

The Present State of Buddhist “Social Work” Activities in Asia
Overview of Buddhist Social Work in Myanmar

Submitted By

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1. Number of temples, monks and nuns; number of Buddhists

In Myanmar, most people are Buddhists and the temples play an important role in their daily lives. There are 2200 Temples in 2017 according to Burmese census data which is an official count of the human population in Myanmar. Myanmar is also famous for its several Buddhist temples called Pagodas, which is why it is also known as the “Land of Pagodas”. The temples are in tiered structures and the tapering shape of a pagoda is either painted white or gold-plated. There are numerous monasteries in Myanmar which serve as the lodging places for Buddhist monks in the country. Almost all of the monks start their monkhood from these monasteries in a year in Myanmar. The Buddhist teachings and principles are passed on by the senior monks in these Burmese Buddhist monasteries. Buddhist monks are venerated throughout Burmese society. According to the 2016 statistics published by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, the Sangha included 535,327 members, evenly split between 282,347 fully-ordained Buddhist monks (bhikkhu) and 252,962 novice monks (samanera).¹

In Myanmar, Buddhism is the overwhelmingly dominant religion and almost equivalent to 89% of the population. In 2019, there were some 500,000 monks and 75,000 nuns out of 54 million people in a country. These religious structures are not only influential in the spiritual and religious life among the Burmese people, but they also influence the lives of Burmese people politically and socially as well.²

Buddhism is one of the largest religions in the world. It originated from India and is based around the teachings of Buddha. Buddhism has its unique traditions, practices, and beliefs. Those who practice Buddhism are known as Buddhists and they believe in rebirth. They have faith in that death is not the end, but instead, a person is reborn death. Buddhists believe that finding enlightenment or Nibbana is the key to ending the cycle of rebirth.

For some, Buddhism is a religion but it is also a philosophy for some. Others practice Buddhism to find themselves and experience inner peace. Buddhism is a religion that is practiced worldwide while it is believed that as many as 535 million people around the world practice this religion, which would represent between 8% and 10% of the world’s total population.

¹ "The Account of Wazo Monks and Nuns in 1377 (2016 year)". The State Samgha Maha Nayaka Committee. Retrieved 19 May 2020.

² Department of Religious Affairs (in Burmese). Ministry of Religious Affairs. Retrieved 2016-11-13.

Several countries have a very high proportion of Buddhism followers. The country with the highest proportion is Cambodia. Of its population of over 15 million, about 13.7 million – or 96.9% of the total population – are Buddhists. Other countries that have a high percentage of Buddhist residents include Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Laos and Mongolia.

All nations listed above have a Buddhist majority that makes up at least 55% of the total population respectively. However, these are not the only nations that have millions of Buddhist residents. The countries where Buddhists make up at least 10% of the total population consist of Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, China, Macau, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Northern Mariana Islands and Nepal. China has the highest number of Buddhists at around 244.1 million. Among them, the main religions of the country, Myanmar in particular are Buddhism (89.2%), Christianity (5.0%), Islam (3.8%), Hinduism (0.5%), Spiritualism (1.2%) and others (0.2%). Religious intolerance or discrimination on grounds of religion is believed to be nonexistent in the Union of Myanmar throughout its long history. Buddhism is practiced by approximately 90% of the country. According to Burmese census data dating back to 1891, between 84% to 90% of the population have practiced Buddhism.³

2. Relationship between Buddhism and the State (Government), position according to the Constitution, Law Code; State financial aid for Buddhism

Since over one thousand year ago, the people of Myanmar have taken in pure Theravada Buddhism with firm confidence and conviction. The Theravada Buddhism leads everyone to carry out his/her welfare and prosperity freely based on his/her own Kamma, wisdom and effort. On the other hand, it reminds and exhorts everyone to avoid evil conduct and evil speech which can cause harm to the human society. Moreover, everyone must dutifully perform their duties related to the society, to the State and to the nation, including oneself, one's family and one's relatives.

The people of ancient Myanmar learned the basic education with respect to writing, reading and arithmetic as well as Buddha's Teachings at monastic schools. Then, they proceeded along the

³ "Global Religious Landscape: Buddhists". Pew Research Center. 18 December 2012, Johnson, Todd M.; Grim, Brian J. (2013), Harvey, Peter (2013). An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. p. 5. ISBN 9780521676748. Retrieved 2 September 2013, and "Global Religious Landscape – Religious Composition by Country". The Pew Forum. Retrieved 28 July 2013.

journey of their life, were not separated from the Buddha's Teachings, and this is why they were able to lead their life to peace and prosperity. As a result, Myanmar has existed peacefully under self-rule for many years.

In 1885, Myanmar lost her independence and took a down-turn in her destiny. She remained under the colonial rule for about a hundred years. During this period, the Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar was on the decline as it lacked the support of the State while the colonial government encouraged the spread of western culture and western religions.

