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Buddhism in Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper is a presentation about the conditions of Buddhism in Myanmar both in the past and present days. The aim of this paper is to present that Buddha's guidance contributed much the development of human society, liberation from suffering and to the emergence of gifted and moral persons. The religion in the country can contribute much to improvement of morality, emergence of moral and gifted persons and maturity of thought are presented with cause and effect relationship. The arrival of an expansion of Buddhism in Myanmar in to be studied by the legends, chronicles, foreign records and archaeological survey on remnants and excavations. This paper will discuss about the development of Buddhism age by age and the condition of Buddhism in modern Myanmar.

Introduction

In presentation about Buddhism in Myanmar, the conditions of Buddhism from the first arrival to today and its developmental progress will be described. Regarding the arrival of Buddhism in Myanmar, the significant evidences which are believed by Myanmar people will also be stated. And then the legends or historical records and evidential inscriptions which can indicate the Buddhism in ancient Myanmar will be expressed briefly.

What is Buddhism?

Buddhism is a religion founded by Gotama Buddha. The Dhamma which is preached by the Buddha not only for the.... The major extant branches of Buddhism are generally recognized by scholars: Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. Theravada school of Buddhism is the oldest surviving branch of Buddhism in the world. The word Theravada literally means "the Teaching of the Elders". Theravada school of Buddhism draws its scriptural inspiration from the Pali Canon, which is in the earliest surviving record of the Buddha's teachings. For many centuries, Theravada has been the predominant religion of continental Southeast Asia (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos) and Sri Lanka. The word Mahyana can be classified: Maha (Great) and Yana (Vehicle). Therefore, Mahayana means "the Great Vehicle" which is the form of Buddhism prominent in North Asia, including China, Mongolia, Tibet, Korea and Japan. Mahayana Buddhism originated in India.

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A brief Account of Gotama Buddha

Gotama Buddha, whose personal name was Siddhattha, and family name, Gotama, lived in Northern India in the 6th century B.C. His father, Suddhodana, was the ruler of the kingdom of the Sakyas (modern Nepal). His mother was queen Maya. At the age of 29, he decided to find the solution to the way out of this universal suffering. At the age of 35, Gotama attained Enlightenment, after which he was known as the Buddha, 'The Enlightened One'. After his Enlightenment, Gotama Buddha delivered his first sermon to a group of five ascetics, his old colleagues, in the Deer Park at Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Benares. Since that day, for 45 years, He taught all walks of people without making the slightest distinction between them. At the age of 80, the Buddha passed away at Kusinara (modern Uttar Pradesh). Today Buddhism is practised in Ceylon, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Tibet, China, Japan, Mongolia, Korea, Formosa, in some parts of India, Pakistan and Nepal, and also in the Soviet Union. The Buddhist population of the world is over 500 million.

The Teachings of the Buddha

The teachings of the Buddha are called Tipitaka which means the three baskets or the three categories. Basket may be defined as a thing to put in which the same items and put together and relay it. It consists of three baskets;

1. The Basket of Discipline (Vinaya Pitaka),
2. The Basket of Discourses (Sutta Pitaka) and
3. The Basket of Higher Doctrine (Abhidhamma Pitaka).

The Vinaya Pitaka consists of five volumes of prescribed rules and regulation for Bhikhus and Bhikkhunis. The Sutta Pitaka consists chiefly of five collections, called Nikayas in Pali. There are discourses delivered by the Buddha Himself on various occasions. A few discourses were delivered by some of His distinguished disciples. Their sermons, narrations, discussions, questions and answers, stories and instructions are included in the Sutta Pitaka. The Abhidhamma is the most important of the three baskets, containing the profound philosophy of the Buddha's teachings. The Dhamma is not merely to be preserved in books. It is not a subject to be preserved in books, non-subject, to be studied from a historical or literary standpoint. On the contrary, it is also to be learnt and to be practised, and above all, to be realized. The ultimate goal of the Dhamma is the realization of the Four Noble Truths. The Dhamma is compared to a

raft which is meant solely for crossing over the ocean of misery, birth and death and also known as Samsara.



Kuthodaw Pagoda and an inscription in it

Buddha's Teachings were systematically collected and recited unanimously in the First Buddhist Council by 500 Arahats Bhikkhus headed by Mahakassapa Thera under the sponsorship of Magadhan King Ajatasattu after three months of the Buddha's great demise. In 443 BC, on account of the ten unlawful practices of Vajjian Bhikkhus, 700 Arahats Bhikkhus held the Second Buddhist Council. According to the Ceylonese chronicles, in 307 BC, the Third Buddhist Council was convened in Pataliputta, presided by Moggaliputta Tissa Thera and supported by King Asoka. After the council, missionaries were dispatched to nine regions including Sri Lanka and Suvannabhumi. In this way, all the first three Buddhist Councils were held in India. In BC 93, at Aloka cave in the village of Matale in Sri Lanka, the Fourth Buddhist Council was held by 500 Mahatheras under the sponsorship of the headman of that region. The significance of the council was inscribing Pali Canonical texts and their commentaries on palm-leaves. The last two councils were held in Myanmar. The former, the fifth Buddhist Council was convened in Mandalay by many 2400 Bhikkhus under the patronage of King Mindon in 1872. Buddhist Scriptures were edited many times by well-versed Sayadaws and then inscribed on 729 marble slabs which are kept on the printed of Lokamarajina Pagoda at the foot of the Mandalay hill. That is known as the biggest book of the world. In 1954, 2500 Bhikkhus from the five Theravada countries headed by Revata Thera convened the Sixth Buddhist Council in Yangon. Delegations from many countries participated at the Council. In this way, Pali Canon was preserved and handed down by bhikkhus generation after generation.

The Arrival of Buddhism in Myanmar

As could be expected in any country, nature worships and animism were the religions of peoples of Myanmar in primitive times. With the intermingling of Myanmar natives and

immigrants, ancestor-worships and Hindu Brahman beliefs and custom were added to the native religion. Trails and traces of these pre-Buddhist beliefs can be observed even today in the daily life of the people. The arrival and expansion of Buddhism in Myanmar is to be studied by legends, chronicles, foreign records and archaeological survey on remnants and excavations.

Historical Records of Shwedagon Pagoda



Shwedagon Pagoda

The oldest and distinguished evidence of Buddhism in Myanmar is Shwedagon pagoda, The great commentator Venerable Buddhaghosa (5th century AD) mentioned about the story of Tapussa and Ballika in his commentary on Anguttara Bikara. The two merchants were from Ukkalapa, Asitanjana Nagara. They met the Buddha after seven weeks of His attainment to Buddhahood. Buddha gave them eight of His hair. On their arrival at Yangon, with the help of King Ukkalapa there built a pagoda enshrined the Buddha's hair in it. This story is also found in the Mahavagga of Vinaya Pitaka. This Asitanjana city is one of the old names of Yangon. The Shwedagon Inscription of King Dhammaceti (4th century AD) is also inscribed based on this story. This shrine is the famous and the biggest pagoda in the world.

The Arrival of Buddhism in Rakhine



Images and Pagodas in Myauk U

An inscription discovered at Nagajunikonda is interesting for the introduction of Buddhism in Myanmar. The record was inscribed in the 14th regnal year of a King Madhariputa of the Ikshvaku dynasty (3rd century AD) of Tambapanna. Some countries are mentioned in the Ceylonese chronicles and some are referred in the Milindapanha. Miniature stone stupas with the ‘*Yedhamma gathas*’ inscribed on them have been recovered in Rakhine. Its date can be assumed to be somewhere round about 5th century AD. Many ancient votive tablets had been excavated from the pagodas together with the miniature bronze *Cetiyas*. Other sources such as symbolic worship, pagodas, images, stone votive tablets, terracotta tablets and inscriptions both in Pali and Sanskrit are also found there.

The Arrival of Buddhism in Sri Ksetra



Phayama Pagoda

Baw Baw Gyi Pagoda

Bei Bei Pagoda

Hmawza in near Pyay, there found ancient monuments, a large number of stone and bronze images. Terracotta tablets with and without inscriptions and reliquaries which belong definitely to the Buddhist creed. The sculpture in small brick monuments and relics come out by

excavations round and about the bases of the Bebe, the Lemyetnha and Yahandagu were dedicated to belong to a date later than 7th century AD or 8th century AD. These temples were assumed to be patronized by Theravadins. Pali stone inscription fragments found from railings and base of the Bawbawgyi Stupa is also a source of Theravada faith. The Pyu script is a local adaptation of the Indian Brahmi script which existed about the 5th century AD because Pyu alphabet and numbers show a very close resemblance with those of Brahmi of the Gupta Period. According to the documents, it is learnt that Buddhism during the centuries from the 6th century AD to at least the 10th century AD was a popular and flourishing religion in the capital city of the old kingdom of Sri Ksetra.

The Arrival of Buddhism in Suvannabhumi

Suvannabhumi is a place where Theravada Buddhism flourished. According to the Dipavamsa (4th century AD) and Mahavamsa (6th century AD), the Theras Sona and Uttara came to Suvannabhumi by sea. Suvannabhumi, land of gold like the Greek Chryse is further in India. The Mon Pali inscriptions of Kalyanisima, Pegu (149 AD) identify this site with the region of Lower Myanmar some 30 miles north of Thaton. Nearly 400 years earlier, in that region, the Bagan King Kyansitha had repaired the two great monuments Kyaik Te and Kyaik Talan at Ayethema village built by King Asoka and left two long inscriptions in old Mon. The pagodas stand some miles around the Kelasa Mountain that it will be Thaton itself. If the identification of Suvannabhumi with lower Myanmar is accepted, Buddhism would have been introduced to that country during the reign of Asoka.

The Arrival of Buddhism in Bagan



Bagan Pagodas

Buddha Sasana which Bagan received was of Theravada type which arrived there by land from the North, It was mixed with Hindu Brahmanic beliefs. Besides there were Aries or forest monks who lived an undisciplined life, they practiced and propagated a debased form of religion. King Anawrahta was intent upon purifying Buddhism prevalent at Bagan with the noble intention of introducing pure form of Buddhism. It was at the advice of Shin Arahan that Anawrahta brought to his capital Tipitaka Texts, Buddha's sacred relics and missionary monks from Thaton in 1057 AD. The arrival of Shin Arahan in Bagan in 1053 AD and arrival of Tipitaka Texts and missionary monks in Bagan in 1057 AD are the two important events which made turning points in Myanmar religious and cultural history. From these dates onwards Buddhism in pure form or Theravada Buddhism with Tipitaka Texts for reference, has been firmly established in Myanmar and it has been flourishing till today. Schools safely say that all the Theravada countries in Southeast Asia. Myanmar is the country where Theravada Buddhism is preserved in its purest form.

The earliest excavations in Myanmar, inscriptions on gold plates, silver plates or copper plates are found. Those inscriptions usually run:

“Ye dhamma hetuppabhava
tesam hetum tathagato aha
tesanca yo nirodho
evam vadi maha samano”

“Those things which arise from a cause of these, the Tathagata has stated the cause. And of these (things) there is the cessation. Such is the creed of the Great Asectic.”

Such Pali verse can be seen only in Pali Tipitaka, or Theravada Buddhist Scriptures such as Mahavagga of Vinaya Pitaka, Apadana and Petakopadesa. The verse shows the essence of Theravada Buddhism, i.e., the relation between cause and effect. The verse also played an important role not only in the history of Buddhism, But also in the archeological excavations in Myanmar. The verse inscribed on these plates shows the existence of Theravada Buddhism in that area. Apart from legendary sources, these plates are historical evidences which indicated that Theravada Buddhism flourished in Rakhine State, Beik-tha-noe, Sri Ksetra, etc. Therefore, the religion has arrived Myanmar since the 2nd century AD. Most of the scholars accept that Theravada Buddhism stands in its purest form.

Buddhism in Myanmar Today



Picture of Samgha

According to the latest news of Buddhism in Myanmar, the population of Buddhism is 80 percent of 52 million people. In Buddhism, there are three stages of Sasana in Buddhism. These are Pariyatti (learning the doctrine), Patipatti (Practising it) and Pativedha (Penetrating it and realizing its goal).

Pariyatti: Buddhist Universities in Myanmar

There is a list of Buddhist Universities in Myanmar. Among them, the two State Pariyatti Sasana Universities and the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) are under the government. And the others are non-government organizations.

1. The State Pariyatti Sasana University, Yangon (SPS),
2. The State Pariyatti Sasana University, Mandalay (SPS),
3. The International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU),
4. Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, Sagaing (SIBA) (founded by Sitagu Sayadaw),
5. Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, Yangon (SIBA) (founded by Sitagu Sayadaw),
6. Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, Mandalay (SIBA) (founded by Sitagu Sayadaw),
7. International Buddhist Education Centre, Sagaing,
8. Buddhist University, Yangon (founded by U Myint Swe (M.A. London)),
9. Buddhist University, Mandalay (founded by U Myint Swe(M.A. London)),
10. Shan State Buddhist University (SSBU),
11. Kon-Kyan-Kone Buddhist University (founded by U Myint Hlaing),

12. Buddhavihara Dhamma-Vinaya University,
13. Dhammasahaya Centre, Pyin Oo Lwin (founded by Dr Nandamalabhivamsa),
14. Dhammavinaya Centre, Hlae Kuu, Ngar Su Taung (founded by Dr Nandamalabhivamsa) and
15. Institute of Dhamma Education (founded by Dr Nandamalabhivamsa).

For many centuries, Theravada Buddhism could be learnt at monasteries in traditional ways in Myanmar. We did not have Buddhist Universities and Colleges in Modern sense in earlier time. In Myanmar, now; there are many famous Buddhist monasteries in Myanmar. Theravada Buddhist Scriptures could be learnt. There appeared famous Myanmar Buddhist monasteries scholars. Sitagu International Buddhist Academy at Sagaing, founded in 1994 by Thaegon Sayadaw Ashin Nanissara. Unlike described earlier Universities, the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University which will be inaugurated in Yangon on 9th December, 1998. It will be a significant institution not only in Myanmar but also in the whole world. It will be the place where international Buddhist scholars can learn both Pariyatti (Scriptural Study) and Patipatti (Buddhist Meditation Practice) at the same time. Through insight meditation practice, prescribed by traditional teachers in accordance with Pali Texts and commentaries. It distinguishes for being free tuition, free mission, free lodging and free health care to those foreign scholars.

Examinations in Buddhist Scriptures



Sitting for Pariyatti Examination

In Myanmar, there are 551587 Bhikkhus and novices. And there are also 55608 nuns. The number of their monasteries is about 1238. There are also more than one thousand colleges

(Pativedha) where Buddhist scriptures are taught. The highest and the most difficult examination in Myanmar is the Tipitakadhara examination.

There are many Buddhist examinations in Myanmar. It can be classified into two main types of Buddhist examinations which are governmental examination and private examination.

The governmental examinations are-

1. Tipitaka,
2. Dhammacariya,
3. Pathamabyan,
4. Nikaya and
5. Abhidhamma and Visuddhi.

These can be also known as “Traditional Buddhist Examinations” for getting support by the kings in ancient periods.

Beside governmental examinations, there are many private examinations in Buddhism. Among them, the famous ones are described as follows:

1. Sakyasiha,
2. Cetiayangana,
3. Susamacara,
4. Samaneyyaw and
5. Suvannabhumi.

These are the examinations for monks. In addition, Abhidhamma courses are founded for lay people. These courses are leaded by the organization of the spread of Abhidhamma. And its many branches are opened throughout Myanmar. The examinations are held regularly once a year.

Patipatti: Meditation Centres in Myanmar

Meditation Centre plays one of the important roles of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar. In Myanmar, there are many different meditation centres. Among them, the famous centres are Mahasi Meditation Centre, Shwe Taung Kone Panditarama Meditation Centre, Naga Cave Kalaywa Taw Ya Meditation Centre, Moe Gote Meditation Centre, Janitarama Meditation Centre, Soon Loon Cave Meditation Centre, Hpar Aut Meditation Centre, Dhammaduta Sasana Meditation Centre, International Patipatti Centre, Dhammajoti Meditation Centre (Founded by S. N. Goenka), Myae Zinn Meditation Centre, Saddhammaramsi Meditation Centre, Thae Inn Cave

Meditation Centre, Taung Pulu Meditation Centre, Mula Saccadipaka Meditation Centre, Mingun Taw Ya Meditation Centre, Kathit Wine Meditation Centre and Shwe Minwun Sasana Meditation Centre.

Some of these meditation centers have many branches. In these centers, not only Myanmar people but also many foreigners usually come and take meditation. So these centres play in a chief role to carry out of Buddha Sasana.

Dhamma Schools in Myanmar



Dhamma School

The courses of Dhamma School are founded as it is fundamental in Buddhism. A Dhamma School is a centre in which Buddhist scriptural courses are taught. Every Sunday, they are opened especially in monasteries and they are a kind of private school taught by monks, nuns and lay people who are well-versed and well-experienced in Pariyatti field. In Myanmar, the foundation of Dhamma School started on 14th of March, 2012. Now, it have been 552 teacher training courses and produced over 30000 teachers. They are teaching the Buddhist courses in between 3000 and 5000 Dhamma Schools. Prescribed books for students are printed systematically and also the guide books for teachers are printed. They hold the system of student-centred approach. It is a kind of foundation produced to perceive the right view and to become clever youths.

Buddhist Cultures

The Culture of Myanmar is deemed synonymous with its Buddhism. For each month, there are many seasonal religious festivals. Most of them are related to Buddhism. Some of the famous festivals are Bodhi tree watering festival, Waso festival, Thedingyut festival and the festival for Kathina. Besides these festivals, there are more religious ceremonies. The famous ceremonies are Novitiation ceremony, Ordination ceremony and Anekaja ceremony. Moreover, Myanmar has a lot of special days about Buddhism in each month. From these festivals and

ceremonies, it can be known that majority of Myanmar cultures base of Buddhist culture. Furthermore, Myanmar people usually celebrate the ceremony of Dhamma-talk. So every Sabbath day and every special religious days and any other day, the ceremony of Dhamma-talk can be seen in a Dhamma hall or at a junction or in an open ground. Together with the flourish of Buddhism in Myanmar, Buddhist literature has been enormous in Myanmar since Bagan Period (the first dynasty of Myanmar). Nowadays, there are so many published religious books such as magazines, booklets, cartoons, etc.

Conclusion

Myanmar is well-known for far and wide land of Pagodas and religious buildings. Pagodas are religious monuments commemorating religious events of the time. They are also landmarks in the history and development of Theravada Buddhist activities in the country. A multitude of pagodas and monuments in Bagan, Bago, Thaton, Mrauk U, Pyay, Mandalay, Sagaing and several other historic sites in the country stand witness to the extent to which Theravada Buddhism had spread to the peak to which it had flourished. In addition, Myanmar had been twice blessed by the events of the last two International Theravada Buddhist Councils – the fifth International Theravada Buddhist Council was held in Mandalay in 1871 and the sixth international Theravada Buddhist Council was held in Yangon in 1954. With the moral and spiritual force of Buddhism, Myanmar people have been able to withstand the vicissitudes of time throughout its history. The opening of the international Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon is another landmark in the history of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar and in propagating the religion to the world. So Myanmar could stand in the topmost stage among Theravada countries regarding Vinaya. Moreover, Abhidhamma Pitaka is most profound and subtle in the Buddha's Teachings, no common people can comprehend thoroughly and deeply. But Myanmar monks could learn and teach Abhidhamma in easy ways. Thus, Myanmar could stand first in learning and teaching Abhidhamma. Not only in Pariyatti field, Myanmar monks together with well-versed lay people successively take great heed but also in Patipatti field as we have seen above. Since Myanmar culture, such as Myanmar alphabet, prose, poetry, stone inscriptions recording charity, novels, customs, vocabularies, etc. came into existence depending on Theravada Buddhism and Pali Canon, Myanmar and Buddhism cannot be separated one from another. In this rapidly changing world, it seems logical to assume that material development should match the spiritual advancement in order to build a balanced and

harmonious society. In this regard Theravada Buddhism has a greater role to play for the moral well-being and spiritual attainment in humankind. Myanmar is proud to claim that it is famous for flourish of both Pariyatti Sasana and Patipatti Sasana in Buddhism till today because of continuous support of successive kings, governments and people.

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