the *Samgha* and the Abbot acts as the President or Rector of the academy.

Often the Rector or the Abbot is busy with domestic affairs and he assigns an old deacon or a novice to take care of the school boys teaching them the alphabets and basic arithmetic. The youngsters usually learn the basic principles of the Buddhist Teachings by rote and recite the lessons all in unison chanting loudly enough in chorus to let the Abbot hear from his place so that he can correct on the spot at once whenever they commit a mistake. They all have to write their lessons on the slates or on the wooden boards blackened by soot and rice-glue with talcum pencils. And the young teachers check them every day to see if the handwriting is neat and tidy, or

if the spelling is all correct.

A young tutor monk is appointed by the Abbot to instruct the novices and newly ordained monks in the study of canonical literature and language prescribed for the elementary scholars in the monastic educational programme. Such junior courses of instruction are taught both in Pali as well as in the vernacular language. Most of the lessons are learnt by heart and the student must be able to recite fluently when the instructor requests him to do so in the class.

The elderly lecturer monks are specialists in their specific subject field and they deliver their lectures at their residential quarters. They may be Professors of Pali Grammar, or Professors of *Vinaya* Disciplinary Rules, or Professors of *Abhidhamma* Philosophy and other *Suttantas*. So the advanced students approach those lecturers for their higher academic studies. Among such advanced students are monks, nuns, a few laymen and old novices who have already passed the religious examinations set and sponsored periodically by the Government, or by the Local Board of Monastic Education.

There are however some scholar monks who do not care for sitting any examination, and they learn the scriptures of the religion for the religion's sakes only. They also attend all these lectures delivered by the experts at various monasteries. There are no tuition fees, no admission fees, no registration fees, and no charge whatsoever. The academy is free and open to all interested scholars.

The lecturers conclude their classes for the day just before sunset, to allow the students to stroll for a while to the pagoda or to clean the sanctuary.

Later they come to take parts in evening service similar to that in the morning. Sometimes there are evening classes for the Advanced *Abhidhamma* studies usually discussed in the darkness which conclude at nine o'clock late at night. While the elder monks perform their meditation and the youngsters tell the rosary-beads, the scholars recite their daily

lessons before they retire to bed. All are so tired and exhausted after such a long day that there is no need for any one to tell them to be quiet after ten o'clock.

The young steward boys and scholars are happy to go to bed late at night because they have already filled up their hungry stomachs with the remnants and leftovers that they have saved from the lunch boxes. And they never regret having to get up early the next morning at dawn to sip the hot rice gruel welcoming them to the routine work and labor of another busy day.

3. General Education system in Monastery School⁽¹⁸⁾

U Kaung, the late Commissioner of Education and an expert in Myanmar education, once said the monastic education system created morality and enshrined Myanmar culture in studies.

Monks have been both the spiritual teachers of the people and responsible for the basic literacy of laypersons, although they are not technically supposed to take on this second role.

The monastic education tradition emerged from Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar in the 11th century and has been an integral part of Myanmar culture. Monasteries played such a significant role in Myanmar education that British people who visited Myanmar in the 19th century observed Myanmar's literacy rate was higher than Britain's at that time.

Following Myanmar's annexation by the British in 1885, missionary schools overtook monasteries as the leading educational institutes in the major cities. In small towns and villages, however, monasteries often remained the only center of learning. Despite their low profile under the British rule, monastic schools paved the way of the emergence of the national schools, established by the patriots who boycotted the University Act that was passed by the British in 1920.

In 1962, however, monastic education was abolished by Myanmar's

socialist government.

Monastic education returned in 1993 when the government began recognizing monastic schools that followed the guidelines of the Ministry of Education.

But modern monastic schools have some differences from those in the past. They use the same system of grades, curriculum and examinations as state schools. Teachers, who are young volunteers or retired civil servants from the education sector, are appointed on a salary basis.

Monastic schools today especially target orphans or children from destitute families, who can ill-afford to pursue formal education. Some well-funded monastic schools also provide students with free food and accommodation while many others are just normal day schools.

Venerable Kusala⁽¹⁹⁾, said his school had improved in both teaching and students' learning since it was founded in 1992 but has faced funding problems.

He said his school mainly relied on donations from laypersons. Most of the time they had to spend money set aside for the monastery and monks because the funding for the school was not sufficient.

Venerable Kusala said their school could only open classes from kindergarten to the eighth grade but wished to open classes for the ninth grade and matriculation when they could provide the facilities.

"We don't have enough building for classrooms," said Venerable Kusala, who is also secretary of the supervisory committee for monastic schools in Yangon Division. "But in this coming academic year we'll try to open a pre-school inside the compound."