The Union of Myanmar regained her independence and became a sovereign State in 1948, just after the World War II. Since then, the concerned authorities made every endeavor to upgrade and promote Myanmar culture and religion which have been on the decline under the colonial rule. However, their effort was not successful as it should have been because of the long destructive civil war and the change in the education system from monastic to modern.

Now the Government of Myanmar is trying to build a modern, prosperous and peaceful nation with great effort as it realizes the importance of Buddhism in the nation-building. If the people abide by the Teachings of the Buddha and give a helping hand in the nation-building, the objectives of rebuilding the country will be accomplished smoothly and rapidly.

Accordingly, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Union of Myanmar effectively supports the activities for propagation of Buddha's teachings throughout Myanmar. Especially, the Ministry encourages the dissemination of Buddhism in hilly regions and border areas in which Buddhism could not flourish in the past. Moreover, the monastic education system that had faded away during the colonial period has been reintroduced into the country.

Besides, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has appointed some learned persons as advisers and requested them to write Many Books on the Teachings of the Buddha which can be studied easily by young people as well as adults. Since 1996, classes on the Buddha's teachings have been conducted throughout the country even during the summer vacation. Nowadays, many foreigners from all over the world are coming to Myanmar; and among them re some enthusiasts who are interested in Theravada Buddhism and Myanmar Culture. There are also some foreign scholars who would like to study the true aspects of Theravada Buddhism by the permission of the Myanmar Government.

And also, for propagation of Buddhism, the Government of the Union of Myanmar have provided many million pounds to form the central fund for the purpose of making necessary preparations for holding the Six Great Buddhist Council in Rangoon and other projects. All the achievements of the past, plans and preparations for future are the outcome of the unprecedented and the happy unity of purpose and harmony of action between the community of monks as well as the Government and the people of Myanmar.⁴

3. History of Buddhism in the target country and its actual state and characteristics System and actual state of Buddhist education.

The history of Buddhism in Myanmar probably extends to more than two thousand years. The *Sāsana Vaṃsa* (Burmese Thathana Win), written by Pinyasami in 1834, summarizes much of the history of Buddhism in Myanmar. According to the *Mahavamsa*, a Pali chronicle of fifth century Sri Lanka, Ashoka sent two bhikkhus, Sona and Uttara, to Suvannabhumi around 228 BC with other monks and sacred texts, including books. A series of epigraphic records in Pali, Sanskrit, Pyu and Mon datable to the 6th and 7th centuries, has been recovered from Central and Lower Burma (Pyay and Yangon). From the 11th to 13th centuries, the Bamar kings and queens of the Bagan Kingdom built countless stupas and temples.⁵

The Arigyi Buddhism era included the worship of bodhisattvas and nāgas. Theravada Buddhism was implanted at Bagan for the first time as early as the 11th century by the Bamar king Anawrahta (1044-1077).⁶

In year 1057, Anawrahta sent an army to conquer the Mon city of Thaton to obtain the *Tiṭṭaka* of the Pāli Canon. He was converted by a Mon bhikkhu, Shin Arahan, to Theravada Buddhism. Shin Arahan's advice led to acquiring thirty sets of Pali scriptures from the Mon king Manuha by force. Mon culture, from that point, came to be largely assimilated into the Bamar culture based in Bagan.

⁴ The Teachings of the Buddha, (Basic Level) Department of the Propagation and Promotion of the Sasana, the Union of Myanmar, 2007.

⁵ Sylvain Lévi, "Concept of Tribal Society" in Pfeffer, Georg; Behera, Deepak Kumar, eds. (2002). *Concept of tribal society*. New Delhi: Concept Pub. Co. ISBN 978-8170229834.

⁶ Lieberman, Victor B (2003). *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, C. 800-1830, Volume 1: Integration on the Mainland*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 115–116. ISBN 978-0-521-80496-7.

Despite attempts at reform, certain features of Ari Buddhism and traditional nat worship continued, such as reverence for the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Lawka nat).

Successive kings of Bagan continued to build large numbers of monuments, temples, and pagodas in honor of Buddhism, and there is an inscriptional evidence of a Theravadin vihara for bhikkhunis from 1279.

Burmese rule at Bagan continued until the first Mongol invasion of Burma in 1287. Towards the end of the 13th century, Buddhism declined due to the invading Tatars. In the 14th century, another forest lineage was imported from Sri Lanka to Ayutthaya, the capital of the Thai Ayutthaya Kingdom. A new ordination line was also imported into Burma.

The Shan, meanwhile, established themselves as rulers throughout the region now known as Myanmar. Thihathu, a Shan king, established rule in Bagan by patronizing and building many monasteries and pagodas.

The Mon kingdoms, often ruled by Shan chieftains, fostered Theravada Buddhism in the 14th century. Wareru, who became king of Mottama, patronized Buddhism, and established a code of law, the Dhammasattha, compiled by Buddhist monastics. King Dhammazedī, formerly a Mon bhikkhu, established rule in the late 15th century at Inwa and unified the sangha in Mon territories. He also standardized the ordination of monks set out in the Kalyani Inscriptions. Dhammazedī moved the capital back to Hanthawaddy (Bago). His mother-in-law, Queen Shin Sawbu, was also a great patron of Buddhism. She is credited for expanding and gilding the Shwedagon Pagoda, giving her own weight in gold.

