

## Brief Biography of Minbu Sayadaw U *Obhāsa*

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### Abstract

The biography of Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* from his birth to the final demise is presented based on the particulars in the eight *Jātaka* Nissaya texts compiled by the Sayadaw and on the particulars described in the *Ganthantara*.

### Introduction

Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* was born in Yattha village, near Minbu in Sagu Township in Magway division. The young novice learned language and literature at the Lethar Kyaung monastery. Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* was novitiated at fifteen years of age. Although Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* intended to compile at the great *Jātakas* but succeeded to translate eight great *Jātakas*.

### Aim and Objectives

Sayadaw wrote selected principal *Jātakas* of the Buddha in Myanmar prose which is exemplary in compositional style. It is highly worthy of admiration. Reading the works of Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* enables the readers to understand the *Jātakas* well giving information on the course of practice of Bodhisattva there by causing emulation, veneration and faith.

## Brief Biography of Minbu Sayadaw U *Obhāsa*

Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* was a famous poet during the reign of King Bodawpaya (1144) M.E of Konbaung Period.<sup>1</sup> Sayadaw U *Obhāsa*, who was skilled in prose writing,<sup>2</sup> was born in Yattha village, near Minbu\* in Sagu Township in Magway division.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GKA, 49-50. MST, 328. SA, 350.

<sup>2</sup> MS. V.XV, 111.

\* Maṅgalāpūra called Minbu.

NMZ, 250. TM.Z, 304. MST, 328.

As it is a place where Man Chaung called Namanta joins with the Ayeyarwady river, it was given the name Mampu which, was changed to Minbu later.

MJ,Z 213. MHZ(conclusion) (second),338. MST, 328.

The place where Mohnin Mitara met with Shin Bo Mai, TMZ, 303-304; MST, 328.

<sup>3</sup> SA, 351. MST, 328. TMZ, Introduction.

Sayadaw was born of father U Zeya and mother Daw Hla Min.<sup>1</sup>

He was the son of an Athi (tonf)<sup>2</sup>. The exact date of birth of Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* is not known.<sup>3</sup> But of the eight great *Jātakas*, the date of completion of the first great *Jātaka*, *Candakumāra Jātaka* is mentioned in the conclusion of this text as follows:

“ရောင်ဝါရွှင်ပြ၊ ဩဘာသဟု၊ နာမနနယ်၊ ပဉ္စင်းငယ်လျှင်၊ မှတ်လွယ်စေမှု၊ ထုတ်ဖော်ပြသား”

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According to this statement Sayadaw completed compiling the first *Jātaka* in the month of Pyatho in M.E.1144. He was then a young monk. Therefore he could not be younger than 20 in M.E.1144. Therefore Sayadaw is considered to be born not later than M.E.1124.

Again by inferring to the statement“ငယ်သွေးပျိုနု ၊ ကောင်းရာမူဖြင့်၊ ဆယ်စုသင်္ကေတဝယ်၊ ဝဏ္ဏရွယ်၌၊ ရှုဖွယ်ရူပ၊ သာမဏလျှင်၊ သုတဓရာ၊ ပညာပွားမှု၊ ဤဝတ္ထုကိုပြုစုစီရင်”<sup>5</sup> in the conclusion of the second *Jatataka* book of the Sayadaw, the *Nārada Jātaka*, and the statement “ယုဝါနကေ-ယုဝေန ပထမအစု ပျိုနုသော အရွယ်လည်းဖြစ်ထသော”<sup>6</sup> in the conclusion of *Mahosadhā Jātaka*, at the time of compiling these texts, it is clear that the poet laureate U *Obhāsa* may be within twenty and thirty years of age.<sup>7</sup>

According to the ten divisions of a person's life, it was *Vañṇadasaka* age.\*It is the closest age of the Sayadaw. Therefore Sayadaw is considered to be born within M.E.1114 and 1124.<sup>8</sup>

As the father and mother were sufficiently wealthy, they initiated their young son as a novice under the guidance of Lethar \*\* Kyaung Sayadaw in the west of Minbu town. The young novice learned language and literature at this monastery.<sup>9</sup> The hill to the immediate west of Minbu town was called Letharkon at the time of from a pagoda with a single entrance and inscribed "Thamauk Shwegu." \*\*\* Since

<sup>1</sup> SA, 351. MST 328. TMZ, Introduction, born in the afternoon of Sunday, the fourth waxing day of Nayon, M.E .1128.

Athi-a person not in the royal service. Therefore athis were originally not in royal service, but had to pay tax during war. In the late part of Konbaung Period the social class of athi was appointed minister.

<sup>2</sup> BHS, 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> MS V. XV, 111. .MST, 328.

<sup>4</sup> CKMZ, Conclusion.

<sup>5</sup> NRDZ, 84.

