

RAWE HTUN

THE MODERN BUDDHIST NUN

Translated by San Lwin



Our three main national causes

- ❖ Non-disintegration of the Union - Our cause!
- ❖ Non-disintegration of the National Solidarity - Our cause!
- ❖ Perpetuation of national sovereignty - Our cause!

People's Desire

- ❖ Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views
- ❖ Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation
- ❖ Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State
- ❖ Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.

The Modern Buddhist Nun

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Introduction

The Beginning of the Order of Buddhist Nuns

After Lord Gautama Buddha had attained Buddhahood, four kinds of congregations paid homage to him. These consisted of the order of monks, the order of nuns, the assemblage of male and female laity. The foremost assemblage of monks consisted of the group of five (Pañcavaggiya) which included Kondañña (Añña-Kondañña) among others to whom the first sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, was preached by the Buddha.

On the 49th day, the merchant brothers from Ukkala, Tapussa and Bhalluka who became the first of the male laity to pay homage to the Buddha. The first female laity was Yasa Thera's mother, who was

grieving because her son had joined the order but became the first *tevācika-upācikā* after hearing the Buddha preach.

The assemblage of nuns however did not come into being for quite a while.

Lord Buddha's aunt and surrogate mother *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī*, had repeatedly tried to get admitted into the order without success. Buddha himself told her not to entertain the idea as women would not be allowed in the monastic order. *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī* wept at this refusal but remained undeterred through the four years that passed before an opportunity to present her case appeared again. This was when Buddha had to intercede in the internecine dispute that rose between the Sakyan and Koliyan people over water rights pertaining to the Rohinī river. Due to Buddha's intercession the five hundred princes involved in this dispute saw the light and became monks of supreme sanctity. As a result, their wives descended on *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī* begging her to devise a way to join the Order that their husbands had done. Accordingly *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī* had herself and the five hundred princesses cut off their hair and after donning yellow robes headed from Kapilavattu to *Vesāli*, a distance of 50

yojana (about 20km) on foot where they arrived with bleeding feet from the strenuous journey.

Ānanda Thera took up their case with the Buddha reminding him of the fact that he had suckled at her breast as a child and that they were now awaiting to be admitted after suffering much on their way. However, the Buddha refused his request for three times. Ānanda Thera nevertheless persisted and again asked the Buddha whether they were not worthy of visualizing the Right Path. When the Buddha replied that they were worthy of it, the chief disciple then argued that if that was so, they should be admitted into the Order.

Only then did the Buddha ask *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī* whether she was ready to abide by the eight strict conditions laid down for nuns. The affirmative answer was joyously given and in this way she received her ordination with that for her five hundred companions held later on a separate occasion.

Not long after receiving her ordination, she achieved the supremely sanctified state and not long after her companions also achieved this state.

Following this event, many high born women became nuns and the chapter of nuns thrived.

There were altogether 13 nuns who were recognised to have gained pre-eminence in a certain field and another ten such from the assemblage of lay women . During the time of the emperor Asoka , missionaries were sent to nine countries out of which Sîhala (modern day Sri Lanka), Aparanta and Suvannabhumi became centres where the order of nuns flourished.

Saw Mon Nyin

(Translated by San Lwin)

The Modern Buddhist Nun

A translation by San Lwin of Part II of “*Bhikkhuni Sāsanā* and the History of Thilashin” by “Rawe Htun” (Ven. U Tiloka)

The term “Thilashin” (literally “ observer of the precepts”), nowadays applied to the body of women associates of the Buddhist lineage, that is to say Buddhist nuns, has always been an honoured institution throughout the history of the Myanmar peoples. Literary references to such an institution of Buddhist nuns abound throughout the ages but the particular term for nuns “Thilashin ”itself seems to have come into existence only during the earlier part of the Konbaung period (1752-1885 A.D), while nuns were

known by other names during earlier times such as in the Bagan and Innwa periods.

At present, some of the women who have acquired an inclination for the pure life have turned their backs on the various, innumerable and turbulent pleasures, delights and attractions of the colourful world of laity to don the austere robes and enter a life devoted to the learning, memorising and recital of the scriptures, the rounds of prayers, devotional and meditational exercises required of a nun. They are to be generously honoured. The nuns who have taken up this kind of life should be well provided with the essentials of existence such as food, clothing and shelter, to nurture them and safeguard their way of life so that they may go on with their pursuit.

In the foregoing chapter on the Bhikkhuni (ordained nun) it has been mentioned that their lineage is believed to have died out at about 500 M.E (ie 1 A.D C.E).

Four Types of Pabbajja (Recluses)

Two kinds of humanity, one who lives a worldly life centered around home and family and the life of a recluse who has renounced worldly life and have left home and family for a life of a recluse can be distinctly drawn. In the category of the pabbajja or rec-

luse four further subdivisions can be discerned.

These four types are :-

- (1) Upasampada Pabbajja
- (2) Samanera Pabbajja
- (3) Isi Pabbajja
- (4) Paribbājaka Pabbajja .

Of these four types :-

- (1) Upasampada Pabbajja refers to the ordained monk (*bhikkhū*) and the ordained nun (*bhikkhūni*) who have been ordained in any of the eight forms of ordainment mentioned below (This has been touched upon in the part pertaining to the ordained nun but the entire eight kinds will be dealt here as a whole) :-

- (a) *Ehi Bhikkhū pa s'ampadā* - the kind of ordination typified by *Koṇḍañña* Thera who was the first to be ordained with the formula “Ehi Bhikkhu” (Come, Bhikkhu !) by the Lord Buddha to whom such an admission into the order is justified by that individual’s past merit which results in that person being invested with the eight requisites of a monk on its own accord.

- (b) *Saraṇa gamanü pasampadā* - the kind of ordination during the period immediately after the attaining of Buddhahood when admission into the order was accomplished by taking refuge in the trinity of the Buddha, the Doctrine and the Order.
- (c) *Ovādapatiḅiggahaṇüpa sampadā*- ordination received in the case of Mahakassapa Thera and the like in which the recipient attains monkhood after listening to certain sermons or homilies .
- (d) *Pañhābyākaraṇüpa sampadā* - ordination of the type conferred on *Sopāka* Thera after he had satisfactorily answered questions set by the Lord Buddha.

The above four types constitute higher ordination for monks while the following three pertain to the higher ordination of nuns.

- (e) *garudhammapatiḅiggahaṇüpa sampadā* - ordination of the type conferred on *Mahapajāpati Gotamî*, the Lord Buddha's step-mother who was admitted after acquiescing to the eight solemn

precepts (garudhamma) prescribed for ordained nuns.

- (f) *dütenüpa sampadā* - ordination of the type conferred on *Aḍḍhakāsî Therî* who received her ordination by a specially appointed messenger.
- (g) *aṭṭhavāciküpa sampadā* - ordination for the majority of the ordained nuns during their time which involved the incantation of ritual texts eight times before the assemblage of ordained nuns and a similar number of incantations before a body of ordained monks.

The last type pertains to the higher ordination of monks up to this day, but since *Mahapajāpati Gotamî*, the step-mother of the Buddha and *Sakyā* princesses who accompanied her were ordained in this way, it can be said that it pertains to monks as well as nuns.

- (h) *ñatticatuttha kammüpa sampadā* - ordination following the fourth motion in the ritual recital of sacred texts and scrutiny by a chapter of monks.

- (2) *Samaṇera pabbajja* -ordination of a novice (which included *samaṇerî* or female novices in the past) in which the taking of the Three Refuges are enunciated in a clear and distinct manner by both the mentor and the postulant.

Noviciation must be characterized by fulfilment of three aspects -

- (a) *kesacchedana pabbaja aṅga* -shaving of the head;
- (b) *cîvaraacchādana pabbaja aṅga* - enfoldment of the body in monastic robes;
- (c) *ubhato suddhi pabbaja aṅga* - clear and distinct enunciation by both mentor and postulant in reciting the taking of the Three Refuges.

Ordination of a postulant without shaving his (or her) head or donning of monastic robes constitutes commital of an ecclesiastic offence on the part of the mentor monk only.

- (3) *Isi pabbajja* -This kind of recluse is typified by the rishi (hermit) way of life adopted by the Lord Buddha in his former lives as

King Temiya, King *Mahājanaka* and *Sāma* as related in the jatakas (birth stories of the Buddha). From what has been described in the birth stories, they plait their hair and wear it coiled on top of their heads. For their clothing, they strip off bark from certain trees which they then pound it into the pliancy of cloth and sew it into a robe. The pelt from the black panther complete with paws is thrown over the shoulder and carries a wooden trident and a water bottle amongst other things.

Eight kinds of rishi hermits can be discerned -

- (a) *Saputta bhariya ishi* - a hermit who maintains a family and pursues such occupations as farming, trading etc.
- (b) *Uñchācariya ishi* - a hermit who has his sanctum by the entrance to a town or village and accepts provender in lieu of gold or silver for tutoring the children of royalty , officials and brahmins.
- (c) *Tanpatta kālika ishi* - a hermit who lives by accepting food that is offered.
- (d) *Anaggi pakkika ishi* - a hermit who subsists only on uncooked food, such as

fruit, roots and berries which can be eaten raw.

- (e) *Ayamutthika ishi* - a hermit who carries rocks and mallets to pound bark stripped off trees into a consistency suitable for consumption as his diet consists only of this .Fasting and leading a chaste life are their characteristics.
- (f) *Dantalüratā ishi* - a hermit who does not carry rocks or mallets but rely on their own teeth to bite off and make a meal of any plant they might come upon when hungry. They are also known to fast and to lead chaste lives.
- (g) *Pavattaphalika ishi* - a hermit who lives near ponds and forests and subsists on lotus stems and rhizomes from the pond, fruit and flowers or when these cannot be had, on bark, leaves and tendrils of plants and trees. They are also known to fast and to lead chaste lives .
- (h) *Vañtamuttika ishi*- a hermit who subsists only on leaves that fall on the ground and does not leave his habitat in search of food. They are also known to fast and to lead chaste lives .

Of the abovementioned eight kinds of hermits, the degree of merit of each type increases step by step in correspondence with each higher number, the *vaṇṭa-muttika* hermit being the most meritorious of all. This categorisation is mentioned in the exposition of the Hiri Sutta, in the commentaries on the *Sutta Nipāta*. In the exposition of the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta*, in the commentaries on the *Sīlakkhandā Vagga*, there is another version of classifying the eight kinds of hermits. However, the difference between these two versions is not much.