The Bamar, who had fled to Taungoo before the invading Shan, established a kingdom there under the reigns of Tabinshwehti and Bayinnaung, who conquered and unified most of the modern Myanmar. These monarchs also embraced Mon culture and patronized Theravada Buddhism.

Mandalay's Kuthodaw Pagoda, which houses marble slabs containing all of the Tipitaka scriptures, was constructed during the reign of King Mindon.

In the reigns of succeeding kings, the Taungoo Dynasty became increasingly volatile and was overthrown by the Mon. In the mid-18th century, King Alaungpaya defeated the Mon, expanded the Bamar kingdoms, and established the Konbaung Dynasty. Under the rule of Bodawpaya, a son of Alaungpaya, a unified sect of monks ("Thudhamma") was created within the kingdom. Bodawpaya restored ties with Sri Lanka, allowing for mutual influence in religious

affairs. During the reigns of the Konbaung kings that followed, both secular and religious literary works were created. King Mindon Min moved his capital to Mandalay.

After Lower Burma had been conquered by the British, Christianity began to gain acceptance. Many monks from Lower Burma had resettled in Mandalay, but by the decree of Mindon Min, they returned to serve the Buddhist laypeople. Schisms rose in the sangha; they were resolved during the Fifth Buddhist Synod, held in Mandalay in 1871.

The Fifth Council was convened at Mandalay in Myanmar on the first waning day of Tazaungmone, 1232 Myanmar Era, and 2415 B.E (November 1871). The scriptures inscribed on palm-leaves could not last for a long time. Besides there might be many variations in rewriting the scriptures from copy to copy. Therefore, the scriptures were inscribed on marble slabs to dispel these disadvantages.

Two thousand and four hundred bhikkhus led by Venerable Jagarabhivamsa Thera (Tipitakadhara Mahadhammarajadhirajaguru) of Dakkhinarama Monastery, Mandalay, convened, to recite and approve the scriptures. King Mindon initiated and supported the Fifth Great Council to the end. The scriptures were first inscribed on seven hundred and twenty-nine marble slabs) in the precinct of Lokamarajina Pagoda at the foot of Mandalay Hill. From 1860 to 1868, the Tipitaka was engraved on 729 marble slabs and assembled in the Kuthodaw Pagoda. It took seven years, six months and fourteen days to finish this work. Then the bhikkhus recited to approve the inscriptions for five months and three days. In 1871, a new hti (the gold umbrella that crowns a stupa) encrusted with jewels from the crown was also donated by Mindon Min for the Shwedagon now in British Burma. After the Fifth Great Council, the Pali Texts were translated into Myanmar language, and the Doctrinal Order was promulgated to the whole country for purpose of purification and propagation of the Buddha's Teachings.

Since 1948 when the country gained its independence from Great Britain, both civil and military governments have supported Theravada Buddhism. The 1947 Constitution states, "The State recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union." The Ministry of Religious Affairs, created in 1948, was responsible for administering Buddhist affairs in Myanmar. In 1954, the Prime Minister, U Nu, convened the Sixth Buddhist Synod at Kaba Aye Pagoda in Rangoon (Yangon), which was attended by 2,500 monks, and established the World Buddhist University.

During the military rule of Ne Win (1962–1988), he attempted to reform Myanmar under the Burmese Way to Socialism which contained elements of Buddhism. In the 8888 Uprising, many monks participated and were killed by Tatmadaw soldiers. The succeeding military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) patronized Buddhism, although persecution of Buddhists contrary to the regime, as well as persons of other religions, namely Islam and Christianity, continues.

Theravadins send their children to kyaungs to receive a Buddhist education, learning the Pāli Canon, the life story of Gautama Buddha, the 550 Jataka tales - most importantly the 38 Buddhist Beatitudes. Monks were the traditional teachers of the young and old alike until secular and missionary schools came into being during the British colonial administration. 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 minority groups such as the Shan, Pa'O, Palaung, Lahu and Wa are benefitting from this revival.⁷

According to the Myanmar tradition, the parents have to send their children once they pass the seven years of age, to the monastery to follow some Buddhist teachings and practices. According to the Buddhism, the Buddha, when he was a prince, left his palace on the horse-back with the his follower, “Maung San” to practice meditation and to grasp the meaning of real life and how the cycle of life is rotating, and how to attain Nibbana. It is understood that life is made up of suffering and there is no “self” after he saw the old, the sick, the dead, and the monk in the royal garden. Myanmar people also send their children to the monastery to conduct Buddhist education. But before they are sent to the monastery, they celebrate the ceremony called “Shinbyu”. In this ceremony, the male children wear the costumes like a princess. Then they ride the horse as the Buddha did when he left for meditation.

