



Buddhism in Myanmar (Burma) From its Inception up to Early Konbaung Dynasty

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ABSTRACT : *Buddhism is one of the world's religions accepting in the universe today. It is founded by Gotama Buddha over 2,500 years ago. Buddhism spread out of India after the 3rd century B.C with the help of Emperor Asoka and Ven.Sona and Uttara led the mission to Thaton (then called Suvanna bhumi) in lower Myanmar (then known as Burma) and introduced Buddhism so Buddhism has been flourishing in Myanmar since the time of Emperor Asoka. The historical background how Theravada type of Buddhism spread from its inception up to early Kongaung dynasty was traced.*

Keywords: *Buddhism, Emperor Asoka, Gotama Buddha, Suvanna bhumi, Theravada type of Buddhism*

I. Introduction:

Myanmar or Burma as the nation has been known throughout history and it is one of the major countries following Theravada Buddhism. There are four dominant ethnic groups in the recorded history of Myanmar: the Mon, the Pyu, the Myanmar and the Shan. The source of information for many of the events can be found in *Sasanavamsa*, a chronicle of Buddhism written in Pali. *Sasanavamsa* mentions several visits of the Buddha to Myanmar and one other important event: the arrival of hair relic in Ukkalapa (now known as Yangon) soon after the Buddha's Enlightenment.

Burmese chronicles and Theravada Buddhist traditions claimed that two Mon merchants from Lower Burma obtained some hair relics from the Buddha, and on their return they enshrined them in a small pagoda which later became the kernel over which the great Shwedagon Pagoda. The history of Buddhism in



Burma is closely interlinked with the development of Burmese culture and civilization. Religion or Buddhism plays a major role in the heart of Burmese so Burmese have been embracing Buddhism since immemorial time [1].

II. Objectives of the Study:

The main objectives in this paper are to study about the Buddhism in Myanmar (Burma) and to find out the status of Buddhism in different dynasty from its Inception up to Early Konbaung Dynasty

III. Methodology:

The research is primarily descriptive in nature. So , secondary data is the main source of data . To fulfil the objectives , study materials have been collected from different books and periodicals and try to explain it properly.

IV. Result and Discussion:

A. Buddhism in the time of King Asoka

It was during the reign of Asoka in the 3rd century B.C that Buddhism came to be known all over India and neighboring countries. Burmese chronicles say that Thaton in Lower Burmese received Buddhism from Sona and Uttara, the leaders of the two missionaries of Asoka sent forth from Pataliputta. The history of Buddhism in Burma began with Sona and Uttara. Burmese and Mon traditions asserted that the monks leading the mission established a monastery at Kelasa Mountain on the outskirts of the city. Barring the story of Ven. Sona and Uttara there is no other evidence that Buddhism flourished in Burma before the fifth century A.C [2].

B. Buddhism in Pyu dynasty:

Considering the close proximity of Burma to India, and the existence of not too difficult land routes between the two even before the Christian era, the possibility is not altogether excluded that Buddhism found its way to Burma even before the fifth century A.C but from this period onwards there exists definite records to prove not only the existence but also the flourishing state of Theravada



Buddhism in the old kingdom of the Pyus known as Sri ksettara with its capital near Prome, the ruins of which lie in modern Hmawza.

The archaeological remains at Hmawza, about five miles from modern Prome, and the Chinese accounts leave no doubts that the Theravada form of Buddhism with Pali canonical texts was introduced in the region round Prome not later than the fifth century A.C. The earliest developed urban settlement of the Pyu was Beikthano, near Prome. When Srikhsetra became the center of Pyu civilization, a major monastery built in the fourth century has been unearthed at Beikthano. The building, constructed in brick, with a stupa and shrine located nearby, is identical to the Buddhist monastery of Nagajunakonda, the great Buddhist center of Southern India [3].