A total of 486 students are enrolled at his monastery, 250 of them stay there as boarding residents.

He said they provide free tuition, meal and board for all students. They spend an average of Kyat 1000⁽²⁰⁾ a day to provide the three meals for each student. Each teacher is paid Kyat 23000 monthly.

"We have just little fund," he said. "We save as much as we can and

spend economically. Sometimes we are forced spend money set aside for general funding.”

However, he said his school was becoming more successful and gaining popularity among the needy children in rural areas.

Venerable Kusala said monastic education, which brings together children from different racial and religious backgrounds, was an opportunity to develop cohesion that would in turn develop national integration.

“Monastic schools are also places that help the country produce valuable citizens because the students have to learn basic ethical values and morality” he said.

4. Meditation

Apart from religious and general education monasteries also providing meditation program for the monks, novices, Mae-thila as well as lay people. Among the meditation master of Myanmar Mahashi Sayadaw is very well known and respectful to the people. There are a few centers from Mahashi Sayadaw side in Rakhine State. Comparing with other states of Myanmar there are not much meditation centers in Rakhine State. But most of the meditation centers are providing physical and mental care of the people.

5. Concluding Remarks

Myanmar has totally discarded the colonial education, and successfully established a firm and advanced national education system. But education system has been heavily impacted in the Rakhine State cause of its economical crisis and lack of schools. Also the regime has a fear of student movements, given the history of student movement in the past people uprisings. As a result, the regime often shuts down the schools and limits the freedom of education. However, the monastic schools assist in providing basic educational needs of the country especially for children from needy

families and orphans-filling the significant gap within the education system. The primary school children of Rakhine State as well as Myanmar attend the Buddhist monasteries to acquire literacy and numeracy skills as well as knowledge of the Lord Buddha's teachings. Thus, the schools provide not only curriculum education but also ethics and moral foundation for the kids. Their role as principle educational providers may have ceased for many years but their contribution is still significant in the 21st century Myanmar.

Notes

- (1) Women who observe 9 precepts and residing into the monasteries. 1 to 8 precepts are same as 8 precepts but number 9 precept is *Metta sahagathena sabbapana bhūthesu parittova viharena samādiāmi-I take refuge to transmitted loveing kindness to all sentient beings*.
- (2) *Buddhist Monks and Nuns from the Buddha's time till now*: Bhikkhu Khantipalo. Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy-Sri Lanka, 1979, p. 99.
- (3) Ibid. p. 100.
- (4) *Burmese Economic Life*: J.R. Andrus. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1946, pp. 36–37.
- (5) *Monasteris aid in teaching the needy*: by Minh Zaw. The Myanmar Times (Feb. 21–27, 2005).
- (6) Interviewed with Sayadaw U. Ketu, a chief administrator of Rakhine State
- (7) *Famous Monuments of Mrauk-U*: Myar Aung, Middle Line, Kamaryut Tsp., Yangon, pp. 116–119.
- (8) *Narinjara*: Article in title Deprivation of Education in Arakan, Friday, 06 October 2006.
- (9) UNESCO Education in Burma. *UNESCO*. Retrieved 13 February 2006.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) *Myanmar's literacy promotion campaigns*: by Dr. Sein Tu. The Myanmar Times, Vol. 12, No. 236, Oct. 4–10, 2004.
- (12) Htet Aung. "Save Our Schools", *Irrawaddy* May 30 2007. Retrieved on 2007–06–08.
- (13) Interview with Sayadaw U. Ariyavaṇsha (monkhood age-36); Shwejadi Kyang, Sittwe, Rakhine State.

- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Basically *Theravāda* Buddhist Lent starts from July to October.
- (16) Within a month there are 4 special days in *Theravāda* Buddhism, which called *uposatha* day. They are as follows: *Aṭṭhamī*, (the eight day and last quarter of a month) *Amavassa or pañcadasa* (15th day of the month or a new moon) and *Pūrnima or pañnarasa* (full moon day).
- (17) Most of the Parittas are from Khuddhaka Nikāya.
- (18) *The Myanmar Times*, Vol. 21 No. 408 March 3–9, 2008.
- (19) He is the abbot of Natmauk Monastic School in Thaketa Township, Yangon and also running monastic schools in Rakhine State as well as other parts of Myanmar.
- (20) Myanmar Currency name is Kyat. 1 USD = 1200 Kyat. But bank rate is 1 US Dollar = 6.54620 Myanmar Kyat and 1 Myanmar Kyat (MMK) = 0.15276 US Dollar (USD).