In the Buddhist ceremony in Myanmar, they also have a follower-man to this child, a monk-to-be. Then a lot of people will also follow, going around the city or village carrying the items, what they referred to as, the “Paraitkayashikba”, the requisites to be a monk, including the robe.

⁷ Htet Aung. "Save Our Schools". Irrawaddy 30 May 2007. Archived from the original on 27 September 2007. Retrieved 3 June 2007.

After the going around, he will be sent to the monastery. Then, the head monk of the monastery will give some teachings.

The Buddhist monastic education school system in Myanmar is an old education system with a very long history, dated back to the 11th century King Anawratha period. Nowadays, the monastic schools assist in providing basic education needs of the country especially for children from needy families and orphans — filling the significant gap in the education system. The primary school children of 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 curriculum education and ethics and moral foundation. Their role as principal education providers may have ceased for many years, but their contribution is still significant in 21st century Burma. Supplementing the government elementary schools, they provide underprivileged children with all the basic education needs as in the government elementary schools by using the same curriculum.⁸

Generally, Burma monastic schools accept children from needy families who live nearby and are unable to attend government schools. Many of the orphans who attend monastery schools in Yangon and Mandalay are from remote areas and have been sent by senior monks from their villages and small towns. Some operate similarly as boarding schools and some as day schools depending on the situation and support of the public.

The schools are required to cooperate closely with the township education authorities to be officially recognized. The operation and finance rely heavily on donations and collaboration from the public. The fees of most of the students at the school were covered by these donations, and some parents were able to make a small contribution.

In the 2004-2005 academic year, there were nearly 1190 monastic schools, providing primary and secondary education to more than 100,000 Myanmar children.⁹

Then he was balded, let in the robe and also cites some Buddhist teachings to become a young monk. On the following day, it is the preaching of Buddhist teaching by the head of monastery at the parents' house with a lot of people. The head monks, the monks from the

⁸ J.R. Andrus in *Burmese Economic Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1946, pp. 36-37.

⁹ "Monasteries aid in teaching the needy". *The Myanmar Times*. Feb 2005. Archived from the original on 2006-11-14. Retrieved 2007-04-12.

monastery, as well as the young monks on the traditional stage cite the teachings first. Then the head monk will give some teachings which takes at least 2 hours. All the laymen and women offer the offerings to the monk and share some traditional food with the guests, all of them are in great interest in the teachings of Buddhist monks. Then the ceremony is closed and the young monks are sent to the monastery to study Buddhist teachings, where they have to keep the Eight Precepts. They have to study in the monastery for at least 2 weeks. But all the parents in Myanmar want their children to learn Buddhist teachings as long as possible during the New Year festival, Thingyan.

When he continues to ordain in monk life, he has to study monastic education at least for 7 years. Monastic examinations comprise of the annual examination system used in Myanmar (Burma) to rank and qualify members of the Buddhist sangha, or the community of Buddhist monks. The institution of monastic examinations first began in 1648 during the pre-colonial era,¹⁰ and the legacy continues today, with modern-day examinations largely conducted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

The institution of monastic examinations date back to the pre-colonial era. Burmese monarchs used these examinations to encourage the study of Pali, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism. Successful candidates were rewarded with royal recognition, titles and ranks, and monastic residences.¹¹

The pathamabyan examinations began in 1648 during the rule of King Thalun of the Taungoo Dynasty.¹² King Bodawpaya of the Konbaung Dynasty standardized the existing set of examinations, and introduced new ones related to the Vinaya.¹³

This system temporarily lapsed following the demise of the Konbaung Dynasty in 1886, but was revived by the colonial Directorate of Public Instruction to encourage theological and secular education in Burmese monasteries. After a few years of resistance by the Burmese sangha, the first series of colonially administered examinations was successfully launched in June 1895.

¹⁰ Festivals in Burma (Myanmar) - Asian and African studies blog". blogs.bl.uk. Retrieved 2016-11-13.

¹¹ Smith, Donald Eugene (2015). Religion and Politics in Burma. Princeton University Press. ISBN 9781400878796.

¹² သာသနာရေးဦးစီးဌာနက ကျင်းပသည့် စာမေးပွဲများ". Department of Religious Affairs (in Burmese). Ministry of Religious Affairs. Retrieved 2016-11-13.

¹³ Dhammasami, Khammai (2004). Between Idealism and Pragmatism: A Study of Monastic Education in Burma and Thailand from the Seventeenth Century to the Present. St. Anne's College, Oxford University.