From the 5th century until the conquest of lower Myanmar by Pagan, there is a continuous record of Buddhism flourishing in the Mon and in the Pyu kingdoms. Pyu culture of this period is well documented because of archeological finds at Maunggan, a small village closed to the ancient ruins of Hmawzar. The finds on the site of ancient Pyu capital confirm the report of the Chinese pilgrims and also the Tang imperial chronicles of China which state: “They (the Pyu) dislike taking life. They know how to make astronomical calculations. They are Buddhists and have a hundred monasteries with brick of glass embellished with gold and silver vermilion gay color and red kino...at seven years of age the people cut their hair and enter a monastery; if at the age of twenty they have not grasped the doctrine they returned to a lay state.” [3].

C. Buddhism in Thaton:

There are good grounds for supposing that the Theravada form of Buddhism also flourished among the Mons settled in Pegu, Thaton and other neighboring regions collectively known as Ramannadesa. Sometime before the eleventh century A.C. Thaton became a very important centre of this religion. Ven. Buddhaghosa was the greatest commentator on the Pali Buddhist texts, whose Visuddhimagga and other commentaries to the canon are regarded as authoritative by Theravada scholars. The chronicle of Myanmar firmly maintains that Ven. Buddhaghosa was of Mon origin and a native of Thaton. However, modern historians do not accept that Ven. Buddhaghosa was from Myanmar [4].



D. Buddhism in Pagan Dynasty, the First Burmese Empire:

Both Buddhist culture in the South of Myanmar, the Mon and the Phy were swept away in the eleven century by the armies of Burmese who had found a unifying force in their leader, the founder of Bagan and champion of Buddhism, Anawratha. The Burmese had established a powerful kingdom with its capital at Pagan and the Burmese were a rude, unlettered people, and a debased form of Tantric Buddhism flourished in Pagan.

In 1044 A.C, Anawratha (Aniruddha), ascended the throne of Pagan and he was dissatisfied with the prevailing religion of his people, which was a mixture of Tantric Buddhism with native animistic beliefs. He resented the enormous authority and prestige of the Ari monks, whom he considered depraved. At this juncture a Mon monk, Shin Arahan by name, also known as Dhammadasi who came from Thaton, arrived at Pagan. His saintly personality stood in contrast to the heavy-eating and arrogant Ari monks, and within a short period of time he was able to convert Anawratha to Theravada Buddhism. Anawratha, who must have been already planning to conquer the Mons and extend his frontiers to the seacoast, was now seized with genuine religious zeal and assumed the role of a champion of his new faith [5].

In making Buddhism the official and national religion of his people, Anawratha was acting under advice of Shin Arahan, whom he appointed as the primate of his empire. A strict disciplinarian, he was intolerant of and punished ruthlessly any departure from orthodoxy. He handled the opposition from the Aris with skill, executing the leaders but conscripting the rank and filed for his armies, and, according to traditional accounts, with their well-fed and vigorous bodies the unfrocked Aris fought well in the elephantry. Nonetheless, he had to come to some compromise with spirit worshipers. In spite of his stern measures, he was successful in making Buddhism the national religion of the people only because the majority accepted. The Burmese of Pagan adopted the religion, language, literature and script of the Mons.

Once Thaton had fallen, Anawratha showed regard for the Mons and encouraged his own tribes to sit at their feet and learn their culture. Although he



allowed his troops to sack Thaton, he saw to it that the defenders were not wantonly slaughtered, and Manuha and his family were treated with consideration and courtesy; even his shackles had to be specially made of gold.

Anawratha and his successors became the great champions of the Theravada form of Buddhism, and along with their political authority it extended over the whole of Burma. With the zeal of a new convert Anawratha built numerous pagodas and monasteries and his example was followed by his successors. Anawratha's successor, Kyanzittha followed in the footsteps and built the famous Ananda temple at Pagan.

By the time Kyansittha was dying, his son, Rajakumar dedicated to the gratitude of his father, set up a golden image of the Buddha, endowing it with the lands he had inherited from his mother. He said to the king, "My lord, remembering the many great favors which you have showered on me, I have done this deed of merit, and may my lord be pleased to take a share." The king, even in the extremity of his sickness and on the point of death, smiled upon his son and said, "Well done." After the king died, so that there should be no doubt in the minds of the king's subjects as to his intentions, the prince Rajakumar set up a stone on which was inscribed a full description of his last meeting with his father in four languages, Pali, Pyu, Mon and Burmese [6].

In the reign of the king, Alaung Sithu, peace and prosperity were enjoyed so the king built temple after temple and became so religious that people felt convinced that he was a Future Buddha. One of the pagodas he built was Shwegugyi by name. His tutor was Shin Arahan himself and under such teacher he learned to be fluent in both Pali and Mon. the king deserved his reputation of being a pious Buddhist. Unfortunately, he was killed by his younger son, Narathu.

During the reign of Narapatisithu religion especially Burmese culture reached its highest level. During Alaungsthu's reign, four or five inscriptions in Burmese were set up, but the style clearly showed that scholars were still unsure in the use of the language.



In the reign of Narapatisuthu, Pali, Sanskrit, and Mon languages were discarded and Burmese replaced them as the language of inscriptions. Pagan scholars were so proficient in the study of the scriptures that they were producing commentaries and grammatical works of their own. These commentaries were accepted in Theravada Buddhist countries as part of the scriptures [6].

The kings and people of Pagan used to build countless temples (pagodas) at Pagan. Some of them stand at the present day and many still in daily use as places of worship. Thousands more were destroyed in the great fire that ravaged the city in 1225, in the sacking of the city by Kublai Khan's troops in 1287, and in the burning of the city by Shan usurpers in 1299. Hundreds of monasteries were also built but did not survive the disasters because they were usually of wood.

The fondness of the Pagan people for music was well illustrated by a prayer contained in an inscription set up by a minister: "For this deed of merit, may I attain Buddhahood, but before attaining Buddhahood, may I always enjoy the bliss of being awakened in the mornings by the music of the drum and the horn." [5].

Kyaswar (1234-50) was a king under whom scholarship was encouraged even more because the king himself spent most of his time in scholarly pursuits including memories passages of Tipitaka. Two grammatical works: the Saddhabindu and the Paramatthabindu, are ascribed to him. It would appear that his palace was a place of great culture and learning as his ministers and his daughter are credited with scholarly works as well. The principal works of Pagan period still extant are Pali grammars. The most famous of this is the Saddaniti composed by Ven. Aggavamsa in 1154. Saddaniti still used to teach grammar in monasteries in Myanmar. B.C Law regards it as one of the three principal Pali grammars by Kaccayana and Moggalana. K.R. Norman says "the greatest of extant Pali grammars is Saddaniti, written by Aggavamsa from Pagan, Burma." [5].

G.E Harvey honors the kings of Pagan with the following words: To them the world owes a great measure the preservation of Theravada Buddhism, one of the purest faith mankind has ever known."



The chronicles suggested that some of the Ari monks who had fled from Anawratha's persecution to the remote parts of the Shan plateau had come back with the Shans. There were riotous scenes at Sagaing. Thadominbya re-introduced law and order and tried to purify the Buddhist clergy, which had become hopeless corrupt. He extended full patronage to orthodox monks and encouraged learning among both monks and laymen. But he died in 1368.

E. Buddhism in Toungoo Dynasty, the second Burmese Empire

Tabinshwehti (1531-50) was not greatly interested in his religion, although he made his pilgrimages to famous pagodas of the country. Bayinnaung(1551-81), in contrast, considered it his duty to act as the champion of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia. In the reign of Bayinnaung, he introduced Theravada Buddhism in Shan region. The Shans had gradually absorbed Buddhism since the thirteenth century. He prohibited all human and animal sacrifices, built hundreds of monasteries all over the Shan region. He distributed thousands of copies of Buddhist scriptures and made it compulsory for villagers to congregate and study the scriptures on Sabbath days [7].

King Anaukpetlun had assumed the role of a patron of Buddhism, and he swore a mighty oath that he would drive away the archenemy of Buddhism, Philip De Brito y Nicote, one of Portuguese mercenaries, into the sea. He was the typical Portuguese adventure in Southeast Asia.

Tharlun Min was another great patron of Buddhism; he built the famous Kaunghmudaw pagoda on the opposite bank of the Irrawaddy River from Ava and enshrined the sacred Tooth and the Alms Bowl received from Ceylon by Bayinnaung. Tharlun Min felt that it was a duty he owed to his brother, Anaukphetlun, and to his grandfather, Bayinnaung, to build a permanent pagoda for the relics. So he sent a mission to Ceylon to get the architectural plans of the great temple of Anuradhapura, and using it as his model he built the Kaunghmudaw pagoda [7].

He extended his patronage to those monks who were famous for their learning and purity, and encouraged all ranks of monks to follow the rules of the Order strictly. He encouraged not only the study of the scriptures but also various works on Burmese customary law, which was considered the common cultural



heritage for all the racial groups. As a result one of his ministers produced another compendium of Burmese law, which took its place with the earlier Cod of Dhammavilasa.

F. Buddhism in Kongaung Dynasty, the Third Burmese Empire:

Alaungpaya (1752-60) established a Myanmar emperor known as Konbaung dynasty. In early Konbaung dynasty, Buddhist monks broke into two sects, orthodox and reformed. The point of controversy was in the manner of wearing robes. The orthodox group insisted that the robes should be worn for dignity and decorum, and the reformed sect insisted that they should be worn for comfort. It was a bitter conflict, involving not only Burmese but Mon monks also, because they were all under the *Sangharaja*, leader of the Sangha, appointed by the king.

Alaungpaya appointed a new primate, who belonged to the reformed sect, and gave him full support to end the controversy and the schism. He encouraged learning and scholarship by giving awards and titles to scholars and poets. He prohibited the killing of cattle, both on religious and economic grounds. People above sixty years old, kept the Five Precepts and spent their time in monasteries and pagodas [8].

However, with the death of Alaungpaya the primate had lost his office automatically and Hsinbyushin (1763-1776) was too much of a soldier to take an interest in the renewal of controversy among the monks. In any case his reign was but one continuous campaign. Singu (1776-1782) appointed a primate from the orthodox sect, but the controversy did not end. Bodawpaya (1782-1819) was reluctant to share authority even with a primate and he appointed a royal commission to consider the point of conflict. The commission heard witnesses and arguments put forward by both sides and then reported in favor of the orthodox sect.

Accepting the commission's report, Bodawpaya proclaimed that all monks must wear their robes in the orthodox manner and the controversy should cease forthwith. No king in the long history of Buddhism, both in Burma and outside, had ever dared to proclaim a Vinaya rule for the monks and there were outcries of protest from all ranks of the monks. Systematically Bodawpaya disrobed all



monks who questioned his authority to make the proclamation. The protests did not cease, and he unfrocked the leader of the reform sect who had been Alaungpaya's primate and ordered him to be taken to lower Burma [8].

V.Conclusion:

In conclusion, Buddhism has been flourishing in Myanmar (Burma) since the life time of the Buddha as mentioned in chronicles. In modern times there are mainly two schools of Buddhism, i.e., Theravada, which is practiced chiefly in Ceylon, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos; and Mahayana, which is practiced in China, Tibet and Japan. Buddhism that flourishes in Myanmar is Theravada Buddhism, the way of the Elders, was the original and only tradition from the earliest times up to date. We traced the historical back ground in brief and the how Buddhist doctrines influenced to the people of Myanmar and their ways of life, finally, by following the teaching of the Buddha, Myanmar adopt their culture, tradition and ways of life and both monks and lay devotees spread the teaching of the Buddha by joining hands together.

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