

Burmese Buddhism and its Impact on Social Change

By Min Zin

Burmese Buddhists still seem to be sleeping in the "magical gardens", to use Max Weber's term, in which tradition is never questioned. Unfortunately, their sleep is full of misery since they constantly/endlessly see nightmares in their dreams.

If each idea has or bears fruit as thinkers claim, the fruit that *Theravada* Buddhism (the way or doctrine of the elders), which wins eighty-nine percent of population's heart in Burma, breeds in Burmese society should be critically examined. The issue of whether there is causation or at least correlation between the predominantly Buddhist society and the consequent "un-Buddhist" experiences remains highly contestable and seemingly unresolved.

As is well-known, the people of Burma bear unspeakable suffering derived from gross human rights violations, kleptocratic corruption, a media blackout and the world's top drug industry. The irony is that if basic Buddhist teaching of the five precepts – abstaining from killing, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying, and using drugs - were observed, as religious devotees recommend, these afflictions would not have fallen upon Burma.

However, the reality proves that Burma's nickname, "The Golden Land," so called because of the glittering pagodas and temples throughout the country, is nothing more than words. The question of why a Buddhist country suffers from such atrocious misery seems to be confusing and bewildering for those who have great passion and faith in the "idea" and its fruit!

Although Burma is not religiously monolithic, popular Buddhist culture has considerable influence on people's attitudes, behavior and social relationships. Culture is, of course, not the sole determining factor for societal change. But examining Burmese cultural practices and their relation to power in Burma's social and political context can shed more light on the impact of Burmese Buddhism on social change.

Ontological Distortion? "The Hegemony of *Samsara* Discourse "

In Burmese Buddhism, a notion called *Samsara* widely prevails and can be assumed as Burmese ontological understanding. "Samsara" is a Pali word combining two elements - *sam*=in succession; *sara* going, wandering.

In its ultimate sense, *Samsara* is the operation of dependent origination. The continuous coming into existence of consciousness (*citta*), and mental factors (*cetasikas*) together with matter (*rupa*) in succession is called *samsara*. In other word, it is a momentary flux of mind and body, of physical and mental phenomena.

But very few Buddhists, for the most part only Buddhist monks who practice insight meditation seriously and profoundly, are able to appreciate such a subtle meaning of *Samsara*. In everyday use (popular belief), the *Samsara* is mistaken as the material world in which beings live. It is assumed as a round of rebirth or cycle of life and death, stream of existence and transmigration.

Thus, the *Samsara* notion has become the Burmese Buddhist discourse that binds all Buddhist concepts into a neat package. The *Samsara* discourse has been effectively constructed by political and religious elite with the consent of the people and has given not only a frame of knowledge for understanding the world but also actual practices.

Burmese (even non-Buddhists living in Burma, in one way or another,) are very much influenced by this *Samsara* discourse (i.e. cycle of life and death). The realm of *Samsara* is endless, lasting until one attains *Nibbana* (Enlightenment).

Thus, Burmese people tend to see themselves against the backdrop of *Samsara*. They see themselves as guests in this life. This present life is just a transit point throughout one's long journey of *Samsara*. It is just a brief transient.

Interestingly, when a funeral ceremony is held in Burma, attendees are offered a hand fan, printed with a poem titled "Guest". It says that you are just a guest in this life. You come alone into this world and go back alone. Life is very short. Burmese says that man is a traveler in the realm of *Samsara*, the round of rebirth. We all are subjected to impermanence – the phenomenon of just arising and passing away or “come and go”. Nothing lasts. Nothing exists that one can hold permanently.

According to this belief, life is no longer for being enjoyed, cherished and celebrated. Burmese in general have a strong tendency to treat not only the sadness and misfortune but also the happiness they encounter as part of life's vicissitudes – the natural process of ups and downs, and coming and going in life.

Thus, every experience (one can include personal crises, human rights violations, social injustice, inequality and whatnot) happening to them is part of the vicissitudes of life and the

impermanent nature of the world. Why should one allow him/herself to get mad about these unfortunate experiences? “Let them go”, they tell themselves.

People's sensitivity to these normally unbearable and unacceptable experiences becomes blunt. They develop a stoic acceptance of injustice as they train themselves to put up with the bitterness. They have learned to endure the pain and misery of life. They survive but they see no point in resisting. The effect of overemphasizing this philosophy of life is de-sensitizing and disempowering. Man views himself as the object rather the subject of change and transformation and comes to feel powerless and passive.

Obviously, culture is always determined, at least in part, by power. As particular cultural practices gained hegemony through power, successive rulers and the religious elite in Burma have effectively promoted this *Samsara* discourse. Acts of merit making (charity, morality and whatnot) are always appreciated as the investment for one's own *Samsara*.

This *Samsara* discourse could be very useful in prolonging the status quo and mystifying/obscuring the cause of justice and equality. Last but not least, it could be helpful in pacifying the anger and the struggle of the oppressed people.

Thus what happens in Burma appears to be a best case for the ruling powers – overemphasizing the *Samsara* discourse. People's powerlessness resulting from the exploitative and distorted interpretation of popular Buddhist belief by the powers-that-be and the harsh repression seem to be prolonging authoritarianism. Visibly, Burmese people have grown rather passive and powerless since the struggle has lingered for many years.

Does History Matter Most? "Genealogy of Burmese Buddhists' Social Practice"

However, without referring to the empirical facts, the above-mentioned explanation would be problematic. The conceptualization of people's mentality and beliefs alone will not help in understanding the reality. Treating the ideological explanation as the sole reason for what is happening in Burma would be an ahistorical approach and run the risk of regarding the idea as reality.

When one looks at Burmese history, one will find complex events unfolding that appear to contradict the popular Burmese Buddhist *Samsara* belief. In other words, there seems to be a tension between Burmese Buddhist ontology and Burma's actual political activism.

More accurately, religion always remains an important medium in the formulation of political strategies and identities in Burma. No political practice is possible without involving Buddhism – and Buddhism has been politicized to a degree where no religious act is apolitical.

Pagodas, as the most visible symbols of religious beneficence, have long played an especially important role in reinforcing claims to political power. In his History of Burma (1925), G. E. Harvey noted that pagodas built by Burma's King Bayinnaung in Ayutthaya (in present-day Thailand) and other neighboring kingdoms "are still to be seen, and in later ages the Burmese would point to them as proof of their claim to rule those countries." This mindset has persisted to this day, as seen in the current regime's building of pagodas modeled after Rangoon's renowned Shwedagon Pagoda throughout ethnic minority areas, as a way of asserting Burmese (i.e., ethnic Burman) sovereignty over these ethnically distinct regions.

Actually, the most illustrative case of Burmese rulers using religion to enhance their political legitimacy is in their patronage of the Buddhist *Sangha*, or monastic community. The successive rulers have exploited the Buddhist *Sangha*'s historically important role as a unifying factor of the state. The military regime has formed *Sangha* organizations in the villages, townships, and districts. All monks have to obey the orders of the organization, whether or not they belong. Buddhist monks cannot do anything without the permission of the government. Even traditional religion ceremonies (such as novitiate and ordination ceremonies) need prior permission from the government.

Aside from the intimidation and severe repression, the regime tries to control the monastic order by awarding religious titles to leading monks who are loyal to the regime and whom the regime wants to co-opt.

However, all of the restrictions and repression only indicate how Burmese Buddhist monks are defiant against the regime. At an estimated 400 to 500 thousand, the number of monks is indeed the same size as the army. So it poses not only moral challenge to the military but also an organizational one.

Throughout history, Burmese monks have been engaged and active in politics of opposing the powers-that-be. Aung San, Burmese independence hero and father of Aung San Suu Kyi, said that monks must desist from taking an active part in political life. They must refrain from politicizing. However, the first organization established during the Independence movement was the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), created in response to

Christian dominance. It was especially attractive to young Burmans who had been educated abroad. They staged an effective a “no footwear in the pagodas” campaign against the British who wore the shoes in pagodas compound.

The first Burmese monk arrested for his political activism was U Ottama, who had lived abroad such as in India, France, and Japan. He urged people to wear local clothes and use local materials. He was arrested twice and imprisoned for a total of seven years, even with hard labor. Another monk who was arrested by the British colonial government and died in the prison after engaging in a 166-day-long hunger strike in prison was U Wisara.

Both could move many Burmese people who previously had not concerned themselves with politics. But both were generally viewed as very politicized. Some abbots were even critical of them as having Mahayana tendencies (Bodhisatta model) since engaging in profane politics is contrary to mainstream Burmese Buddhism. Actually, both were very much inspired by Gandhi’s strategy of non-violence and boycotts, instead of the indigenous Buddhist philosophy.

To make a long story short, Burmese Buddhist monks have carried on this anti-establishment tendency. During the reign of the former socialist government and till now, monks were at the forefront of the massive demonstrations for democracy. When the military cracked down on the unarmed protesters ruthlessly, 600 monks were among the more than 10,000 people killed in August and September of 1988.

On August 8, 1990, in commemoration of the second anniversary of that democracy uprising, more than 7,000 monks and novices walked through the streets of Mandalay, solemnly and peacefully accepting alms from the people. Soldiers confronted the monks and opened fire, killing two monks and two students and wounding seventeen others. One novice disappeared.

Following this massacre, the Monks' Union (*Sangha Sammagi*) of Mandalay, led by Ven. U Yewata, declared *pattam nikkujjana kamma*, "overturning the bowl," against the military. A refusal to accept alms is used as a rebuke to lay people. This powerful religious boycott, which began in Mandalay spread like wildfire across Burma, causing alarm and trauma to the ruling junta. Throughout the country, monks were refusing alms from military personnel and their families and refusing to attend religious services organized by the regime.

The military retaliated by staging a massive clampdown on the *Sangha*. More than 350 monasteries were raided and more than 3,000 monks and novices were arrested. Twenty monasteries were seized and expropriated. Several leading monks died in prison.

All of these historical events surprisingly confirm that the Burmese Buddhist philosophical underpinning (*Samsara* belief) does not seem to reflect the actual activism of Burmese Buddhists. The compartmentalization or division between the idea and the reality is evident. It appears that Burmese monks engage in societal affairs so actively that it contrasts with their daily preaching, which points in a different direction.

What Else? "Count Structure as Significance"

The activism of the Burmese Buddhists does not come from philosophy, but from the structural role of societal leaders - monks. Since the historical significance of Buddhist monks already was elaborated upon, the following serves to highlight their structural role.

As a traditional agrarian society, the majority of Burmese people live in rural areas. In the village-bound primordial social life, the monks and monastery play the leading role in every aspect of people's daily lives. The villagers support the monks as merit-making, while monks give their supporters not only spiritual guidance but also social, educational, and health-related welfare.

Since they want to help their supporters, whose main concerns are with their daily lives rather than with seeking enlightenment, many monks even engage in fortune telling, astrology and giving of protective charms and incantations to lay people. This structural role of the monks seriously determines the activism of the monks to intervene in the disastrous situations of their supporters, which inevitably means getting involved in politics.

Not only in the villages, but also in the cities such as Mandalay, where many impoverished Burmese have sold their homes to Chinese immigrants and moved to the outskirts of town, monks have been left by themselves in the city center with no one to feed. The monks consequentially are very sensitive to the joy as well as the plight of the local people. When local people suffer from heavy taxation, forced labor, rice quota extortion and relocation, the monks cannot ignore these miseries. Monks represent "the public conscience".

Thus, the structural/historical role of the Burmese monks and their followers requires them to be deeply involved in the societal affairs, in contrast with their preaching. This contradiction or compartmentalization produces several disadvantages for Burmese Buddhists.

Social Actions against Ontology? "The Disadvantages of Compartmentalized Life"

Since there is no philosophical underpinning, aside from the structural and historical role of the religion, Burmese find themselves at a serious disadvantage. One of the clearest cultural impacts is the notorious mentality of Burmese people's short-lived perseverance. The Burmese temperament is described with the metaphor of a hay-fire. When you set fire to the haystack, it burns quickly and even aggressively, but it extinguishes quickly too. Similarly when all protests are silenced, Burmese just sit back and learn to adjust to the status quo. The passivity, apathy and even cynicism with politics are increasing while there is no ideological drive pushing them back on track. Burmese cannot draw power, guidance, or energy from their philosophy. In short, Burmese Buddhism's ontological underpinning does not operate at a functional level.

So, there is an inherent inconsistency between Burmese Buddhist ontological philosophy and Burmese practical activism. Burmese Buddhist monks and their followers are being pulled by their ontology in one direction and again by their structural/historical role in a different direction. Life seems divided into separate and distinct elements for Burmese Buddhists.

Burmese must think critically about how to adjust the gap between the reality and the idea. Otherwise, the role of Buddhism in Burma's future may become more nominal, perhaps merely an instrument or ritual for relieving tension, in the approaching waves of wide-ranging industrialization and globalization. Religious values will then not be exercised in the daily practice. The compartmentalization between daily life and religious life of Burmese people will become more substantial.

Paradigm Shift? "The Preciousness of *Dullabha*"

In fact, there are several counter-hegemonic attempts initiated by some abbots and lay leaders, including U Hpo Hlaing and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to reinterpret some particular teachings of Buddha, such as the ten precepts for the Kings and the seven *Aparihaniya*, to reflect modern circumstances and relevancy. But it is doubtful that their re-interpretations are based on a fundamental paradigm shift.

Actually, a new paradigm could be found within the Theravada Buddhist teaching that can reconcile today's Burmese reality with "the idea." According to Buddhism, there are five kinds of "Dullabha". Buddha taught the *Dullabha* discourse everyday. So, it was the sermon that was taught more than 16,425 times by Buddha when he was alive.

One of the five *Dullabha* is human life. Human life is *Dullabha*. It is very difficult to attain. A human life may attain innumerable merits, and is, therefore, regarded as particularly precious. Buddha did not say that the attaining celestial being is *Dullabha*; instead, Buddha highly valued individual human life. Within Buddhist understanding, human existence is considered more conducive to enlightenment than a divine existence. Thus, every human being holds the preciousness of *Dullabha* life.

If we assumed that everyone had his or her own human value, it would breed significant social implications. If people appreciated their *Dullabha*, they would not allow others to violate and abuse their human dignity, human rights and human value (*Dullabha*). They would become sensitive to injustice, inequality, and oppression. They would have a strong will to fight back against any attempt to dehumanize them.

On the positive side, one would take more responsibility for self-betterment – financially, intellectually and spiritually -- because one appreciates life in its *Dullabha*-defined preciousness. The *Dullabha* notion is, in fact, not the anti-thesis to *Samsara*, but its best compliment for the well-rounded welfare of the people.

If Burmese Buddhism can shift its emphasis from the *Samsara* paradigm to *Dullabha*, the problem of compartmentalization will be resolved effectively. By emphasizing the present preciousness of human *Dullabha*, Burmese can generate infinite sources of power, energy and guidance to take a more active role in changing their destiny – not only their political/social destiny but also their spiritual destiny. This paradigm shift will be harmonious/more in accordance with the path that the Lord Buddha wanted Buddhists to walk on.