They were held annually in Mandalay, Rangoon, and Moulmein. Successful candidates were certified as pathamagyaw.¹⁴

Monastic examinations are divided into multiple grades, based on level of difficulty. Monks that pass each succeeding examination are eligible to sit for the next highest-level examination. Monastic exams are held during the Burmese month of Nayon. Examination content is drawn from Buddhist texts (e.g., Abhidhamma Pitaka, Vinaya, and Sutta Pitaka). Questions require candidates to replicate passages from memory, to analyze specific texts, and to correct Pali grammar.¹⁵

Novice monks (sāmaṇera) who are under the age of 20 and by virtue of their age have not yet received full ordination are eligible to sit for the thamanegyaw examinations, which are administered by the monasteries in which the novice monks reside, between the months of October and January. The overall examination has three grades, knowledge test of Buddhist scriptures, the Vinaya, Pali grammar, and the Jataka tales. Memorization of over 5,000 pages of text is required to pass the written and oral components, and the annual pass rate is under 13%. Novice monks who pass the exam are awarded the monastic title "-alaṅkāra", which is suffixed to the monk's monastic name.¹⁶

The Pahtamabyan examinations, the lowest-level series of examinations, comprise three exams, from lowest to highest difficulty:

Pathamange examination

Pathamalat examination

Pathamagyi examination

Candidates who rank first on the Pathamagyi examination are known as the pathamagyaw.

Dhammācariya examinations are the mid-level series of examinations. Candidates for these examinations are required to pass all three components of the Pathamabyan examinations. The

¹⁴ Smith, Donald Eugene (2015). Religion and Politics in Burma. Princeton University Press. ISBN 9781400878796.

¹⁵ Johnston, William M. (2013). Encyclopedia of Monasticism. Routledge. ISBN 9781136787164.

¹⁶ Thar, Hein. "The gruelling tests of a monk's knowledge". Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved 2020-05-16.

examinations are held over the course of nine days, including six days covering the base texts, one day covering Burmese language texts, and two days for Pali language texts.¹⁷

Successful candidates are bestowed the monastic title of "Dhammācariya" (Pali for "teacher of the Dharma").¹⁸

The Tipiṭakadhara and Tipiṭakakoviḍa examinations, held since 1948, are the highest-level examinations conducted by the Burmese government. These examinations, require candidates to demonstrate rote memory and comprehension of the entire Pāli Canon and its relevant commentaries, sub-commentaries, and treatises.¹⁹ The oral (Tipiṭakadhara) and written (Tipiṭakakoviḍa) components are held annually in December, over the course of 33 days at the Kaba Aye Pagoda's Mahāpāsāṇa Cave in Yangon.²⁰

The breadth of the examinations requires candidates to recite over 2.4 million words with correct pronunciation and smooth flow, and transcribe over 200 texts from memory.²¹ The examinations also require candidates to display their mastery of "doctrinal understanding, textual discrimination, taxonomic grouping and comparative philosophy of Buddhist doctrine."²²

The first candidate to pass such grueling examinations was Mingun Sayadaw in 1954.²³ His error-free performance across 16,000 pages was rewarded by the Burmese government with the title "Mahātipiṭakadharatipiṭakakoviḍa" (lit. "Great bearer of the spoken and written Tipiṭaka").²⁴ As of 2020, only 15 monks have passed both the oral and written components, who are recognized by the Burmese government as "Sāsana Azani" (from Pali Sāsanañāyeyya, lit.

¹⁷ "ဓမ္မာစရိယာစာမေးပွဲ". Department of Religious Affairs. Ministry of Religious Affairs. Retrieved 2016-11-14.

¹⁸ Johnston, William M. (2013). *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*. Routledge. ISBN 9781136787164.

¹⁹ Aung Thein Nyunt. "A STUDY OF TIPITKADHARA SELECTION EXAMINATION IN MYANMAR (1948-2007)". The International Association of Theravāda Buddhist Universities. Retrieved 2016-11-13.

²⁰ Kawanami, Hiroko (2013). *Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma: Building a Community of Female Faithful*. BRILL. ISBN 978-9004234406.

²¹ "TIPITAKADHARA SAYADAWS OF MYANMAR (BURMA) IN FIVE DECADES". Nibbana.com. 2014-10-23. Retrieved 2016-11-13.

²² Kawanami, Hiroko (2013). *Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma: Building a Community of Female Faithful*. BRILL. ISBN 978-9004234406.

²³ Harris, Ian (2007). *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*. Routledge. ISBN 9781134129478.

²⁴ Jordt, Ingrid (2014-07-31). *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Ohio University Press. ISBN 978-0-89680-457-9.

"Noble Hero of the Buddhist doctrine").²⁵ Successful candidates are bestowed ranking titles, flagstaffs, and white silken kanekgadan umbrellas depending on their relative performance.²⁶

There are private examinations, such as the two monastic organizations in Burma which also conduct the annual Dhammacariya examinations, including the Sakyasīha Examination sponsored by Mandalay's Pariyatti Sasana Association, and the Cetiyaṅgaṇa Examination sponsored by the Board of Trustees of Shwedagon Pagoda.²⁷ Monks who pass these examinations are bestowed a monastic title, -bhivaṃsa, literally "noble lineage"), which is suffixed to their monastic name (e.g., Ashin Nandamalabhivamsa).²⁸

These examinations, which test the monks' knowledge of Buddhist scriptures and analytical thinking are highly regarded by the Buddhist laity in Myanmar, and consists of two stages, the first of which must be passed by the age of 27 and the second by the age of 35.²⁹

Successful candidates of the latter examination are bestowed the Cetiyaṅgaṇa Pariyatti Dhammācariya Gaṇavācaka and Cetiyaṅgaṇa Abhivaṃsa titles. Successful candidates are qualified to sit for the government's Tipitakadhara and Tipitakavida examinations.³⁰

Candidates successfully passing the Dhammācariya and higher-level examinations are bestowed ranking titles, as listed below (in order of decreasing precedence):

1. Tipiṭakadhara and Tipiṭakakovida examination titles are:³¹

Dhammabhaṇḍāgārika, ("Keeper of the Dhamma Treasure")

Maha Tipiṭakakovida, ("Great Bearer of the Tipitaka (oral and written)")

Tipiṭakakovida, ("Bearer of the Written Tipitaka")

²⁵ "တိပိဋကဓရ၊ တိပိဋကကောဝိဒ စာမေးပွဲအောင်မြင်တော်မူကြသည့် သာသနာ့အာဇာနည် အရှင်သူမြတ် ၉၅ ပါးတို့အား အောင်လက်မှတ်ဘွဲ့တံဆိပ်တော် ဆက်ကပ်လှူဒါန်း". Ministry of Information (in Burmese). 2019-05-21. Retrieved 2020-05-16 and Department of Religious Affairs (in Burmese). 2020-01-29. Retrieved 2020-05-16.

²⁶ "တိပိဋကဓရရွေးချယ်ရေးစာမေးပွဲ". နိုင်ငံတော် သံဃာ့မဟာနာယကအဖွဲ့ (in Burmese). Retrieved 2020-05-16.

²⁷ Johnston, William M. (2013). *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*. Routledge. ISBN 9781136787164.

²⁸ Sayadaw U Pandita. "One Life's Journey". vmc128.8m.com. Retrieved 2016-11-14.

²⁹ Thar, Hein. "The gruelling tests of a monk's knowledge". *Frontier Myanmar*. Retrieved 2020-05-16.

³⁰ "တိပိဋကဓရ တိပိဋကကောဝိဒ ရွေးချယ်ရေးစာမေးပွဲ (ရေးဖြေ) ကျင်းပနေပုံ". Department of Religious Affairs (in Burmese). Ministry of Religious Affairs. Retrieved 2016-11-13.

³¹ Harris, Ian (2007). *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*. Routledge. ISBN 9781134129478.

Abhidhammākovida

Tiṭṭakadhara, ("Bearer of the Spoken Tipitaka"))

Abhidhammika

Dīghanikāyakovida

Dīghabhāṇaka

Vinayakovida and

Vinayadhara.

2. Dhammācariya examination titles are:³²

Dhammācariya Makuṭiraṃsī

Sāsanadhajadhammācariya Abhidhammā Paḷi Pāragū,

Sāsanadhajadhammācariya Dīghanikāya Paḷi Pāragū, and

Sāsanadhajadhammācariya Vinaya Paḷi Pāragū

Sāsanadhaja Sirīpavaradhammācariya and

Sāsanadhajadhammācariya.

Buddhism made major contributions in the development of Burmese politics. Burmese nationalism first began with the formation of the Young Men's Buddhist Associations (YMBA) – modelled after the YMCA – which started to appear all over the country. Civilian governments, after the country gained independence, patronized Buddhism, donating large sums to fund the upkeep and building of Buddhist monuments. In addition, leaders of political parties and parliamentarians, in particular U Nu, passed Buddhist influenced legislations. He declared Buddhism the state religion which isolated minority groups, especially Kachin. This added yet another group to the growing number of ethnic insurgencies. The present military government are such patrons of Buddhism that it has become a joke- "Burmese TV has only two colors, green and

³² "ဓမ္မာစရိယာစာမေးပွဲ". Department of Religious Affairs. Ministry of Religious Affairs. Retrieved 2016-11-14.

yellow” – describing the military green uniforms and monk’s yellow robes or golden pagodas which cover the screen.

The Shwe Dagon has been a local venue for large meetings where both Aung San and his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi made their famous speeches. The second university strike in of 1936 was also held at that location. Aung San Suu Kyi returned from London to lead the National League for Democracy but was placed under house arrest in 1989. However, since she is a devoted Buddhist and as well as political, she is considered a socially engaged Buddhist.

4. Government’s Financing to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture (Budget Allocation)

(MMK in Million)

Fiscal Year	Revenue	Expenditure	International Grants
2017-2018	38,249.834	28,321.133	-
2018-2019	29,731.064	35,784.728	231.064
2019-2020	49,331.686	78,402.554	39,457.850
2020-2021	13,197.282	47,322.052	790.400

Source: Yearly Citizen’s Budget³³

In FY 2017-2018, there was no data in the Citizen’s Budget. The allocated budget percentage of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture (MoRAC) for FY 2018-2019 was 0.15% out of total budget where there was more expenditure than the allocated amount. The allocation to the MoRAC was higher in the year of 2019-2020 with 0.20% of the total budget and it received the highest International Grant among the above FY for the MoRAC.

³³ Citizen’s Budget 2017-2018; Citizen’s Budget 2018-2019; Citizen’s Budget 2019-2020; Citizen’s Budget 2020-2021

Why do Myanmar people help?

Helping others is part of humanity and has been practiced long before any religion was introduced. Although it is by no means exclusively Buddhists, many people in Myanmar engage in the act in the name of the religion because the overwhelming majority of people in Myanmar are Buddhists and charity works are religiously motivated as well. Stories of the former lives of Buddha, known as Jataka stories, were full of examples of sacrificing oneself to help others; so many Buddhists, monks and laypeople alike, take them as role models. Before western style or form of social work was invented, all social work activities throughout the history of Myanmar were conducted in the spirit of “parahita”, a word derived from Pali which can be loosely translated as welfare of others and most people generally understand it as a concept of helping other(s) altruistically. While some good practices may be shared among the practitioners locally, most parahita activities are not documented like their western-style social work counterparts because they were not intended to develop as a discipline initially nor to transform into professions. In fact, it is more of a way of life and people of Myanmar are very active on that aspect. As Myanmar ranks first for four consecutive years in World Giving Index from 2014 to 2017 (number 9 as of 2018 ranking), helping others is very much part of Myanmar’s social fabric. Most credit may go to the Buddhists due to their sheer number but their Christian, Muslim and Hindu colleagues who may have different concepts of charity respective to their faith also do their part with the same spirit.

Role of Buddhist monks in social work

Strictly speaking, Buddhist monks are part of the Sangha Order and not part of the secular world. Their main purpose is to maintain the longevity of the Sangha Order and to spiritually liberate oneself and as many others as possible. However, because of the symbiosis relationship between the monks and the laypersons where the former need food, robes, medications and other monastery-related materials as much as the latter need spiritual guidance and social recommendations from the former. Primary goal of Buddhist teaching is the spiritual liberation and the historical Buddha did not explicitly encourage the members of his religious order to engage in social works. Yet, a lot of his teachings are specifically intended to improve the wellbeing of laypersons, which in turn gives great authority to the monks as the experts of Buddhist literature to teach people how to live their lives better and do the right things.

Moreover, Buddhist monks are seen in high regards in Myanmar, just like any society sees their religious figures, and this added influence not only makes them religious leader but also life teacher, counselor and in some cases plays a judge in social disputes. In short, monks are community leaders in many if not most areas. Besides, monasteries are also better equipped than most other institutions to undertake many tasks that are outside of the religious activities as a lot of resources are pooled to the monasteries via donation (funding), voluntary (manpower) and personal networks (social and political influence).

Buddhist monks engaging in social work in Myanmar, also like their lay people *parahita* counterparts, coordinate with each other but do not streamline their activities. International exposures through overseas trips and best practices of other groups inspire them to make their organizations work more efficiently and effectively but most of them work individually so institutional memories do not transfer from one another. Most follow the needs of the situation so their activities vary. For example, monks have to prioritize literacy, healthcare, nutrition, etc. in underdeveloped areas before imparting the religious teachings. In special circumstances, monasteries serve as emergency shelter in the time of natural disaster due to their high capacity to house large groups of people. A lot of monasteries in the villages are built on the high ground because it is considered holy and this comes in handy during the flood. Some became unintended refugee camps for the children who lost their parents in a disaster or war. Or some parents deliberately sent their children, particularly young boys, to the monasteries far away to avoid being drafted into ethnic armed groups.

Current social work ecosystem in Myanmar

Traditionally, social work is seen as the act of charity and is part of merit-making activity. It would be hard to categorize *parahita* either as social work or religious act since the line between the two is blurred. Turning point may be the aftermath of Cyclone Nagis in 2008. Complete failure from then military government to provide assistance to those affected by the disaster gave rise to numerous local volunteer *parahita* groups throughout the country. People realized that they could not count on the authorities in such situations and could only help themselves and one another. The spirit of *parahita* was reawakened and reached a new height. At present, Myanmar houses many types of vibrant *parahita* groups around the country. Most of them are organized locally and provide the services free of charge. Most popular social services are funeral support,

health support (ambulance service is the most common one), education for the underprivileged and home for the aged or destitute.

The significant difference between the traditional charity work and more modern parahita work is that the assistance provided by the former mainly goes to those who are the most vulnerable such as orphans, elderly people, sick people, victims of the disasters and wars, etc., while the latter helps everyone indiscriminately. While the motivation for charity is rooted in religion, people see the contemporary parahita works as social activity with no obvious religious undertone. People of all faiths organize, support and participate in parahita works side by side. Both traditional and modern version of social/charity works share the principle of providing the service free of charge. It is usually the founder who self-funds a new parahita group or project. Once people are convinced that he or she is doing a good job, whether for real or perceived, all kinds of resources pour in. Accountability and professionalism are not the names of the game. Yet many of these parahita works are well received by the community and complaint of the quality of their services are not often heard. However, long-term sustainability of these groups remains to be seen. Since parahita works are not founded on the principle of self-sustainability their existence entirely depends on the donations. Perception on donation has changed as well. Merit-making for special occasions like birthdays and anniversaries for previous generations mean making donation to the monks. Today, many people diversify their donations to different religious activities as well as to those who are doing parahita works and providing social services even if they do not belong to the same faith as long as they have good reputation. Thus, change of peoples' perception on donation or merit-generation may be significant for the survival for parahita groups in Myanmar.

Buddhist monks' involvement in contemporary social works

Buddhist monks in Myanmar have a long tradition as social service providers. Being a community leader with full authority on the monastery, which usually happens to be the most resourceful part of the community, drags them into many things that they may not be prepared for. Yet a lot of them do more than their fair share of their part because monks believe they are supposed to save other beings, spiritually or otherwise. Some of them perform it as a part of their monastic life while others devote themselves to a particular cause or program such as education,

healthcare, orphanage or any other services that would serve the best to the needs of community they live in.

I. Education

Before the arrival of colonial British to Myanmar in the nineteenth century, Buddhist monasteries were the sole providers of education. Their curriculum was mainly Buddhist literature and was designed to make their students become successful Buddhist scholars. However, they provided basic literacy to those who did not wish to enter monkhood and chose to lead a secular life. Many of the accomplished scholars of feudal Myanmar were enrolled in the monasteries and many monks ranked among the famous writers and poets. A lot of social-economic changes happened during the colonial time and British introduced the education system of modern school as we know it. Interest and popularity of monastic schools were revived when anti-colonial sentiment rose in the early twentieth century. Myanmar nationalists viewed the education provided by the British of inferior quality specifically designed to limit the development of people in its colonies. Monastery-based schools were re-styled as national schools and taught the mixture of Myanmar classic literature and modern academic curriculum. Curriculum of monastic schools had changed over time in response to the need of the era but Buddhist monasteries are at the center of education tradition throughout Myanmar history. Today, a mixture of monastic schools provide different types of curriculum for both monks and lay persons. There are monasteries that are solely devoted to the Buddhist literature. The government-certified examinations were convened annually to award certificates and diplomas for the studies of Buddhism. Some monastic schools follow the same national academic curriculum. They go in parallel with schools operated by the government and for-profit private entities. They mainly target the population with limited opportunities in the areas where quality of education and availability of schools sponsored by government are inadequate. In some areas, government schools do not exist at all. There are some monasteries that do not have fixed programs but offer basic literacy courses and other personal development classes such as English speaking, computer skills, etc. depending on the availability of volunteer teachers. Some monastic schools in ethnic provinces offer their own ethnic language courses that are not part of the national curriculum. These schools collaborate with ethnic cultural societies that try to preserve and promote their ethnic identities.

Flagship example: Paungdawoo Foundation

II. Healthcare services

From the religious perspective, Buddhist monks are prohibited to practice medicine by Buddha as the Enlightened One did not intend to let his disciples create influence on people other than preaching his teachings. Organizing the service which provides healthcare, however, is not part of the restriction. Since health is the vital part of everyone's life and monks being the community leaders who look after the wellbeing of his followers, it is inevitable that they would be involved in providing services that are related to health issues one way or another. While Buddhist monks in Myanmar may not have the same tradition and authority in health sector the way they have on education, a lot of hospital projects and health programs are initiated and managed by venerable monks at present.

Flagship example: Sitagu Sayardaw's projects

III. Buddhist missionaries in hilly regions

In hilly regions ranging from Chin state to Shan mountains, Buddhist missionaries are sent to promote Buddhism among the people converted to Christianity by the British. Part of the religious career for monks is to give their services to the program in order to be eligible to apply for higher Buddhist studies programs or to become abbots in more urban areas. A lot of them ended up staying in the rural areas. The logical approach model for Buddhist monks in hilly regions is to mingle with the locals first and accommodate their social-economic needs. Teaching Buddhism comes later and indeed this makes them unintended social workers during their stay at their assigned location.

IV. Other social development programs

Recently in Myanmar, some Buddhist monks have started housing shelter for abandoned elders and destitute. This social program has been inspired by Christian's home for the aged however Buddhist's shelters for the aged and destitute has become popular very quickly.

Flagship example: Thabarwadhama at Thanlyin

Some Buddhist monks organize and operate locally on the needs of the community without intending to replicate elsewhere. For instance, there is a youth development program in the form of football game. It was very well received that it evolved into a football league with 40 participating teams competing annually. The monk responsible for the program tries to keep a low profile because that was not what he envisioned when he started it and also to avoid unwanted attention, particularly from the commercial sector. Meanwhile, some Buddhist temples have served ad hoc emergency shelters or go-to place when either man-made disasters or natural disasters strike in Myanmar. Not only Buddhist temples have become refugee colony when war breaks out but also they provide space and resources to set up emergency hospitals during pandemic when conventional hospitals are full until today.