<sup>6</sup> MHSDZ, 340.

<sup>7</sup> Vism V.II, 254.

\* Ibid, 25

<sup>8</sup> MST, 329. SA, 350-351. BHS, 12.

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<sup>9</sup> SA, 351-352.

\*\*\* သာမောက္ခရွှေဂူ

then the hill has been called "Dhattawkon" meaning 'hill of sacred relics'.<sup>1</sup> The Lethar Kyaung situated to the west of Dhattawkon has now become a centre of learning Buddhist Scriptures.

Lethar Pond, Lethar Kyaung and Letharkon form a tripartite. The Lethar Pond found 80 years ago is still intact. After gaining independence, a circular road was constructed around Dhattawkon. It is named U *Obhāsa* Road in honour of Sayadaw U *Obhāsa*. The road running along the Ayeyarwady river is called Bo La Yaung Road in honour of Bo La Yaung.<sup>2</sup> As Sayadaw was unequalled in acute intellect since he was young, Sayadaw himself described the keen intellect in the *Candakumāra Jātaka* as follows:

“ပထမအရွယ်၊ နုနယ်ပျိုညက်၊ သျှင်လက်ထက်က၊ လေ့ကျက်ဋီကာ၊ ဌကထာနှင့်၊  
ညဝါပဋ္ဌာန်း၊ ဆန်းအလင်္ကာ၊ နည်းနာစေ့စုံ၊ တတ်မျိုးပုံလျက်၊ အာဂုံလေ့လာ၊ စွမ်းပညာဖြင့်၊  
ရောင်ဝါရွှင်ပြ၊ ဩဘာသ”<sup>3</sup>

Sayadaw is known to be the close disciple of Lethar Sayadaw.<sup>4</sup> Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* was novitiated at fifteen years of age. The name of the novice was *Ariyavaṃsa*. Since fifteen years of age, Sayadaw was accomplished in the art of composition of verses, articles, stories, lullaby, ratu, rakan, luta, pyo, etc. Sayadaw was not only skilled in versification but also learned in the art of reading the significant signs of elephants and horses, in astrology and in reading dreams<sup>5</sup>.

Sayadaw sought knowledge of miscellaneous religious literature under Thanhlut Sayadaw who was residing at *Amarapūra* during the reign of King Bodawpaya, the founder of *Amarapūra* city and palace. While Sayadaw was learning, twenty *Samgha* and Minbu Sayadaw went to the palace to recite *parittas*. Minbu Sayadaw was included as a representative of Thanhlut Sayadaw. In reciting the attributes of the three *ratanas* namely Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Samgha* beginning with "Itipiso", other Sayadaws recited without 'ti' at the end but only Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* recited with inclusion of "ti". Other Sayadaws were displeased with Sayadaw U *Obhāsa*. Monks were assembled at *Thudhammā Zayat* and U *Obhāsa* was asked to explain. Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* explained the attributes of Buddha, *Dhamma* and

<sup>1</sup> BHS, 32.

<sup>2</sup> BHS, 37-39.

<sup>3</sup> CKMZ, conclusion. SA, 352.

<sup>4</sup> MJZ, Introduction. NRDZ, Introduction. TMYZ, 304. MHSDZ, 340.

<sup>5</sup> Significant signs of elephants and horses, astrology, interpretation of dreams. TMYZ, Introduction. GA, 49.

*Samgha* taking three days to explain each attribute. Accordingly all the audience including the King, *Samgha* and Lay people praised Sayadaw U *Obhāsa*. In this way Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* became a poet laureate.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore U *Obhāsa* decided to write ten great *Jātakas* at the request of Maung Htauk. The son of close lay devotee of the abbot it was described by Sayadaw in the conclusion of *Mahājanaka Jātaka* text as follows: -

“ကျောင်းဒါယကာမောင်ဝ၊ တွင်ထသညာ၊ တို့ဆရာ၏၊ တကာရင်းသား၊ ပျိုထွား၊ ရွယ်ပေါက်၊ နည်းနာသောက်လျက်၊ မောင်ထောက်တွင်မည်၊ ဤသူသည်လျှင်၊ ကြည်ညို၊ လေးမြတ်၊ ဆယ်စောင် ဇာတ်ကို၊ မွေးဆွတ်ဆွတ်ကြူ၊ နာခံသူတို့၊ အယူမခဲ၊ ရွှေကြုတ်ထဲမှ ပုလဲဂေါ်မုတ်၊ စိ၍ထုတ်သို့၊ ကောင်းဟုတ်မင်္ဂလာ၊ ရေးစီပါဟု”<sup>2</sup>

Although Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* intended to compile all the ten great *Jātakas*, he could not accomplish<sup>3</sup> to compiling all the great *Jātakas* but only succeeded to translate eight great *Jātakas*.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless with only eight great *Jātakas* the name of Sayadaw remains in the record of the history of Myanmar Literature.<sup>5</sup>

*Nemi* and *Temiya Jātakas* are profound, steady in *samādhi*, and the most difficult and so they seem to be written last to show Sayadaw's skill.<sup>6</sup>

The eight great *Jātakas* and the time of completion<sup>7</sup> are as shown in the following Table.