(4) *Paribbājaka pabbajja* -This type of recluse include those recluses who had been in existence long before the Teachings of the Lord Buddha were propagated, members of sects such as that led by *Sañjaya Belatṭhiputta* who was contemporary to the historical Buddha and recluses as the white-robed “Hpo Thudaw” (literally, “saintly fellow”) and the present day nun or “Thila Shin” (literally, “mistress of virtue”).

As the concept of *paribbājaka pabbajja* recluse should be explained in full, the following section will be devoted to this.

Paribbājaka

The Pali term “*paribbājaka*” is derived from the root [*pari*, *vaja* + *nvu*] meaning those who have “gone forth from ” or renounced the mundane society to don the garb of and live as recluses.

Since this type of recluse has been in existence for a very long time which even preceded the life and times of the historical Buddha, it cannot be ascertained when the term had come into existence. In the 547 birth stories (*jātaka*) related to Lord Gotama Buddha, there are many instances when the future Buddha assumed the life of a hermit (*rishi*) and sometimes a recluse (*paribbājaka*) in seeking to perfect his virtue of renunciation (*nekkhamma pāramī*). Instances of women becoming hermits can also be found

Although a hermit (*rishi*) and a recluse (*paribbājaka*) are basically similar in that both seek the refuge of a forest to pursue their own doctrines there are differences between these two in their outward appearances and the particular apparel that each affects.

As mentioned above, King Temiya, King *Mahājanaka* and likewise others who took to the for-

est to pursue the life of a recluse made a practice of not shaving off their hair or shaving it off only once to let it grow long again, then plaiting it and wearing it coiled on their heads, donning robes made of bark fibre or russet coloured cloth and spending their time in meditation for spiritual tranquility in forests, while subsisting on fruit and tubers gathered. These features have been related in the birth stories of the Lord Buddha.

Tonsuring was however required of paribbajaka recluses. In this process also, they favoured the mode of pulling out hair with tweezers made of palmyra palm seed over shaving it off with a razor or blade. Although some of the recluses made a practice of pulling out the new growth of hair, it seems that they were allowed to let it grow long again. In the commentary on the saintly ordained nuns (*Therī Aṭṭhakathā*), we come upon the quaint story of *Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā* who joined an order of nuns who tonsured their heads by means of palmyra palm seeds but whose hair regrew in curls.

Bhaddha joined the order of *Nigaṇṭha* nuns belonging to the *Sañjāya Belaṭṭhiputta* sect of recluses after killing her husband who was a great robber by pushing him off a cliff. She was tonsured in the manner of the said order by pulling off her hair with

palmyra seeds but her hair reappeared in curls, with strands of it curling around the back of her ear and projecting foreward in tufts so that she seemed to be wearing earplugs of hair and thus earned the sobriquet *Kuṇḍalakesā* (Mistress of the Curly Tuft Earplugs) added to her personal name Bhadda. From this we learn that paribbājaka nuns of yore tonsured their heads.

In the Mahosadha (*Mahāummagga Jātaka*), the *Berī paribbājaka* nun was said to rub her head with her fingers to convey the message “Why don’t you become a paribbājaka recluse like me ?” on meeting Mahosadha as a way of testing his intelligence. From this too we can infer that such nuns were tonsured.

Moreover, the *paribbājaka* recluses preferred to amass doctrinaire learning to the practice of meditating for tranquility so that they could go around the towns and villages to exhibit their prowess, often challenging others of their ilk from rival sects to engage in debate. Occasionally, a male recluse and a female recluse would fall in love and leave their respective orders to marry. There are instances of a child from such a union inheriting five hundred concepts from each parent and thus mastering a thousand concepts in all. The future *Vaṅgīsa Mahā* Thera and the recluse Saccaka were two recluses who were renown for such learning during the lifetime of the Buddha.

Some of the *paribbājaka* nuns became so proficient in such learning that in their arrogance they would travel around seeking worthwhile rivals to challenge them to a debate in which they would be able to flaunt their virtuosity. Their way of throwing out a challenge was to gather sprigs from the eugenia tree and after planting these at the village entrance they would enter shouting “Those who will debate with me step forth and smash these twigs!” The aforementioned *Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā* also followed this practice and it was in this way that she met *Sāriputta* Thera who pointed out the error of her doctrines in the ensuing debate and consequently she sought admission into the Order, eventually receiving higher ordination to become a *Bhikkhunī* nun.

In much the same way as *Bhaddā*, the four sisters of Saccaka, all of whom were older than him, were converted into Buddhism and eventually gained emancipation from the endless rounds of rebirths.

Saccaka and his sisters were born to parents who had been *paribbājaka* recluses. Each of the parents had mastered five hundred vedas before resuming lay life to marry and each of the children had learnt a thousand vedas from their parents when they came of age. Saccaka became the tutor of the *Licchavī* princes while his sisters went around with sprigs of eugenia

throwing out challenges in towns and villages they came across.

Their story is fully old in *Cūlakāliṅga Jātaka* (*Jātaka* No.301), *Catukka Nipāta*. It can be recalled that the exploits of these four paribbājaka nuns are described by Letwethondara, an eminent poet and courtier during the monarchical days in his epic poem “*Nandîsena Pyo*”. A gist of the first and second stanzas from this poem is given below-

“The five siblings born of parents
 Each an expert on five hundred theses,
 A thousand theses did every one of them mas-
 ter
 In the prosperous city of *Vesāli*.
 The handsome son, to the throng of princes and
 their sons
 A mentor of great renown was he,
 In the magnificent city of *Vesāli*,
 Living a life of ease and happiness.
 His four sisters radiant
 As golden stalks in the vernal season,
 Each held a sprig of *Eugenia*,
 Symbol of this Southern Continent
 And of glorious victory.
 They journeyed around
 From town to town,

Prideful and confident would they enter
And make for the south west corner
Of the city gates, where
In a patch of pristine white sand
Would they plant their heraldic wands of vic-
tory
Challenging one and all
To trample these to dust
If he with preponderant wisdom may
Solve those problems they present .”

Sāriputta Thera came upon this scene while going on a round of accepting food offertories and had the twigs destroyed .He then defeated the sisters in debate and converted them to Buddhism and ultimately led them to become ordained nuns.

Their young brother Saccaka however, continued to enjoy his fame as the king’s mentor in the court of Vesāli and after meeting Assaji Thera, he came to contend with Buddha whom he had thought he would be able to defeat in debate . Buddha preached the doctrine of non-self to him and in the end he was converted to Buddhism but he did not don the monastic robes and spent his days as a lay disciple of the Buddha.

There were many recluses like Saccaka during the lifetime of the Buddha .Some were converted by

the Buddha himself, some by his senior disciples like *Sāriputta* Thera and others to spend their lives as ordained monks and nuns . There were also many others who could not leave their heretical ways even after having the benefit of hearing the doctrine from the Buddha himself or from one of his disciples just as there were those who deliberately avoided a meeting with either the Buddha or one of his disciples.

Although there were many sects of such recluses during the lifetime of the historical Buddha, all of them fall into either of the following two groups -

- (1) *Acelaka paribbājaka* - those who as a rule did not wear any clothes but went around completely naked. *Pāthikputta*, *Acelakassapa*, *Kalāramatt(h)aka* and *Jambuka* were some of the recluses from this class prominently mentioned in the scriptures. The *Ajīvaka* sect of naked ascetics also shaved their heads and lived like Buddhist monks and there was an instance of an *ajīvaka* who stole a Buddhist monk's robes so that after the monk had established that he was not an *ajīvaka*, the Lord Buddha had to give special permission so that the monk could clothe himself in leaves that he had gathered.

Nigaṇṭha nāṭha putta, who was an eminent teacher even before the Lord Buddha had attained enlightenment was also an naked ascetic and had founded the Jain religion. His likeness can still be seen in Jain temples.

- (2) *Channa paribbājaka* - These are ascetics who wear clothes and the term encompass many kinds of recluses. There are recluses who don robes similar to those worn by Buddhist monks, those who wear robes made of woven grass such as rice grass, pin reed grass, or woven hair or feathers or pieces of bark stitched together. Upatissa, the future *Sāriputta* Thera and Kolita, the future *Mahāmoggallāna* Thera were at first, *paribbājaka* recluse-disciples of the *Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta*, the heretical teacher, before they met the Lord Buddha and *Suppiya paribbājaka* (mentor to King Bhramadatta) and *Subhadda paribbājaka* (the last one to receive ordination from the Lord Buddha who was then near his *Parinibbāna*) are some of the well-known *paribbājaka* recluses during the time of the Lord Buddha.

Some of these heretical recluses did not shave off their hair and facial hair as the Buddhist monks do, but plucked them off. They also donned robes which were similar in colour and method of fabrication to that of the disciples of the Buddha with the result that outwardly they did not differ from the Buddhist monks. The Vinnaya canon mentions an incident in which a Buddhist monk and a heretic recluse were robbed of their robes but later these were recovered but that the problem of differentiating which robe belonged to whom cropped up then, which resulted in the Lord Buddha allowing monks to mark their robes with a personal pattern of dots termed “kappa bindhu”. There is also the episode in which Upananda Thera, who used a well-made double-robe, was persuaded by a heretic recluse to exchange it for the latter’s own robe which was much more costly. Later when this paribbājaka recluse found out from others that his former robe was more valuable he went back to Upananda Thera and asked him to return it but the latter would not. The upshot of

this was that the case was brought before the Lord Buddha and another ordinance was added to the Vinnaya to deal with such cases. From this it can be inferred that some of the robes worn by these recluses were quite similar to those worn by the ordained monks.

In the *Mātaṅga Jātaka* (*Jātaka* No. 497), the Bodhisatta said “*samaṇa pabbajjam pabba jitvā*”, which has been elucidated as “*paribbājaka vesam*”, which meant that he became a paribbājaka recluse, not a rishi. His appurtenances were said to consist of a nethergarment, girdle, double-layered robe made from discarded clothes and earthen food receptacle bowl etc. which are identical with the eight requisites prescribed for monks and novices.

In the *Mahābhodhi Jātaka* (*Jātaka* No. 528), the Bhodhisatta was said to have uttered “*Paribbājaka pabbajjam pabbajitvā*” and at one place he was said to be equipped with a staff, the skin of a black panther, an umbrella, footwear, an earthen food bowl with a net-bag to carry it slung from the shoulder, a crosier-like

staff for plucking fruits and a double-layered robe. From this it can be seen that with the exception of the black panther skin, the rest are appurtenances which can be included among the parenphenalia of a monk.

Thus it is evident that the *paribbājaka* recluses wore robes of cotton or silk that have been dyed and that their food receptacle bowl was not much different from the bowl carried by monks to accept food offertories.

Paṇḍaraṅga Paribbājaka

The *Paṇḍaraṅga paibbājaka* recluses belong to the *Channa paribbājaka* class of recluse. The robes of the *Paṇḍaraṅga* are white and they are believed to have been in existence even before the advent of recluses who wear robes dyed with bark from trees. The *Sārasaṅgaha* Commentary mentions that the *Paṇḍaraṅga* sect came into being after the teachings of the Kassapa Buddha had waned and become extinct and the sect was still thriving up to the time of the writing of the commentary. It was said that they wore their white robes in much the same way as the

Buddhist monks did and they also shaved their heads. This is confirmed by the passage in the *Kuṇāla Jātaka* (*Jātaka* No. 536) *Asīti Nipāta*, which refers to the white robes worn by female recluse *Saccata-pāpī* and thus infers that the white-robed *Paṇḍaraṅga* female *paribbajikā* recluses had thrived continuously from hoary times preceding the time of Buddha's enlightenment.

However, after Lord Gautama had attained Buddhahood not a few of these recluses from the *Paṇḍaraṅga* sect became either ordained monks or ordained nuns according to their perfection of accumulated virtue, witness the case of the Subhadda recluse and the *Kuṇḍalakesā* female recluse. *Bindusāra*, father of the emperor Asoka, was said to have regularly offered food to sixty thousand which included brahmans and the white-robed *Paṇḍaraṅga* of the *Pāsaṇḍa* cult among others. This reveals to us that substantial numbers of *Paṇḍaraṅga* recluses existed during the time of the Lord Buddha.

Therefore, it should be remembered that the white-robed and tonsured recluses were extant from the interim period devoid of the Buddha's teachings (ie between the time the teachings of the Kassapa Buddha had gone into oblivion and the teachings of the Lord Gautama had not asserted their influence).

through the lifetime of the Lord Gautama Buddha and even after the historical Buddha had passed away.

This *Piṇḍaraṅga* sect seems to be closer to the teachings of the Buddha than other sects of recluses and they were more apt to enter the Order as either ordained monks or ordained nuns and the female recluses from this sect seem to be especially close-knit with the *Bhikkhunî* Order so as to be nearly undistinguishable.

As it has been mentioned earlier, after the lineage of the *Bhikkhunî* Order became defunct due to various reasons, women who had become disenchanted with mundane life and driven by their in-born nature to embrace the life of a recluse, would probably join the female order of *Paṇḍaraṅga* sect which was still extant, as they no longer had the opportunity to enter *Bhikkhunî* Order.

However, it is beyond doubt that such female recluses, though not members of the *Bhikkhunî* Order now obsolete, were nonetheless recluses under the aegis of Buddhism as they had sought refuge in the teachings of the Buddha and were studying and observing its precepts during a time when Buddha's doctrines are still extant. Thus, these female *Paṇḍaraṅga paribhājikā* recluses were the forerunners of the modern Buddhist nun.

The Modern Nun's Morality

Since the modern Buddhist nun belongs to the lineage of pabbajja recluses, it must follow that the morality prescribed for the nuns be in line with morality pertaining to pabbajja recluses. It should be remembered that Buddhist morality can be broadly differentiated as morality for lay persons (*gahaṭṭha sīla*) and morality for those who have renounced the mundane society (*pabbajjita sīla*) that is for the category comprising monks, novices, rishi hermits, other recluses and nuns.

Gahaṭṭha sīla, is otherwise known as *garudhamma sīla* (precepts that are to be gravely observed) or the Five Precepts. That is why laymen are required to observe the five precepts without fail. (They may of course observe the eight or ten precepts as the Vissudhi Magga points out) Similarly the morality for those who have renounced the world for a higher calling (*pabbajjita sīla*) calls for the observance of the eight precepts at the very least to the observance of the fourfold purity of monastic morality (*catu pārisuddhi sīla*). For nuns and hermits, they must unfailingly observe the ten precepts just as the monk must always observe the precepts prescribed under the fourfold purity of monastic morality. This is described in the commentary on the Thera *Gāthā* (*Theraṭṭha* 2-152).

The fact that nuns have to observe the Ten Precepts is evident in the episode related in the *Dīpavamsa* Pali Chronicle (pg 95 in the Myanmar translation of Chapter 15, 81st stanza of the Chronicle) on the arrival of *Mahinda Mahā* Thera to Sri Lanka to carry out missionary work. In order to ordain *Anulā Devī* and the ladies of the court as nuns, *Samghamittā Therī*, had to be brought over to Sri Lanka and as *Anulā Devī* and the ladies waited for this arrangement to be completed, they shaved off their hair and assumed the attire of *paribbājikā* recluses in the meantime and assembling in a small monastery they observed the ten precepts.

That is why Buddhist nuns, whose lineage is related to the *paribbājikā* recluses should observe the ten precepts daily.

The Buddhist Nun during the earlier part of Myanmar History

In the foregoing chapter it has been described how the Buddhist nun's lineage may be traced to the *paribbājikā* recluses who adopted the Buddhist faith. The Myanmar term "Thila Shin," is however, a word that had been coined quite recently. During the Pyu (Sriksetra and Halin) and Bagan periods which could

be termed as the dawn of Myanmar history, it has been ascertained from stone inscriptions and various records of that period that Buddhist nuns co-existed with monks of that period although it cannot be said with certainty by what term they were known at that time. In the following Innwa period, they were variously known by the terms “Thadinn Thoun” (observers of the higher precepts), or by the Pali-Mon hybrid term used by Mons “*Suppa yāk*” (‘those that carry trays on their heads’) or its Myanmar adaptation “Thouppayoma”. (These terms will be discussed in the chapter pertinent to these).

Accounts on prehistorical Myanmar are wreathed in controversy. However, we must go back to times before the writing of Myanmar History as Buddhism was already thriving in the country long before the history of Myanmar peoples were properly chronicled.

Accounts from the later Bagan period, which begins after 1500. B.E or 400 M.E (10 A.D), that is starting from the regnal years of King Anawratha (Aniruddha), are much more clear. At about the same time it will be seen Buddhism was already in its ascedency. Although some historical accounts mention that it was only during King Anawratha’s time that Buddhism was introduced into Bagan from

Suvannabhumi, also known as Ramanyadesa with the arrival of Shin Araham Thera and the transfer of the Tipitaka scriptures to Bagan through the exercise of military might, it has been known from contemporary accounts in Chinese that the Pyu culture which was still extant up to the earlier part of the Bagan period was founded on the Buddhist faith.

Therefore, the assertion that only the decadent Ari sect, which was associated with Mahayana Buddhism, flourished in Bagan before the time King Anawratha and that Theravada Buddhism was introduced only after the arrival of Shin Araham Thera in Bagan should be discounted. This should in no way detract from what is obvious is that, the Ramanyadesa and the Rakhine Dinnyawadi state being more assessible by sea than Bagan from India, the font of Buddhist faith, they would have been the first to adopt the Buddhist faith.

However, it should also be considered that the trading activities of the Mons from Ramanyadesa, the Rakhines from the Dinnyawadi region and Pyus from times before the Bagan period would have brought Buddhism to the land of the Pyus.

Here, we will leave the part of prehistory dealing with the period before the advent of the Pyus, Kanyam and Thet races and take up the story from the spread of Buddhism among the Pyus.

From investigations carried out by the archaeology department, it has been established that there were thriving Pyu communities in Northern Myanmar extending from Halin, Shwebo to Sriksetra in the south along the Ayeyarwady river valley in 13th century A.D. The Pyus were in prominence for about a span of 600 years up to the 9th century A.D and from the 7th century A.D when Bagan was first founded, they could contend with the emergent Myanmar of Bagan for nearly two centuries, after which it could be conjectured that they were assimilated by the Myanmar and gradually lost their identity as a separate nation.

From the existence of the Rajakummar stone inscription, also known as the Myazedi inscription, in which Pyu forms one of the four scripts with which this four-sided pillar was inscribed, it can be inferred that Pyu culture and literature persisted almost right through the whole of the Bagan period. Contemporary accounts in Chinese reveal in detail that among the Pyu people, Theravada Buddhism was a thriving force up to that time although Myanmar records are silent on that aspect. It is learnt that there were many Bhikkhu monks during this period although its companion, the Order of Bhikkhuni nuns had its lineage severed around 500 B.E (that is a few years before the beginning of the Christian Era). However, there

are indications that after the *Bhikkhunî* Order had withered, women with an inclination for renunciation of the mundane world could find refuge in the *Paṇḍaraṅga Paribbājikā* tradition carried on under the banner of Buddhism. Thus we find that the *paribbājikā* nun, forerunner of the modern-day Buddhist nun, existed during this Pyu period.

In the old T'ang chronicles, that is Chinese historical records written during the 8th century A.D, the grandeur of the Pyu kingdom, the splendour of its kings and their form of administration are described, and with these words the aspect of Theravada Buddhism that was flourishing at that time - "In the country of the Pyus there are more than one hundred monasteries. The buildings are embellished in gold and silver and the brilliant hues of vermilion. The floors are finished in red over which carpets with flowery designs are spread. The monastery buildings are roofed with glazed tiles in the same manner as palace buildings. On reaching the age of seven, Pyu boys and girls have their heads shaven and join the Order in these monasteries. If they wish to leave the Order after they have reached the age of twenty, they return to lay life and let their hair grow again." (This passage is based on Dr. Kyaw Thet's translation of the Chinese chronicles incorporated in his 'History of the Union of Myanmar' on page 30. Similar accounts also

appear in the Ancient Myanmar History by Dr Than Tun on page 50, and on page 10 of Ancient Votive Tablets and Images of the Buddha written by Thiri Pyanchi U Mya) The chronicles also describe their national costumes, their use of gold and silver as currencies, their agriculture and diet but these will not be discussed here so as not to digress.

These chronicles indicate that Buddhism during the Pyu period was of a more vigorous nature which even surpassed that of modern times . In the present age boys between the ages of 7 and 15 are bestowed with the dignity of novicehood by their parents but during the Pyu period which was about a millenia from now, daughters were also bestowed with this honour of donning the robes of a Buddhist nun. (In these days, the more pious parents often send their young daughters to nunneries to become nuns for at least a few days where they will learn the basics of Buddhist religious institutions such as the ritual presentation of flowers and other offertories, group recitals of sacred texts and be imbued with its three foundations of charity, observation of precepts and meditation. Such practices are beneficial for a child by acquainting her with the tenets of Buddhism and by guaranteeing a better future for her and is therefore recommended for all Buddhist parents of female children)

Since it has been mentioned that Pyu girls become nuns till the age of twenty after which they could leave the Order if they did not wish to spend their whole lives in it, it follows that there must have been quite a number of those who did not leave the Order. Thus the Pyus who were called P'iao by the Chinese, Tir Cul by the Mons and Htu Lo Kiu by themselves and had settled down along the Ayeyarwady river valley from around Shwebo to Sriksetra by the 1st to 3rd centuries A.D and though not quite developed then, had become quite advanced during the span of 900 years in the period from the 3rd to the 9th century A.D when Buddhism flourished vigourously and its practice was replete with Bhikkhu monks and *Paribbājikā* nuns.

Buddhist Nuns During the Bagan Period

While the Pyu kingdoms were in their ascedency, the kingdom of Bagan was being founded so that it may be said that Bagan recieved an infusion of Pyu culture during that time .As Bagan was said to be founded during the 8th century A.D, it can be estimated that it existed in parallel with the already existing Pyu states for a span of approximately 100 years .

According to the chronicles , up to the time when King Anawratha ascended its throne, Mahayanist

rather than Theravadin Buddhism was prevalent then in Bagan. If Theravada Buddhism had struck roots there at all as a consequence of infusion of Pyu culture, it was not of significant proportions and was overshadowed by the Mahayana Buddhism which by then was firmly rooted there, it is learnt. Meanwhile among the Pyus, Theravada Buddhism was predominant although they probably had a few Mahayanists among them.

During the 9th century A.D, when the vitality of the Pyu nation waned while Bagan was in its ascendancy, Mahayanists were in their heyday at Bagan so that Theravada Buddhism could make no headway there and could thrive only in Lower Myanmar in the land of the Mons. Ancient Bago was then located near the mouth of the Sittaung then and the discovery of Theravadin artifacts and some relics of Sivaite worship there presents strong evidence supporting this view.

During the 300 years between the 9th and 11th centuries A.D, Theravada Buddhism, as we have seen, had not extended its roots firmly in Bagan although it was flourishing in the regions of the Pyus and Mons but once it did in Bagan it burgeoned into full flower there is no doubt that it would be replete with the body of monks and nuns serving the faith.

The following facts amply support this contention. The formal titles of Buddhist monks often appear in the stone inscriptions of the Bagan period. Their titles are in Pali in the same way as these are today and are preceded by honorifics such as Myat Kyee, Myat Kyee Swa and Hpone Myat (meaning “Extremely Venerable,” “Most Venerable,” and “Venerable Monk” respectively) or sometimes Thakin (Lord), Hsaya (Mentor) etc. The “Extremely Venerable,” and “Most Venerable,” are of course honorifics applied to very senior monks of great renown and “Venerable Monk” ,to a senior monk.

During these times ,the name of a man was preceded by the epithet Nga unless he had been invested with a title by the king and names of women were preceded by either Ein, Eih, or frequently O . From a sampling of these terms of address for women appearing in combination with monastic honorifics in stone inscriptions which are given below ,the conclusion that they refer to women serving the faith must be inevitably made.

Hpone Myat Tho O Hsi Tin

Thakin O Kyam Pin Thin

Thanka Dhi Oh Kyam Thin

Hpone Myat Tho Eih Ti Thin.

Hpon Myat Tho O Hsi Tin in modern terms would be “Elder Nun Daw Hsi Tin,” and Thakin O Kyam Pin Thin would be “Nun Ma Kyam Pin Thin.”

The term Thanka Dhi (*Samghādhpati*) would mean “Chief of the Order,” and it could be the highest title in the hierarchy of nuns. As this was at a time when the order of ordained nuns was no more, evidently these were titles of women serving the faith as *paribbajikā*.

A historian had however concluded that these were titles of *bhikkhunī* ordained nuns and had asserted that the *bhikkhunī* order existed during the Bagan period.

It has been mentioned previously that the lineage of the ordained nuns was severed round about 500 B.E. (44 BC). Since the aforementioned stone inscriptions had been made around 11 th century A.D, the *bhikkhunī* order could not have existed then. A more indisputable piece of evidence is to be found in the writings of Fa Hien, a Chinese monk who had travelled to India and Sri Lanka on a pilgrimage and to secure a copy of the scriptures in 943 ME. (399 AD). He wrote of places where there were ten thousand monks or five thousand monks but he did not mention the existence of *bhikkhunī* nuns in his journal. (An exception is to be found in his description of

Saṅkassa city where an allusion to monks and nuns is made, but the mention of a powerful dragon which follows this allusion raises the question whether it refers to an incident in the past or whether the translator who had rendered his accounts into English had either made an error or failed to make the proper distinction between a *bhikkhuni* nun and a Buddhist *paṇḍaraṅga paribbājikā*-. From 'A Record of Buddhist Countries' by Fa Hien). Fa Hien describes Sri Lanka, where the last of the *bhikkhunī* nuns had lived, in great detail. He describes the *Abhayagīri* Monastery Complex where there were over five thousand monks, the *Bhaddarika* Monastery Complex where there were two thousand monks and the *Mahāvihāra* Monastery Complex where there were three thousand monks but there is absolutely no mention of the existence of *bhikkhunī* nuns. This constitutes the strongest evidence supporting the contention that there were no longer any ordained nuns by 10th century B.E.

In the well-known compendium on ecclesiastic code of conduct *Vajīrabuddhi ṭīkā*, the section pertaining to ordained nuns. *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*, describes the undergarment used by nuns to cover their breasts as "*samkiccikāya pamāṇam tiriyaṃ diyaḍḍha hatthāti porāṇa gaṇṭhipade vuttam*", that is, "it was of 27 inches in width according to an ancient glos-

sary,” which shows that even learned scholars who prepared the glosses in that age no longer had a concrete idea of such apparel worn by the *bhikkhunî* nuns. This demonstrates that the lineage of ordained nuns must have died out long ago.

That being so, it would not be possible to resurrect this lineage later and the nuns hailing from the Bagan period that had been referred to can only be said to belong to the society of *paribbājikā* nuns organised under the Buddhist faith. Although it has been said that in China and elsewhere where the *Mahāyāna* Buddhism prevails, the *Bhikkhunî* Order of Nuns is still extant, a parallel cannot be drawn here as by the time the stone inscriptions in question were being put into writing, it is certain that Mahāyāna Buddhism had been completely replaced by Theravāda Buddhism in Bagan.

Furthermore, all the names of venerable monks found in many stone inscriptions recording various charitable events have been rendered in Pali. The famous Rajakumar Inscription (also known as the Myazedi Inscription) mentions the names “son and disciple of the Noble Lord, the *Mahā Thera*” (which probably meant Shin Araham himself and therefore was not mentioned by name); son and disciple of the Noble Lord, Muggali Putta Tissa Thera; son and

disciple of the Noble Lord, *Sumeda Paṇḍita*; son and disciple of the Noble Lord, *Brahmapāla*; son and disciple of the Noble Lord, *Brahmadiv*; son and disciple of the Noble Lord, *Sona*; son and disciple of the Noble Lord *Samgha Senavara Paṇḍita* “ (as translated by Thiri Pyanchi U Tha Myat).

Here the Pyu honorific “*Bam:*” has been rendered as “noble, worthy of adoration, venerable” in U Tha Myat’s “The Myazedi Pyu Inscriptions” Almost all of the names of monks in the stone inscriptions of Bagan has been rendered in their Pali titles (with the exception when appearing before the courts of justice they had been referred to by the term of address “Nga” used in connexion with male laity and probably was a direct reference to the person representing them in court). In contrast, the names of female practitioners of the faith are referred to by their own names ,not by any Pali title as mentioned earlier- “Eih Hsi To or Daw Hsi Taw, Eih Kyam Pin Thin or Daw Kyam Pin Thin, Eih A Kyam Thin, Daw Ah Kyam Thin” etc. From the above it is beyond doubt that there were well-known female supporters of the faith during the Bagan period, but that they could not been descendants of the *Bhikkhunī* lineage and by what term they had been known cannot be traced.

After the existence of the predecessors to our modern day Thilashin during the Bagan period has

thus been proved, their mode of attire during these days was determined to be the same robes of white as it was worn by their predecessors, the *Pañḍaraṅga*, as described by U Po Latt in the following excerpt from his “Introduction to Myanmar Language”- “After elucidating the meaning of ‘oh’, the meaning of the word ‘hpu khi’ will be determined next. In modern Mon we come across the word for white ‘bu’ and the term for robe, ‘gvî’. In the Shwezigon Mon inscription, the word for white ‘*bum tān*’ appears and the Mon inscription on the building of the royal palace, the Mon term for a mantle or robe ‘*gîvah*’ can be discerned. Since the sounds ‘*hpu, bu, bum*’ on one hand and ‘*khi, gî, gvî*’ on the other are very close to each other and carry more or less the same import, the word ‘hpu khi’ may be deciphered as ‘white robe’. Thus the meaning of the term ‘oh hpu khi’ would be ‘the white robed master’, ‘the white-robed mistress’, ‘the white-robed personage’ etc. . In brief, the combination of the term ‘Oh Hpu Khi’ with a person’s name would identify that person as one equivalent to a modern day ‘Hpo Thudaw(white-robed acolyte)’ or ‘Mae Thila or Thilashin (white-robed nun)’ (From ‘Myanmar Saga Ahpwint Kyam’ Vol.II, p.116) In the ‘Literature and Social Sciences Journal’ Vol.I, No.2 an article titled ‘Nurturement of Children’ written by U Soe Nyunt from factual data provided by Shwepyi

U Ba Tin, the following statement appears -“In the wake of King Anawratha’s reign was the advent of religious anchorites known as the ‘Practitioners of the Precepts’, followed by what the Pali scriptures term as ‘*Pañḍaraṅga*’ and what might be termed as ‘white-robed persons’ or ‘Hpothudaw’ and ‘Mae Thila’ in Myanmar.”

These prove that there were nuns during the Bagan period and that they wore white habits.

Buddhist Nuns During the Innwa Period

The Bagan Empire which once spread over the present territory of the Union of Myanmar and its sphere of influence encompassed the whole of Indochina Peninsula including Thai, Cambodia, Laos, Viet Nam and Malaysia, eventually fell into decline and in its place the two small kingdoms of Pinya and Sagaing came into being. Times were chaotic then and the country lapsed into near anarchy. Those who could usurped the throne so that people did not know what to expect and their livelihood was often disrupted by these upheavals. The former unity and harmony which made Bagan powerful had now been shattered.

According to the catch-phrase “Hteinh Kyaw Hoe; Thado Hpyar”. Thado Min Hpyar founded the

royal city of Innwa at the confluence of the Ayeyarwady and Myitnge rivers in the year 726 Myanmar Era (1346 A.D). During his reign the country regained much of its former stability although it was not yet wholly peaceful. Peace and prosperity were gradually achieved during the successive kings and by the time of Minkyiswa Sawke ,the country had become considerably peaceful.

During this Innwa period , considerable progress was made in religion, education and social affairs. There were wars between the Bamar and Mon for about 40 years from the time of Minkyiswa Sawke and his successor Minhkaung. Despite this prolonged conflict between two peoples who were both Theravada Buddhists, times were not as chaotic as in the days before and immediately after the founding of Innwa dynasty. During King Minhkaung's reign, religion and literature reached new heights of development with the appearance of many learned monks . From the following passages excerpted from chronicles it is learnt that there were many female anchorites too during these times.

“ In the year of the Myanmar Era 766, Razadirit sailed up with a flotilla of over three thousand ships and river craft which included junks, carracks and war canoes , 160 thousand troops led by four command-

ers, mandarin Deinmaniyut, Smim Byat Za, Smim Ava Naing and Smim E Brare ,from Bago up to Ye Wunn. King Minhkaung conferred with his high officials and a body of monks on how Razadirit could be persuaded by means of diplomacy to turn back. Not one minister or noble or presiding monk uttered advice. Only the noble monk Sagyo from the Panya monastery, 31 years of age and an ordained monk for 11 years spoke out ‘Leave alone Razadirit, even if all the kings from the whole of this southern continent of *Jambudîpā* come here in a body, I can make them turn back by means of well chosen words.’ King Minhkaung was overjoyed at this and begged him to use his powers of persuasion to the utmost.” (*Sāsanālaṅkāra* Treatise p.139; for fuller details vide *The Glass Palace Chronicles* Vol. I p. 490)

“When everything had been prepared according to the Noble Monk Sagyo’s wishes, a tuskless elephant about 2.5 metres in height was fitted with a gold howdah for the noble monk to ride on. Three hundred white-robed practitioners of the precepts preceded the noble monk while three hundred elderly persons holding gifts followed him.” (*U Kala Mahā Razawin* para. 477; or *The Glass Palace Chronicles* Vol. I p. 492)

The first passage describes the eloquent noble monk Sagyo taking on the peace-making mission

while the second describes the noble monk embarking on this mission in which the tuskless elephant and the entourage led by a bevy of nuns amply symbolises its peaceful and definitely harmless purpose. The upshot of his meeting with Razadirit was that due to the eloquence of the noble monk Sagyo and Razadirit who was receptive of and sympathised with the monk's way of seeing things, the mission was successfully accomplished and Razadirit sailed back home to Bago.

**Is the term Practitioners of the Precepts an
allusion to nuns of the Buddhist faith
(Mae Thilashin) ?**

As the term used in the chronicles is “white-robed practitioners of the precepts”, one could very well argue that it could have been equally applied to white-robed males of the *Paṇḍaraṅga* anchorite order as the literal meaning of the term offers no indication of their gender. However, taken in context with the following passage from the Ratana Kyemon Court Drama shows that it applies only to the feminine gender.

“ Long ago when King *Rājakāruṅṅa* ruled over the *Maṅgala* Nagara Country, a daughter by the name of *Suvaṅṅaraj* was born to his beloved

queen *Pañcalamandā*. Being blessed with the five virtues and of great beauty, the princess was installed in a trio of palatial mansions with multi-tiered roofs attended by a retinue of five hundred and her fame spread throughout the the Great Southern Continent of *Jambudîpā*.

Prince *Āvajjañña*, son of King Dasadhammaraj and Queen *Khemāsantî* of Indapathana country then came accompanied by his retinue of five hundred came to *Maṅgala* nagara and stopped to stay in the park maintained by *Māgharî*. Being the son of a monarch, the prince was well steeped in the manly arts and recited the *Cūlasatta ru* and the *Bharipappatāya* verses daily.

When *Māgharî*, the practitioner of the precepts heard his recitals, she approached he prince and asked him to teach her hese verses. The prince asked what a practitioner of the precepts would want to have to do anything with learning the vedas. *Māgharî* replied that she went to the seven gabled palace to tutor the princess on the literal works and that she wanted to teach these verses to the princess. The prince then aksed whether it would not be better if he undertook to teach her in lieu of the pactitioner of the precepts.

The nun replied that it would not possible as her father, the king had placed a solid ring of guards

to see that no man could approach her.” If it were so,” said the prince, “ While you, ‘Thilashin’ were studying the vedas, who will be tutoring the princess? If you would like the princes to learn the vedas, why don’t you send one of her maids of honour instead ?”. The nun duly reported the matter to the princess who sent her nurse *Mallādiya* as she wanted to learn the vedas very much .(From the “Ratana Kyemon Court Drama*” p60)

From the above we learn that the term Thadinthoun or Practitioner of the Precepts is synonymous with the modern term for the Buddhist nun “Mae Thilashin,” and also provides incidentally the first recorded use of the term to appear in writing. That is why it can be said that the term Thilashin was in use during the time of Alaung Min Taya (ie King Alaunghpaya) who founded the Konbaung Dynasty.

From the above incident related in the court drama, we can infer that the Buddhist nuns of that period took part in the education of the princesses and maids of honour in the royal court. (It will be seen that this practice was continued through the later parts of this dynasty). Moreover, from the following inci-

* It has been stated by the editor ,U Sein Tin in his preface to the “Ratana Kyemon” Court Drama , that it was written by Shwe Taung Thihathu at the urging of King Alaunghpaya’s general, Maha Nemyo Thihathu.

dent it can be seen that the good offices of such nuns were often employed by the heads of the royal households .

“Of the two monks , Tetheygyi and Tetheyngge , the Mahagiri Nat (Lord of the Great Mountain Spirit) came daily to the monk Tetheygyi to pay obeisance If prognostication was needed on some current affair, someone could be sent to obtain it. Once, Tetheygyi monk asked King Minhkaung to donate the proceeds from the weaver’s tax and when the king replied that he would discuss the matter with the queen, the monk asked “Are you under the command of the queen ?” When the queen Shin Bo Me heard of this interchange, she commented “If he was not a monk but one of the laity he could be executed.” When the queen accompanied the king on one of their frequent pilgrimages to Shwezigon pagoda of Bagan on the she-elephant Pho Gaung Yin Ma who could make the trip from Innwa to Bagan in the course of a day, she was met by the monk Tethey who said “If you have plans to execute me do it !” The royal couple was discomfited because the monk knew what had been discussed strictly in private between them. They sent a practitioner of the precepts (nun) to investigate this matter and was

told that the guardian spirit of the city 'Tepathin', had reported these developments to the monk."

As it has mentioned before, it was during the reign of King Minhkaung that the monk of Sagyo, acting as the king's envoy, took along three hundred 'practitioners of the precepts' when he went to meet King Razadirit. King Minhkaung is also involved in the above incident which demonstrates that during his regnal years of 762 M.E (1944 B.E ; 15th century A.D) there were quite a number of Buddhist nuns and that some of them were privy to the highest state authority of those times.

Soppariu; Soppayiu; Svappayiu

Here, it will not be inappropriate to introduce a term adopted from the Mon language that has been used in connexion with Buddhist nuns. The original Mon word "Sopparoch *", is derived from the Pali "sappurisa", meaning 'worthy men or women of piety' and therefore applicable to both sexes. In Halliday's Mon - English dictionary it has been defined thus -

"Sopparoch =[P. Sappuriso] a good or pious man ; a grave-digger ."

*"The Myanmar -English Dictionary " published in 1993 gives an altogether different derivation:-

‘soppayouma= a Buddhist nun (from the custom of carrying a tray on her head) [Pali suppa + Mon youk + Myanmar ma] ’ ‘Suppa’ in Pali, denoting a tray combined with ‘youk’ in Mon being the verb ‘to carry’ and ‘ma’ which is a Myanmar suffix signifying female gender.

The second definition given seems to conflict with the first, but it has been learnt from a Mon scholar that a term “asopparoch” existed in old Mon inscriptions and that the initial vowel “a” had been nearly completely elided with time . Therefore , the Mon term “sopparoch” seems to be a personal noun (like the Myanmar term “ thadinhoun ” and in usage confined to the feminine gender) That this Mon term “sapparoch” has been rendered into Myanmar as “swappayou ” with reference to the *paribbājikā nun* (Maethila-shin in Myanmar) is evident from the following :-

- (1) “swappayou ”.... (vide . Kusa Pyo * 157; written by the Ven. Monywe Sayadaw; born 1128 M.E ie 1766 AD, died 1196 M.E ie. 1836 A.D)
- (2) “ soppayou ”... (vide Candakinnari Pyo* 5 written in 1212 M.E ie. 1850 A.D)
- (3) “*svappayā*”...(vide *Kavimaṇḍanī Kyam** 11 p. 106 written by *Hsi-banī Hsayādaw*)
- (4) “*svapphpayou*” (vide Maghadeva

Lingāthit written by the Ven. Mahāsī Sayadaw , born 1203 M.E ie 1840 A.D, passed away 1281 M.E ie 1919 A.D)

Although the first quotation does not offer an unrefutable guide to the nature of the term's spelling in Myanmar, the second provides a firm clue that it is spelled with “you” rather than “rou” as the preceding word which rhymes with it is spelt “*kaṅkā ñṅvat rou*”, indicating that the author had spelt it as “soppayou”. The context of the second quotation also shows that it refers to a female as does the third and fourth quotations although the vowel ending in the third is “*ā*” instead of “ou”, and in the fourth it is spelt with a “hpa” consonant. Therefore, although there are some variations in its spelling in the above quotes, it is clear that all refer to a female recluse (*paribbājikā*) and is identical in meaning to the Mon term “sapparouh” (sopparoch, etc).

Furthermore, from the appearance of the term in the “*Dhammasat Laṅkā*,” written by (A)shin Vajīra and the definition of the term in the “*Vohāra Vipallasa Lakkhaṇā*” (p.42 in the palm-leaf edition), it is clear that during the Konbaung period, the term was in use in making references to Buddhist nuns which used to be known as “thidinthoun” during the preceding Innwa period.

In an incident concerning King Dhammazedî, a famous Mon king, it has been recorded that his mother, a peasant woman by the name of Mi Tat dreamt that three practitioners of the faith came to her and after placing a grape on her head, presented her with a red lotus, a blue lotus and a sacred lotus blossom.

From this well known record, it can be inferred that the "thadin thoun" (practitioner of the faith), otherwise known variously as sappariuk, soppayiu or svappayiu in Mon all meaning the modern Buddhist nun had existed in the land of the Mon for ages.

White Robes

The quote from U Kala's Chronicles "Three hundred" practitioners of the precepts "in white robes," will bear some investigation. The fact that the practitioners of the precepts (thadin thoun) wore white robes does not seem surprising as their being associated with the recluses of the *paṇḍaraṅga paribbājikā* lineage who customarily wore white throughout the centuries.

It should be remembered that the *paṇḍaraṅga paribbājikā* and their ilk wore white from the hoary times before the founding of the teachings of the Buddha, throughout all the years that they flourished as contemporaries of Buddhism, to the times during the

Pyu period here when due to the *Bhikkhuni* (Ordained Nuns) lineage being severed long ago the only refuge for women desiring to assume the life of a Buddhist ascetic lay in becoming a *paribbājikā*, then when they became to be known as “thadin thoun”, being the precursor to their modern name of “thilashin”, right up to the time well in the Konbaung period.

The following passage from in the book known as the “Amedawhpye Kyam” (Answers to Royal Queries), a collection of replies made by the royal patriarch, the presiding monk of Maungdaung monastery to questions on religious matters raised by King Bodawhpaya of the Konbaung dynasty has a direct bearing on the kind of apparel worn by Buddhist nuns.

(Excerpt from page 150 of the abovementioned book)

Your devotee the Junior Minister of the Royal Court respectfully submits to your venerable presence that -

The nuns belonging to the clan of the presiding monk of Taungloun monastery wear robes stained with bark dye while others are entirely garbed in white. The king has ordered the Minister of Religious Affairs to ask you whether the commentaries have anything to say whether practitioners of the precepts should wear white or robes dyed with bark dye

and we respectfully request you to give a reply on this matter.

Accordingly, a reply dated the 4th waxing day of the moon in the month of Tawthalin, 1148 M.E was sent stating thus:-

As regards the matter of nuns wearing robes of white or stained with the dye from barks, it has been mentioned in the Dhammapada commentary (vide the eighth duodecimal section in the ten-line palm-leaf version) that 92 world-cycles from this present world, at the time of Phussa Buddha, three princes donned robes stained with bark-dye and kept the ten precepts for three full months at the monastery of the Buddha and later came to be known as the venerable monks Uruvela Kassapa, Gaya Kassapa and *Nadī Kassapa*. Thus it is fitting that practitioners of the precepts should wear robes stained with dye from the bark of trees. On the other hand, in the *Sarattha Saṅgaha* (vide the duodecimal section marked “khe” in the eight-lined palm-leaf book with this title) it is mentioned that the custom of wearing white-robes began from the time of the Kassapa Buddha and is therefore also acceptable.

From this incident it may be inferred that the custom of nuns wearing white robes was much more prevalent than the modern custom of donning robes

stained with dye. Moreover, although the term “thilashin” seemed to have gained quite some currency, the appellation “thadin thoun” had not become obsolete yet.

During the time of King Mindon who was the third in line as successor to the throne after King Bodawhpaya, we discover from literary records that nuns, or at least some of them, were still wearing the white robes. Bamaw Sayadaw was a learned monk from those times and one well-known for his lampooning of Mae Kinn, herself a nun of no mean learning during their frequent literary jousts. The Bamaw Sayadaw is also famous for his humorous double-entendres in which a nun often bears the brunt of his jokes. In one of his off-the-cuff versifications, he referred to a nun he saw on his way past a public rest house as “a white hen”, and to her garb as “hempen robes of the purest white”.

In another instance, while poking gentle fun at another venerable monk who happened to enjoy the amenities provided by nuns respectful of his learning, probity and age as well as sympathetic of his infirmities, he included a line which could either mean “purify the pure-white morality further to your heart’s content” or “strip off the white-robed nun to your heart’s content”.

However, it is said that he had put it down for the record that he had meant it to be interpreted in the former manner.

References to a nun in white robes also appear in the lyrics sung by U Kyaw Hla a master lyricist of that same period who recited his impromptu lyrics during dramatic presentations.

The words of the head nun of Thit-hseint Gyaung, of the Sagaing monastic community, on the matter of the Buddhist nun's garb, are also worth quoting. She remembered that at a time about forty years ago, nuns used to wear white jackets with nethergarments and cloaks dyed with red ochre. At that time, She said, the venerable Maha Gandayon Sayadaw, who sojourned in Sagaing from 1895 to 1919, was paid a visit by some nuns who had come to pay homage to him. Noting their white jackets, he remembered the venerable Sayadaw commenting that their arms "have returned to lay life" and admonishing them to wear jackets which were of the same colour as their cloaks. From this it is evident that white in the robes of nuns had disappeared completely only about (70) years ago. (It should be noted that Theravada Buddhist nuns in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Theravada Buddhist countries which have cultures similar to us and had relations with us throughout the times, wear robes of white to this day) Moreo-

ver nuns in Thailand are wholly garbed in white, do not wear cloaks round their shoulders but carry a white bag everywhere they go in the crook of their arms and a white parasol if they should use one. However, it is learnt that umbrellas of black satin-finished cloth are being used now. A distinct feature of these nuns is their habit of carrying a double-ply piece of white cloth about a metre square which they use for sitting on or when paying homage. They also use it to receive offerings made to them by people. They observe the eight precepts all the while they are in the order.

The Dyeing of Robes

In the olden days brown -tinged ochre from Pakkhan was the only dye used in the dyeing of nuns' robes with the tint adjusted by adding or reducing the amount of ochre. Later, dyes manufactured abroad and known as "Yangon red ochre" came to be used increasingly. Robes are dyed with blends of red and yellow ochre. The nethergarment is given a deep shade while the jacket and chemise are dyed in a magnolia hue.

The shawl is of woven raw cotton of a pale brown colour. The items of clothing for a modern nun include :-

- (1) gaik tou or bodice;
- (2) jacket;

- (3) gaik shey or slip
- (4) cloak;
- (5) nethergarment;
- (6) shawl of cotton cloth.

Of the above six tiems, the bodice is made from cloth 24 inches in length, while the jacket requires 45 inches; the slip, 54 inches; the cloak, 96 inches, the nethergarment 90 and the shawl 108 inches. Except for the shawl, the cloth is obtained undyed and dyed by themselves after being made into various items of wear as mentioned above. Thick cloth is used for the nether-garment while the chemise and jacket are made of thinner material.

For a nun who is going to stay in the order for a substantial period of time the following items will be needed .

- (1) 4 sets of clothing as above;
- (2) Razor to shave hair;
- (3) Umbrella;
- (4) Footwear;
- (5) Box;
- (6) Rosary;
- (7) Tray (to receive offered uncooked rice) and
- (8) Bedding such as a mat , blanket and pillow.

Moreover, since unlike a monk, a nun cooks her own meal, she will need some cooking and eating utensils too. Thus, a nun's paraphernalia is much more

than a monk's requisites and support from willing and able donors are often needed for a person to become a nun.

The abovementioned paraphernalia of nuns would cost about K 1,000 at today's prices. In addition pots and pans and eating utensils would also be needed so that a nun's requisites are much more than that of a monk and the support of donors might be essential in some cases.

The abovementioned perquisites are mentioned only to give a rough idea and the actual requirements could very well vary from place to place.

Mae Kinn the Nun

The order of Buddhist nuns reached its acme in the reign of King Mindon, patron of the Fifth Synod during the Konbaung period. The nuns Mae Kinn and Mae Nat Pe were amongst the van in this phenomenon and were respectfully worshipped by the queens and other ladies of the court. As this chapter would not be complete without referring to the Manipuri campaigns of that period, the following historical accounts with have to be retold.

In the year M.E 1104 (1742 AD) the city of Myinde was renamed Manipura and the country of the Kassi came to be known as Manipur .This incident is mentioned in the Inyon Documents (on page 121) thus -

“ An envoy from the city of Kassi arrived at the customs house of Kani with a message of supplica-

tion and presents and this being duly reported to the king by the town's elders, the Kassian envoy was allowed to proceed to Ava (Innwa).

The message bore the letterhead of the king of Manipur and it mentioned that the from the royal city of Manipur to the towns and the countryside people took heed of the teacher Mahaparabu's admonishments and abided by the ten rules of conduct. The master said that he would convert the king of Ratanapura to follow the ten rules of conduct and was allowed to proceed to Innwa. However he was placed under arrest so that he had to return. Pray follow his teachings as we in Manipur from myself to the citizens and villagers are doing so"

When the Kassi envoys were asked to elaborate on this they related that a Brahmin from Bengal had come to Manipur after which the people from the chieftain downwards tonsured their heads keeping a forelock in the manner of Brahmins and dressed in their clothes; that only the elder son of the chieftain declined to follow this example and adhered to the wearing of traditional Kassian dress; that those who followed the Brahmin customs like the chief abandoned their native Kassian language in favour of the Bengali language ; that the Candi god was propitiated once a week from the time that the Brahmin arrived

and that the city of Myinde has now been renamed Manipura and the chief as King of Manipur.

In reality Kassian people belonged to the Shan ethnic group; envoys from Kassi always had to use Shan interpreters and messages sent to the Kassi chief always written in Shan. Even when the Manipur chief made a present of his daughter to the Myanmar king she was received with the same rituals and honours accorded in receiving a Shan chief's daughter as it has been elaborately described in the Inyon tract. That is why it should be remembered that the Kassis belong to the Shan ethnic group.

Manipur or Kassi as it is also known became a tributary of the Myanmar kings beginning with the time of King Bayinnaung, also known by the title Hanthawaddy Hsinbyushin, in ME 921 (1559 AD). However, the Kassi chiefs tended to rebel and become independent again during the times of weak Myanmar kings and there were many campaigns mounted against the Kassis to keep them in line.

Not long after Hsinbyushin, king of Hanthawaddy had passed away in ME 973 (1611 AD) when they rebelled and up to the time of King Alaunghpaya (ME 1115 / 1753 AD) they mounted raid after raid into Myanmar territory. As a result after King Alaunghpaya has reconsolidated the coun-

try, he turned towards Manipur, subduing it in ME 1120 (1758 AD) and placed Candraw Mawni who had vowed allegiance to him as governor.

After the demise of King Alaunghpaya, the Manipuris again rose at the instigation of the British East India Company. This happened during the reign of King Hsinbyushin who reconquered it in ME 1126 (1764 AD). The king brought back a great number of Kassis to the royal capital. There was a Manipuri rebellion again in ME 1131 (1769 AD) when General Mahathura was sent to quell it.

During the reign of King Alaunghpaya's fourth son Bodawhpaya, Manipur again showed signs of unrest. This was caused by bad blood between the chief Chawjit Singh and his brother Marjit Singh. Under Bodawhpaya's admonishment it quieted down for a moment but soon afterwards flared up again so that the army was sent out under the command of generals. Marjit Singh became chief while his elder brother, the former chief, ran away to seek asylum in British territory.

Bodawhpaya died in ME 1181 (1869 AD) and soon afterwards Manipur rose in arms at the instigation of the British .Bagyidaw, who had succeeded Bodawhpaya had to mount a campaign. At first it met stiff resistance and reinforcements had to be sent by

the month of Dazaungmone (about November) in the following year. The governor of Pakhan, Minkyawgaung was given command with instructions to “bring all Kassis, even babes in cradles on your return”. Manipur was duly taken and the Minister for Kassi affairs, Jeyyavattana Kyawhtin was placed in charge as mayor and about two thousand Kassis in addition to booty consisting of weapons and horses were brought back. The Kassis were settled around Amarapura and Innwa.

In that contingent of Kassis who were forced to emigrate were a brother and sister of royal blood both of whom entered the Order. The youth who became a monk later came to be widely known as Shangalay Kyun Sayadaw (Presiding monk of the Shangalay Kyun Monastery) His younger sister became a nun and as Thilashin Saya Kinn would be later known as the torchbearer of the modern nun movement in Myanmar.

In an article by Ko Oo Myint titled “Thilashin Mae Kinn” which appeared in the vol.3 no.6 of the Union Culture Magazine, it was mentioned that among the Kassis forcibly brought to Myanmar during the reign of King Bagyidaw was Thilashin Mae Khemar also known as Saya Kinn , then a young girl of three, a Monday -born child who was born in ME 1176 (1814

AD). However, since the year of her entry into this country is definitely known to be ME 1182 the statement she was three years old then, is not consistent with her year of birth which is given as ME 1176. Thus taking the given year ME 1176 as the year in which she was born it is probable that she was six then.

It is not known in which year she donned the robes of a nun but since it is said that it occurred after reaching Innwa so that it could only be conjectured that she became a nun while quite young. The name of her first mentor nun is also not known but that she taught her classical Pali grammar and explanatory works concerning commentaries on the Tipitka. She is known to have progressed to have learnt the *Atthasālinī* and *Sammohavinodanī* commentaries under the tutelage of an ex-monk. She then took up abode in a sylvan monastery in the Sagaing hills, a favourite haunt of recluses and that the venerable Htutkhaung Sayadaw was another mentor just as he was to other nuns too. There is, however, no mention that she was tutored by her elder brother, the Shangalay Kyun Sayadaw, although he was famous for his scholarship. It might be that the Shangalay Sayadaw was averse to teaching women.

Saya Mae Nat Pey

One of Saya Mae Kinn's close companions was the nun Saya Mae Nat Pey. The year of birth of this nun is not known. It is however known that like Saya Mae Kinn she was also a Kassi girl who had come over with her father during the ME 1168 campaign when troops were sent to settle the rift between the chieftain brothers. The troops brought a number of artisans on their return and although their number was not as large as the contingent which included the future Saya Mae Kinn. Among them was an old Kassi mason who was the father of the future Saya Mae Nat Pey. As the old mason had to work on the Mingun stupa which was under construction he often left his young daughter in the care of nuns from a nearby nunnery and it learnt that it was in this way that the daughter became a nun who would later gain fame as Saya Mae Nat Pey.

The name Mae Nat Pey, which means "given by the gods, or god's gift" seems to be translation from her formal title in Pali "*Deva dinnā*". Although it may be not much more than a conjecture a similar parallel can be seen in the formal title "Khemar" of Saya Mae Kinn, which means "free of danger's taint" in Pali might have resulted in the name 'Mae Kinn' which means "Miss free of, untainted or untarnished"

in the Myanmar language. Their real names moreover would most probably in Kassi, their mother tongue. The difference in their ages seem to be around 10 years seeing that Mae Nat Pey had arrived in the ME 1168 contingent while Mae Kinn had come over with the one in ME 1176 while both were in their childhood years.

However, it seemed that in spite of their similar native origins they did not seem to have spent their childhood together. Saya Mae Nat Pey had stayed around Mingun and there is a stupa about eight metres high executed in the olden style with four guardian lions and four *kalasā* lotus vases in the vicinity of Mingun Gugalay Gyaung (the Mingun Grotto Retreat)(now known as Dhammasāra Gyaung) that has been dedicated to her memory and kept in good repair up to this day and a small grotto ,now dilapidated by the ravages of time, where she had practised religious meditation. (The author hopes that charitable donors will step forward for the maintenance of both edifices on account of their historical value as well as vintage workmanship)

Meanwhile Saya Mae Kinn was spending her days around Sagaing. The Guta-lone Gyaung (the Solitary Grotto Retreat) in Sagaing was where she had sojourned. However, she was wont to leave the rela-

tive comfort of the nunnery to repair to the austere surroundings of the hills where she could meditate in complete isolation. It is said that her pupils had to follow her to the nooks and crannies where she sat in meditation to continue their lessons.

Saya Kinn had, however, a natural bent for teaching while Saya Nat Pey was more engrossed in the practice of meditation and assumed her teaching duties as just one of her obligations she had to perform as a nun. The latter had a retiring personality she was by nature taciturn and often dispensed with niceties when speaking so that she tended to avoid personal contact as much as possible.

At times Saya Mae Nat Pey used to pay Saya Mae Kinn a visit to spend days together in meditation. They complemented each other and it seems that the former being more experienced in this practice could lead the other, who was more inclined towards teaching the scriptures, in the practical aspects of this discipline.

In the year ME 1209, during the month of Thadingyut (around October 1847) King Bagan Min came from Amarapura with a royal flotilla carrying his family and nobles to Sagaing on a pilgrimage to the Kaunghmudaw (*Rājamaṇi-cūlā*) pagoda. As the king was fond of the sport of decoying doves and trap-

ping pheasants he went on a tour of the glades in the hills with his crew of bird hunters after worshipping at the pagoda. His queens and princes in the entourage being left to their own devices, toured the countryside on their own.

His brothers Princes Mindon and Kanaung not being interested in hunting went around the environs where they came upon Saya Kinn and Saya Mae Nat Pey who were at that time sojourning in a dell near the pond of the Red Lotuses (*Kyānîgan*). They were much impressed by the demeanour of the meditating nuns and then and there they made up their minds that they would request them to honour them with a visit to the palace when kingship had been achieved.

(In another version of the above incident, it has been claimed by one that when Princes Mindon and Kanaung led a rebellion against their brother Bagan Min, the princes had met the two nuns as they asked for some water to drink on their way to Shwebo from where they were going to start their rebellion; that they were impressed by the nuns and after presenting a donation of a bag of rice and two yards of cloth to each, they made a promise to bring them over to the palace and act as their donors once their cause had been realized. This claim is however is contrary to historical evidence as the route taken by the princes

was through Madaya where they crossed over to Singu on their way to Shwebo and after Prince Kanaung had secured Amarapura for him, Prince Mindon assumed kingship at Shwebo from where he ruled for eight months before coming down to Amarapura)

Prince Mindon proclaimed himself king after dethroning his brother Bagan Min in February 1853 (ME 1214, in the month of Dabaung) and marched down to Amarapura in the month of October 1854 (ME 1215 in the month of Dazaungmone) by way of Kyaukmyaung. He made his loyal brother Prince Kanaung crown prince but then being preoccupied with bringing the Anglo-Myanmar war to a definitive close and moving the royal capital to Mandalay could not follow up on their promise yet.

Construction of Mandalay was begun in ME1218 (1857 AD) and royal city and palace buildings were finished in ME 1221 (1859 AD). Even before the Mandalay project was implemented, the king had invited Shin Nanda of Khawtaw village in Shwebo to the royal city where he assumed the responsibilities as the presiding monk of the Shangalay Kyun. Here it might be pertinent to say a few words about the presiding monk of Shangalay Monastery for he was after all the brother of Saya Mae Kinn.

Since Saya Mae Kinn was about six when she arrived here, it might be conjectured that her elder

brother would have been at the age of ten or so at that time. (He had reached the status of a *Mahā Thera*, ie. a monk with a seniority of having passed more than twenty years in the Order and was at the height of his career as a lecturing monk by the time he was invited to preside at the Shangalay Monastery, so that he could have been 25 to 30 years in the Order which makes aforesaid conjecture quite plausible) Tradition has it that King Bagyidaw's Manipur campaign had a salutary effect on the Buddhist community here. This tradition is based on the fact that one result of this campaign was to bring about the arrival of these siblings who would later become the leading lights of the Myanmar Buddhist society as Shangalay Sayadaw and Saya Mae Kinn.

As Shin Nanda, the future Shangalay Sayadaw had already made a name for himself as a scholar with a phenomenal retentive power even during the reign of Bagan Min. It was said that he could recite the Tipitaka and the commentaries from memory and was a lecturer of the doctrines even then. At that time he had observed only about ten monsoon retreats as a monk . He was famous for his nighttime lectures to scholar monks and it was said that even the Thathanabaing (Primate) during the reign of Konbaung Min(1837-46AD) used to have a dish of food sent to him daily as an appreciation of his

scholarship. He was also reknown for his judgement in cases on ecclesiastical disputes. Once, he took on a case that the primate who was also Bagan Min's mentor monk had passed judgement but was not acceptable to the parties concerned. For taking on this appeal the disgruntled primate had the king banish Ashin Nanda from Amarapura, Innwa and Sagaing. The monk just took his pupils with him to the village of Khawtaw in Shwebo where they settled in a vacant public rest house and continued with their studies. Later this development reached the ears of the Thilone Sayadaw who made arrangements for Shin Nanda and his pupil monks to be housed in a proper monastery. When Mindon Min ascended the throne, he repeatedly invited the Thilone Sayadaw to the royal city but the venerable monk declined saying that he would recommend a suitable monk for the royal city and named Ashin Nanda as that person. Thus Ashin Nanda left for Amarapura in ME 1287 (1855 AD) on the first month of Wazo (about May).

On reaching the royal city he declined the monastery which the king had specifically built for his use but instead took himself off to his former place, the Shangalay Kyun monastery. Immediately his fame spread and he is known to be the author of the Dhamma Vinaya ecclesiastical ordinances promulgated by King Mindon. He was reknown for his un-

derstanding and strict adherence to the Vinaya rules and it is known that he seldom spoke to women .That seems to be the reason that he is not listed as a mentor to his sister Saya Kinn. He passed away in the year ME1220 , in the month of Thadingyut (about October 1858 AD) during the reign of King Mindon.

Saya Kinn and Co. are invited to the palace

With the construction of Mandalay city was completed in ME 1221 (1859 AD) King Mindon invited the Shwegyin Sayadaw to the royal city. The Shwegyin Sayadaw held Shangalay Sayadaw in great esteem and they had cooperated on religious matters before.

Not long after this the king invited Saya Kinn who was then staying in Sagaing and Saya Mae Nat Pey who was then at Mingun to reside in the royal city to tutor the queens and princesses on religious matters . Saya Mae Kinn put forward three conditions before accepting . These were that :-

- (1) As they were nuns in deference to monks they could not and would not accept palatial buildings with tiered, ornate roofs as their residential quarters.

- (2) No titles should be conferred on them as these would not be accepted
- (3) Regular offerings of food would not be accepted .

Saya Nat Pey, on the other hand demurred saying that she was too blunt and brusque of speech which would not suit the cultured, suave atmosphere of the royal city and palace and that she would like to continue living in the countryside . However she finally came after the king insisted for the third time that she should come and stay for the benefit of the queens and ladies of the court , that they might be imbued with religious teachings which would enrich their lives . The nun was famous for not mincing words and speaking in a curt manner which some interpreted that she was very short tempered . Even the king pretended to be alarmed when he saw her approaching teasing his queens with “Don’t let me get infected with her anger” . Saya Nat Pey stayed just long enough to mollify the king after which she returned to her beloved haunt in Mingun. Only Saya Mae Kinn and her nuns stayed on at the royal city. (Saya Mae Kinn however was said to visit the village of Kangyigon Saye which was across the Ayeyarwady from Mingun from time to time . The villagefolk worshipped Saya Mae Kinn and when she passed away they took charge of

crematory ceremonies . This was related to me by Wunna Kyaw Htin U Ba Than former editor of the Kaba Aye Buddhist *Sāsanā* Organisation Press whose grandmother had been one of the greatest admirers of the nun)

Meanwhile, Saya Mae Kinn's place of residence was in the nunnery which lies north-east of Mandalay Hill. She stayed at the Northern Garden Sylvan Monastery when she was occupied with the task of educating the queens and the ladies of the palace in Buddhist literature, lecturing on the doctrines or teaching them insight meditation practices. In this way she gained the love and respect of the queens , princesses and ladies of the court . King Mindon was born in the same year as Saya Mae Kinn and respected her more than others and saw to her every need (I had heard from an elderly monk that the learned and witty Bamaw Sayadaw, Saya Mae Kinn who frequently was the butt of his jokes and the pious King Mindon were all born in M.E 1176)

The nunnery for Saya Mae Kinn was built with a simple pavilion roofed cupola mounted on the roof, a floor with a raised central dias mounted by a throne for giving sermons and fore and aft twin staircases just as she had insisted that it should not be an ornate building. Her second condition that no titles and

awards should be given was also adhered to. Dry provisions of rice, dried fish chillies and onions were amply provided (on the scale of about 1.5 kg of cooking oil and about a half a bushel of rice per head for each month it has been learnt)

She was held in such veneration by the ladies of the court that they would often send their own children to be admonished by her believing that she could make them better personalities than they themselves could do. An 18 lined poem (a popular form of versification during these times) extolling her virtues was also composed in her honour by one of the ladies.

The number of womenfolk who donned the robe at Saya Mae Kinn's rose day by day. In addition to common citizenry even queens and maids-of-honour became nuns to pursue their study of the Buddha's teachings or meditate. King Mindon had his daughters enter the order of nuns when they had reached the age of seven or so. Saya Mae Kinn presided over the ritual ceremony of shaving off the tresses of the postulant princesses and the proceedings were as solemn and imposing as the noviciation ceremonies that were held in the case of young princes.

Princess Salin, King Mindon's daughter and the 'Tabindain, g Minthamee' (literally 'the princess reigning in solitary splendour') or the officially appointed

chief queen designate had been a nun in her childhood days in the same way as described above. When King Mindon died and the official ceremony of interring his remains were over, the princess lost no time in shaving off her tresses and donning the robes of a nun. This was because she knew that the queen of the middle palace who had schemed and plotted to have Prince Thibaw, her son-in-law designated as the future king when the king was on his deathbed was not enamoured of her due to the position she held. Princess Salin, whose formal title was Susri Myatswa Ratanadevi, spent her remaining days as a nun in the North Salin Monastery complex located north of the Mandalay Hill. The palace intrigues of these times are reflected in an episode involving puppeteer-lyricists. Now there are a number of puppet troupes in the palace with each maintained by a palace personality or by a palace organisation. Once it happened that one Nyan Gye, a lyricist who enjoyed the patronage of the middle palace queen made snide references to Maungdaung U Kyaw Hla, a lyricist who had been hand-picked by Princess Salin to serve in the royal puppeteer troupe, as “Salin’s servant, the rebel woman’s servant” in an attempt to curry favour with his patrons. Maungdaung U Kyaw Hla, an artiste of no mean repute whose lyrics had carved out a niche for himself in Myanmar literature, responded by point-

ing out that Nyan Gye's breach of etiquette in using the name of the princess without the proper titles was tantamount to transgression against royalty, while of course, he did not neglect to make proper noises in the direction of King Thibaw and Queen Suhpayalat. Princess Salin, however, was made to suffer deprivations even as a nun and later passed away.

In another episode involving the royal family, Queen Laungshe, King Thibaw's mother, had been a nun during her youngerr days and after meeting Saya Mae Kinn she was inspired to resume the life of a recluse and wrote a poignant poem of eighteen lines begging King Mindon to let her don the robes of a nun. In it she contrasted the severe ochre robes of a nun with her queenly robes of brocaded silk woven with a hundred shuttles, chased with an intricate pattern of green silk cord cleverly woven into the fabric and admitted that in spite of everything she had come to treasure the former over the latter. If he would agree with her supplication, she said, she would with Saya Mae Kinn as her guide and mentor, roam the hillsides scented with calophyllum blossoms to seek insight so that the king and she might one day enter the realm of deathlessness together.

When Saya Kinn grew too old to continue her teaching duties, she abandoned that responsibility and wholly immersed herself in the pursuit of insight medi-

tation. The task of tutoring the ladies of the court was relegated to younger nuns such as Daw Vanna, Daw Dhamma, Daw Vimala, Daw Gon and Saya Htat also known as *Daw Esārī*.

In connexion with this, King Mindon had once remarked to her “Some of the queens, princesses and ladies of the palace are bereft of the teachings of the Buddha. They are like dried gourd bottles that although pitched into water will not fill and just bob about on the surface .I entrust them to you that they might become well-filled vases” To this Saya Kinn responded in this way “If they are dried-gourd bottles, they can be filled. My only fear that some of the water in the gourds might contaminate my sisters .” In this way she voiced her fears that instead of the nuns teaching the ladies of the court religion, they might become enmeshed in the nefarious affairs of worldlings from their charges. She seemed to have spoken to her nuns on this subject also as when the queen of the southern chamber asked for her help in educating her daughter Princess of Mohnyin she was known to have given just a curt reminder “ Don’t bring back gourd water ” to two young nuns Mae Vanna and *Mae Ummārī* before sending them off on that task .

Saya Kinn Passes Away

When Saya Kinn became infirm with age she left the palace grounds and returned to her former station in the Sagaing Hills to pursue her practice of insight meditation. From young she had made a practice of worshipping at the Kyauktawgyi Pagoda in Amarapura. Now she made it a custom of making offerings at that pagoda every year. During such an event she was so engrossed in worshipping at the image that she only realized that a whole night had passed when the villagers started arriving at dawn to proffer their food offerings. Looking around her she found that the young nuns who had accompanied her were fast asleep. However, she did not scold them but only told them in a gentle tone to wake up. This incident had been mentioned in the journal of one of the young nuns according to the Shwehintha Sayadaw.

The same source mentioned above also relates that Saya Kinn also used to meditate near the great reclining image on the cliffside Shwehpone Pwint. A nun by the name of Saya Kywe who was the sister of U Kyauk Lone { who was invested with the accoutrements of a prince of royal blood when another of his sisters married Bagan Min (1846-53AD) } used to accompany her it was said.

Saya Kinn who was known for her probity , uprightness and scholarship and as one who raised the world of the modern nun in this nation to new heights under her leadership passed away serenely on a Wednesday, the 5th day of the waxing moon of the month of Pyatho, ME 1244 (1882 AD) while meditating at the Solitary Grotto Retreat. She was 68 at that time and it was four years after King Mondon had died.

King Thibaw who was on the throne at that time, was deeply aggrieved and although he could not attend her cremation, charged, U Bo, a treasury official who was meditating at the Aniruddha Retreat to see to that her remains were properly cremated. Accordingly, her ashes were interred in an ornate masonry mausoleum near the grotto where she spent her last days. Its porch faces the south and inside the cavernous hall there is an image of the Buddha. However, since there is no mention of its connexion with Saya Kinn it is suggested that a plaque inscribed with some message indicating what it commemorates should be placed there.

Saya Kinn's Pupils

Saya Kinn's pupils carried on her good work at the palace up to the time of the British Annexation. Foremost among them was the nun Daw Vanna who

was mentor to King Mindon's queen of the southern chamber and her daughter the princess of Monhnyin as mentioned earlier. She also took on the duty of educating other ladies of the court. Once it happened that her nunnery was destroyed by fire. On hearing the news the king himself gave orders to give her enough money to build a new one of substantial proportions. Daw Vanna built a new monastery and donated it to her brother who was a monk and later became the presiding monk of the monastery of the *Sîtā mukha* Retreat, Sagaing.

The king's treasury was customarily overseen by a queen who took on this duty on a rotational basis. Naturally, nuns who acted as mentors to a particular queen prospered when she took on that responsibility. Daw Vanna husbanded the donations that she received while her charge was acting in that capacity and with this money built another monastery in the Myataung monastic complex whose presiding monk was her uncle. Her charitable work was located southwest of the main monastery but nothing remains now except traces of the foundation.

After King Mindon had passed away, Daw Vanna continued her work under King Thibaw. Once King Thibaw asked her about her education to which she replied that she had gone through the traditional

curriculum. To this the king told her in jest that he would have to show her some of the palace collection of Tipitaka scriptures. Undaunted, the nun replied that he was welcome to do so.

At this the king turned towards Queen Suhpaya Lat and told her to adopt her as her mentor. The queen demurred saying that she should not she was already acting as mentor for others in the palace. They did however, treated her with esteem up to the time of their abdication.

When the British took over the Mandalay palace, it was said that Daw Vanna rescued a wooden image of the Buddha about a cubit high that had been traditionally worshipped by royalty by carrying it off on her head through the British soldiery. This incident has been related to the by the chief nun of Thit Hseint Gyaung.

Of Saya Kinn's many pupils Saya Htat (also known as *Daw Esari* as mentioned earlier), