

**A study on the Palm leaf Manuscripts in  
Thar –Lay (South) Monastery, Thar-Lay Village,  
Innle Lake, Shan State**



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## ABSTRACT

There have been many fine monastic libraries since early period all over Myanmar country. Most of monastic libraries kept mainly hand inscribed Palm leaf manuscripts and handmade paper manuscripts, called Parabikes (folded paper). Now these monastic libraries are disappearing because monks and people did not use these libraries. But some monasteries still remain these rare manuscripts. So, this paper aims to study the palm leaf manuscripts of a monastic library called Thar-Lay (South) Monastery, Thar-Lay village, Innle Lake, Shan State that was established in the early Konbaung period, AD-1789. There are above (704) palm leaf manuscripts. This paper highlights on those palm leaf manuscripts in that Thar-Lay Monastery: what types of manuscripts there are, what kinds of literature (eg. Prose, Poem) there are, which language (Pali or Myanmar) is used, the life of palm leaf, which subjects there are, and how to keep those manuscripts and so on. This study which is not only Myanmar scholars, researchers and monks but also other scholars and researchers from abroad can be able to know that still have those rare palm leaf manuscripts in that monastery and able to study their related subjects in those resources. And the palm leaf manuscripts collection is need to preserve and conserve to exist the Myanmar treasures.

## **Introduction**

In Myanmar, there have been monastic libraries which have many rare palm leaf manuscripts and parabikes that is made with paper since early period. In these days, Most of monastic libraries are disappearing. Thar-Lay Monastery in Innle Lake, NyaungShwe Township, Shan State is existing one of the monastic libraries in Myanmar in these day. This monastery has many rare palm leaf manuscripts collection and a few parabikes. Those manuscripts had already been preserved and conserved by a team of librarians and archivists from UCL (Universities' Central Library), UHRC (Universities Historical Research Centre) that shifted under Ministry of Culture and changed Historical Research and National Library Department , National Library and National Archives in 1997. This manuscript collection is very useful and valuable for scholars.

This paper includes the history of Thar-Lay Monastery, characteristics of palm leaf manuscripts in this monastery and brief about texts on all palm leaf manuscripts.

In Thar-Lay Monastery, five kinds of manuscripts are found. They are (1) Shwe-myin that is gilded on four sides, (2) Kyan-sit that is made with red vermilion on middle of length of two sides (3) Myin-ni that is coated with red vermilion on four sides (4) Myin-net that is covered with black vermilion on four sides and (5) Pe-gyan or MyinPhyu that is original palm leaf.

When the team preserved and conserved, there were above 1000 bundles of palm leaf manuscripts. Now we found (704) bundles of palm leaf manuscripts which are kept in cupboards with glass. All these manuscripts are classified into subject. There are 19 subjects which are (95) bundles in Suttana subject, (170) bundles in Vinaya, (150) bundles in Abhidamma, (13) bundles in Pitakat General, (1) bundles in Meditation, (44) bundles in Sermons, (4) bundles in Buddhavamsa subject, (8) bundles in Prayers, (4) bundles in Heresy, (97) bundles in Pali Grammar, (7) bundles in Maxim, (8) bundles in Medicine, (14) bundles in Astrology, (10) bundles in Customary Law, (15) bundles in Myanmar Literature, (13) bundles in History, one bundle in Biography, (2) bundles in Universe, (50) bundles in General.

This paper explained about the brief data of all palm leaf manuscripts in each subject titles. Those palm leaf manuscripts were written in Pali, Pali-Myanmar, Myanmar Language. Types of literature are prose, Prose, Nissaya, Pali-Prose, Essay, Poem, Pali-Poem and Linka (Verse). This paper is an attempt to study the palm leaf manuscripts in Thar-Lay Monastery, Innle Lake, NyaungShwe Township, Taunggyi District of Shan State.

## **History of Thar-Lay Monastery**

It is located in Innle Lake, Nyaung Shwe Township, Southern Shan State of Myanmar. Innle Lake is the second largest lake in Myanmar. The lake is 2918 feet above sea level. It is 412 miles far from Yangon to Shwe Nyaung. Shwe Nyaung to Nyaun Shweis 7 miles. Innle

Lake is 11 miles long, and 4 miles across. The maximum depth is 3.7m. Its surface area is 44.9 square miles.

Thar-Lay village was established in A.D 1789 during the reign of King Bodawpaya. This village is just Southeast of the famous Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda of Nan Hu village where is the main pilgrimage centre. This monastery was set up at the same time as the village. So it was named Thar-Lay Monastery. Later one monastery was established in Northern part of Thar-Lay village. It was called Thar-Lay Monastery (North). The first one was called Thar-Lay Monastery (South). Its main monastery size is (120) feet in length and 80 feet in width. It has two buildings before and (3) buildings are new.

The Chief monks of Thar-Lay monastery are Phongyi Lone, Phongyi Yone, Phongyi Kyain, U Tayza Wunta, U Mei Dar We, U Nay Mein Da Bi Wuntha, U Ottama, U Tay Zeinda who passed away in 2015. When he passed away, his age was 76 years old. He gave the strongly support to the team of preservation and conservation to be successful their works. The present Sayardaw, Chief monk is U Nandaw Bartha Lingarra who is (40) years old. He is one of the U Tay Zeinda's pupils. He is Inntha. He has finished the Nikay' (5) treatises. He passed the Tharmanaykyaw examination. Before chief monk passed away, Buddhist scriptures were taught to monks.

In 1997, the team including librarians, archivists and conservators from UCL, UHRC, the National Library and the National Archives went to preserve and conserve in all collection of manuscripts at Thar Lay monastery. When the team arrived first at that monastery, all palm leaf manuscripts were mixed, disused, improper condition. So they cleaned, sorted and also kept orderly and systematic way all palm leaf manuscripts bundles according to the subject and they compiled the catalogue in those manuscripts. The catalogue of manuscripts in this monastery was published in 2006. This project was supported by Toyota Foundation.

At that time, there were above 1000 palm leaf manuscripts in that monastery according to the inventory of the team. All manuscripts had been catalogued and 34 palm leaf manuscripts had been taken microfilm. At present, taking inventory, there are (704) bundles. Manuscripts are kept in two cupboards that is (25) shelves. The number of palm leaves put on each shelf of cupboard. They are wrapped with Shan paper or cloth and tied with cloth string. Some wrapping clothes and papers are tearing.

### **Characteristics of Palm leaf manuscripts in Thar-Lay Monastery**

There are five kinds of manuscripts in that Monastery. They are (1) Shwe-myin that is gilded on four sides, (2) Kyan-sit that is made with red vermilion on middle of length of two sides (3) Myin-ni that is coated with red vermilion on four sides (4) Myin-net that is covered with black vermilion on four sides and (5) Pe-gyan or Myin Phyu that is original palm leaf. Some palm leaf manuscripts are covered with wooden plate. Some are not cover.

The life of those palm leaf manuscripts are between A.D 1548 and 1905. The earliest palm leaf manuscript has been for 468 years and the latest one is 111 years. Some palm leaf manuscripts are found the copying date. The earliest copying date is in A.D 1651 and the latest is in 1910. It has been for 365 years and 106 years. Some manuscripts are not included date.

Those manuscripts were written in Myanmar, Pali, Pali-Myanmar language. The kinds of literature are Prose, Nissaya, Pali-Prose, Essay, Poem, Pali-Poem and Verse.

Sizes of those manuscripts are different. The longest length is (52) cm and the width is (7) cm. Some palm leaf size length is short but the width is wide. Eg. 48 x 6 cm, 52 x 5cm.

The most number of leaves are 534 leaves and the least number of leaves are 8 leaves in one bundle. Page numbers are used Myanmar vowels (Ka, Kar, Ki, Kii, Ku, Kuu, K, Ke, Kawt, Kaw, Kan, Karr. One batch consists (12) leaves. Page number starts with 'Ka' and some page numbers do not start 'Ka' because some leaves are missing. Some pagination are complicated.

The lines of text are (12) lines and some texts are (6) lines in palm leaf. Some texts are not clear and missing. Some titles are same but copying date and the numbers of leaves are different in this collection.

### **List of Subjects**

There are (19) subjects in all palm leaf manuscripts. They are-

- (1) Suttana
- (2) Vinaya
- (3) Abhidamma
- (4) Pitakat
- (5) Kammathan (Meditation)
- (6) Sermons
- (7) Buddhavamsa (Life of Buddha)
- (8) Religious Proclamations (Prayers)
- (9) Heresy
- (10) Pali Grammar
- (11) Niti (Maxim)
- (12) Traditional Medicine
- (13) Astronomy
- (14) Customary Law
- (15) Myanmar Literature
- (16) History
- (17) Biography
- (18) Universe
- (19) General

The texts of palm leaf manuscripts are explained the brief data in each subjects.

(1) Suttana

It is one of the three Pitakats that are repositories of Buddha Scriptures which have (15) treatises. Suttana has (3) treatises that are သုတ်သီလက္ခန္ဓ (Sut Silakkham), သုတ်ပါထေယျ (Sut Patheyya), သုတ်မဟာဝါ (Sut Mahava). There are (68) bundles in this subject. All palm leaf manuscripts in Suttana subject include about the 3 treatises, the Dhammapada, the short historical account of Gotama Buddha, thirty fives stories of Buddha's previous lives, a collection of the Buddha's words or basic and essential principle of the Buddha's teaching. It explains about the Kammatthan which means techniques of the meditation and the second treatise of Khuddakanikaya.

(2) Vinaya

There is one of the three Buddha scriptures. It has (5) treatises. They are ဣဠဝါ (Culava), ပရိဝါ (Pariva), မဟာဝါ (Mahava), ပါဏိတျဒိ (Paciyadi), ပါရာဇိကတ် (Parajikan). There are (150) bundles under Vinaya subject. All manuscripts of Vinaya subject are about (5) Vinaya treatises. It explains about the serious and light offences of Bhikkus means monks, Kammawasa that the scripts to recite when the monks commit the heavy offences, Sima: that the ordination hall for monks, instruction for a novice during the ordination of monk and general knowledge about the rules of discipline for the monks. And these express about the commentary text of the whole five Vinaya treatises, critical review of Vinaya, question and answers on Vinaya and the knowledge about the Kathina that offering the robes to the members of Buddhist order for a special purpose before the full moon day of Tazaungmone that eighth month of the year.

(3) Abhidamma

It is also one of the three Pitakats. Abhidamma has (7) treatises which are ဓမ္မသင်္ဂဏီ (DhammaSingani), ဝိဘင်္ဂ (Vibhin), ဓါတုကထာ (Dhatukatha), ပုဂ္ဂလပညတ် (Puggalapannat), ကထာဝတ္ထု (Katha Vatthu), ယမိုက် (Yamuik), ပဋ္ဌာနိ (Patthan). There are (133) bundles in Abhidamma subject. It explains about the (7) Abhidamma treatises. These palm leaf manuscripts express that the explanation of difficult word and the nature of Abhidamma, the four Paramatta means absolute truth from seven treatises of Abhidamma Pitaka, the account that how to appear and deliver the seven treatises. These also are about the four kinds of Dhamma, Phatthan that twenty four kinds of relation give benefit simultaneously. These also express about mind what happen constantly, the third text of seven Abhidamma treatises and compilation of three Abhidamma treatises.

(4) Pitakat General

There are (13) bundles in Pitakat general subject. These include about the history of Pitakat in Pali language, stories from the Dhammapada atthakatha under different titles, the essence of Dhamma, quizzes on Pitakat and answers and general.

(5) Kammathan (Meditation)

There are (1) bundles in meditation subject. The manuscript explains about two types of meditation of Samatha means tranquility and Vipassana means insight.

(6) Sermons

There are (41) bundles under Sermons subject. These palm leaf manuscripts describe that about the charity such as offering meal, various types of donation called Dana which human should do. These express about the result of Dana, Sila means precepts which have five, eight and ten numbers and Bhavana that is meditation, oral presentation of Dhamma extracted from the Pitakat and various types of precept. There are about the relic of the Buddha, Nibbana that the goal of Buddhist and benefit for donation of Pitaka and Sila, Samadhi means concentration on mind and Pyinnyar (education).

(7) Buddhavamsa (Life of Buddha)

There are (3) bundles in Buddhavamsa subject. These bundles include about the happening of Buddha's life, a list of places, cities and villages where the Buddha kept lent and the people who were awarded ဧတဒဂ် "Etadag" means highest degree for their expert subject in the life time.

(8) Religious Proclamations (Prayers)

There are (8) bundles in Prayers. These palm leaf manuscripts explain about the various kinds of prayers in the form of lyric and pali poem, royal order of religious affairs, Obeisance to the sacred Botree and three objects of veneration i.e Buddha, Dhamma and Samgha.

(9) Heresy

It has (4) bundles. Those show that the various kinds of false belief and compilation of ethics for laymen.

(10) Pali Grammar

This subject has (79) bundles. These texts on palm leaf manuscripts express the various kinds of vocabularies in Pali language, forty one kinds of akkhara (alphabet) from Pali grammar, the meaning of the grammar text in general, the method of learning Pali grammar and the method of reciting Akkhara. There are about Pali grammar in Myanmar prose, Myanmar language orthography and the general knowledge of Loki means the secular world and Lokoutara means the way to escape from worldly desires by raising questions and answers in the form of Sampok that kind of Myanmar verse and ပုဒ်စဉ် (Pudcac') about pali grammar in Myanmar prose for Myanmar people who don't know Pali language. And သဒ္ဒါနာယ Sudda nay', သဒ္ဒါကြီး SuddaKri, a kind of grammar texts in Myanmar Language are included.

(11) Niti (Maxim)

It has (7) bundles. This subject includes not only Loki admonition but also Lokou

tara admonition, ten facts of rules of conduct for kings and translation text from Sanskrit into Myanmar which admonishes the people with the stories.

(12) Medicine

There are (8) bundles in medicine subject. These palm leaf manuscripts explain about medicine through seven basic properties of matter i.e. solidity, heat, fluidity, volatility, spare and nourishment, medical text which deal with alchemy and indigenous medicine.

(13) Astronomy

This subject has (14) bundles. These bundles include the fortune telling, methods of fortune telling, notes on fortune telling, a kind of calendar that is used by astrologer and a text deals with interpreting the space omen & sign.

(14) Dhammathat (Customary Law)

There are (10) bundles in Customary Law. The palm leaf manuscripts contain the judgment of dispute, explanatory text of Manu Dhammathat and inheritance chapter.

(15) Myanmar Literature

It has (15) bundles in Myanmar literature subject. This subject includes about the method of composing the Pali poem, letters that are the request of donors about their personal affairs, the Arindma fiction in the form of Rakan, Ratanakara fiction that is the classical work based on Dhammapada, glossary text of Paramito Khan Pyo in Innwa period, a written homily in lyric form and compilation of the fictions from Dhammapada.

(16) History

This subject has (13) bundles. Those palm leaf manuscripts explain that the four tooth relics of Buddha, royal order of religious affairs, record of royal protocol in ancient Myanmar period, the inscription of Kalayani Sim in Pali language by king Dhammaceti (833-854), history of Konbaung Shwepyi, Myanmar great chronicles and Myanmar translation of Thiho (Sri-Lanka) chronicle in Pali language.

(17) Biography

It has one bundle. It includes about a biography of Shin Buddhaghosa.

(18) Universe

It has (2) bundles. These manuscripts are about Okasa Loka which is a coexist of world of reality named Sankhara Loka and world of apparent reality known as Satta Loka.

(19) General

There are (42) bundles in general. These manuscripts are about the compilation of answers by king Alaung Min Taya, judgment of Atula Sayardaw on Loki and Lokoutara affairs, ten ways of speaking, miscellaneous works on Loki and Lokoutara, the rule and regulation of the world and the Mingala Sut. These include the answers about Pitaka of Oak Kyaung Sayardaw and questions by Minye Theinkhathu, religious beliefs, a thousand

questions and answers about general on Pitakat, elaborated version of the text on the ten principles virtues and general works on various subjects.

### Conclusion

Thar-Lay monastery is one of the remaining monastic libraries in Myanmar. It had (1007) bundles of palm leaf manuscripts according to the inventory of preservation and conservation team in 1997. But the collection only remains (704) bundles at present. Fortunately, this collection still remains without damaging and we found some parabikes. This paper will give the researchers the knowledge about the palm leaf manuscripts in Thar-Lay monastery and partially fulfill to the study of Buddhism, Myanmar literature, Pali grammar, history, customary law and Medicine contained in these manuscripts. Most of palm leaf manuscripts in monasteries around Myanmar are disappearing because of various reasons.

In 1994, National Commission for Preservation of Tradition Manuscripts (NCPTM) was organized to solve the problem of preserving of manuscripts with the Myanmar Historical Commission and Universities Historical Research Centre. They undertook (34) projects of preservation and conservation and (24) microfilm projects of manuscripts during 1995 to 2003. Now this Commission is not continuing to carry out the projects of preservation and conservation. Actually we should go and survey again to the locations that they had carried out the projects and educate the monks and villagers how to keep and that manuscripts are valuable for our heritages. Therefore, we need to keep on preserving and conserving all palm leaf manuscripts in Myanmar.

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