Serial No.	Name of <i>Jātika</i>	Time of Completion
1.	<i>Candakumāra Jātaka</i>	Pyatho, 1144, M.E.
2.	<i>Nārada Jātaka</i>	Tagu, 1144, M.E
3.	<i>Vidhūra Jātaka</i>	Wakhaung, 1145, M.E
4.	<i>Vessantarā Jātaka</i>	Tabaung, 1145, M.E
5.	<i>Mahosadhā Jātaka</i>	Tazaungmon, 1146, M.E
6.	<i>Mahājanaka Jātaka</i>	Nayon, 1147, M.E
7.	<i>Nemi Jātaka</i>	Wæzo, 1148, M.E
8.	<i>Temiya Jātaka</i>	Tabodwe, 1148, M.E <sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> SA, 358-359.

<sup>2</sup> MJZ Conclusion.

<sup>3</sup> MST, 330.

<sup>4</sup> MS V. XV, 111. MST, 329.

<sup>5</sup> MS V.XV, 111.

<sup>6</sup> BHS, 15.

<sup>7</sup> MST 332. GA, 49-50. MS Vol. XV, 111.

BHS, 13. TMYZ, Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> MST, 332. GA, 49-50. M.S V.XV, 111. BHS, 13. TMYZ, Introduction

According to this list, it is clearly seen that *Sayadaw* compiled the eight books of great *Jātaka* during the period of four years and a month.

Of the above mentioned *Jātakas*, *Candakumāra Jātaka* and *Nemi Jātaka* were compiled at the request of Maung Htauk<sup>1</sup> and *Temiya Jātaka* was compiled at the request of monastery patron Maung Wa.<sup>2</sup>

U *Obhāsa* seemed to be troubled in mind during the period of compilation of *Temiya Jātaka*. This *Jātaka* seemed to be written at the repeated requests of monastery patron Maung Wa.<sup>3</sup> Sayadaw wrote his troubled mind during the period of compilation of *Temiya Jātaka* in the conclusion as follows: -

“ငါသည် ဒါန၊ သီလ အစရှိသော သူတော်ကောင်းတရားတို့ ပြည့်စုံစေလျက် သူတစ်ပါးတို့၏ အကျိုးစီးပွားတို့ကို ကောင်းစွာ ဆောင်တတ်သော အယူသီလ မတူသည်ဖြစ်၍ မညီညွတ်ခြင်းကို ပြုတတ် သော အဖော်အပေါင်းမှ ကင်းသည်ဖြစ်၍ သုနန္ဒာရထားမှူးကဲ့သို့ အဆွေခင်ပွန်းကောင်းကို ရ၊ ရပါလို၏”

"I keep myself replete with *dhamma* of the virtuous such as *dāna*, *sīla*, etc, and perform the welfare of others. May I be free from friends who cause disharmony for having different faith and *sīla* and may I gain good friends like *Sunanda*, the chariot driver."<sup>4</sup>

Sayadaw, who had been a good teacher to his disciples and a good disciple to his teachers, wrote in the conclusion of *Nemi Jātaka* as follows:-

“သီလအစရှိသော ဂုဏ်တို့ဖြင့် တပည့်အပေါင်းတို့၏ အကြီးဖြစ်သော ငါ၏ ကျေးဇူးရှင် ဖြစ်သောဆရာမြတ်သည်လည်း အနာအစရှိသော အန္တရာယ်တို့မှ ကင်းငြိမ်းတော်မူသည်ဖြစ်၍ အကြင်နေရာ စသည်ဖြင့် ကိုယ်စိတ်ချမ်းသာတော်မူ၏။ ထိုနေရာစသော ကိုယ်တော်၏ စိတ်တော်ချမ်းသာရာရှိခြင်း”

"The chief of the disciples, my noble benefactor teacher, who is endowed with attributes such as *sīla*, is free from dangers such as illness and is peaceful in mind and body. May I have peace in mind and body like Sayadaw."<sup>5</sup>

On studying the completed *Jātaka* books and the time taken in compiling those books, Sayadaw completed in compiling *Nārada Jātaka* in two months, and *Vidhūra Jātaka* in five months. Sayadaw completed compilation of other four great *Jātakas* in seven months at most. The intellectual ability of Sayadaw to accomplish

<sup>1</sup> BHS, 13.  
<sup>2</sup> BHS, 13. TMYZ, Introduction.  
<sup>3</sup> TMYZ, 305. SA, 301.  
<sup>4</sup> TMYZ, 308.  
<sup>5</sup> NMZ Conclusion, 255.

such excellent works of prose in the duration of four years is highly admirable. But it took Sayadaw over one year to complete the compilation of *Nemi Jātaka*. It is likely that Sayadaw was enjoying ill-health during the time of compilation of *Nemi Jātaka*.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the two remaining *Jātakas* out of the ten great *Jātakas*, *Bhūridatta Jātaka* was compiled by Venerable *Nandamedha* in *Nattaw*, 1148 M.E.<sup>2</sup> and *Suvaṇṇasāma Jātaka* by Venerable *Paññātikkha* in *Nayon*, 1188 M.E.<sup>3</sup> Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* used to compose and insert complete Ratu and epistle in Rakan style in the conclusion of every *Jātaka* of the eight *Jātakas* compiled by Sayadaw. Myanmar literary scholars consider that *Vessantara Jātaka* is the masterpiece of Sayadaw U *Obhāsa*.<sup>4</sup>

Sayadaw, aspiring for Buddhahood, and being desirous of admonishing all living beings like one's own off springs, compiled the *Jātakas* so that father and mother, brothers, grandchildren, grandfathers, relatives, friends and benefactors<sup>5</sup> could preserve the *Jātaka* stories.

After the demise of Lethar Kyaungtaik Sayadawgyi, Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* continued to reside at this monastery and taught Buddhist Scriptures. While Sayadaw was residing at this monastery, Sayadaw was conferred title, insignia, royal boatmen and helmsman by the King of *Amarapūra*.

While Sayadaw was residing at the Letha Kyaung, there appeared a tabaung or random prophecy that said, “လေသာကန်ပေါင်၊ ရေမအောင်တဲ့ ကန်စွန်းသီး ဖောင်းပွင့်ကြီး”<sup>6</sup>

As soon as Sayadaw heard this tabaung, Sayadaw called the helmsman and set out for *Amarapūra* City and paid obeisance to Thanhlut Sayadawgyi. Then Sayadaw returned by boat to Minbu. Sayadaw passed away en route.

The exact year of Sayadaw's death is unknown. It can be only surmised that Sayadaw passed away at about 20 years of monkhood, 40 years of age soon after completion of *Temiya Jātaka* as described in the Biography of Poet Laureates.<sup>7</sup> Again Sayadaw's year of birth is given as 1120 M.E. in Myanma Sweson Kyan. If this

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<sup>1</sup> MST, 332-333.

<sup>2</sup> BRDTZ Conclusion, 116.

<sup>3</sup> SSZ, D.

<sup>4</sup> MS V.XV, 111.

<sup>5</sup> MHSDZ 1, Preface.

<sup>6</sup> SA, 305.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 350.

year is correct, then Sayadaw passed away in 1160 M.E. when Sayadaw was 20 years in monkhood.<sup>1</sup>

Another additional information is that *Suvaṇṇasāma Jātaka* was compiled by Venerable *Pañātikka*, the disciple of Yangon Kyaungtaik of Minbu village at the request of the royal clerk Maung Thar in 1188 M.E. during the reign of King Bagyidaw. Based on the statement that the ancient teachers seemed to forget this *Jātaka* in the conclusion, this *Jātaka* was compiled after the demise of Sayadaw U *Obhāsa*.<sup>2</sup> If these statements are correct, Sayadaw seemed to have passed away between 40 and 68 years of age.

Sayadaw U *Obhāsa*, who could successfully write the eight great *Jātakas* within a short period of four years, prayed for *Sabbaññuta Ñāṇa* in the conclusion of *Mahosadhā Jātaka* as "May I attain the noble *Sabbaññuta Ñāṇa* in the last existence just like *Mahosadhā* the Sage attained the *Sabbaññuta Ñāṇa* in the final existence."<sup>3</sup> "Sayadaw wrote the selected principal *Jātakas* of the Buddha in Myanmar prose which is exemplary in compositional style. It is highly worthy of admiration. Reading the works of Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* enables the readers to understand the *Jātakas* well, giving information on the course of practice of *Bodhisattva* there by causing emulation, veneration and faith.

### Conclusion

Myanmar is a country where *Theravāda* Buddhism thrives; Buddhists study the Ten Great *Jātakas* pertaining to the Buddha etc. In this section, other literatures and brief account of *Jātaka* in addition to Minbu Sayadaw U *Obhāsa* who compiled eight of the Ten *Jātakas* .

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<sup>1</sup> MS V.XV, 111. GA, 49.

<sup>2</sup> MST, 219-220.

<sup>3</sup> MHSDZ, 345.

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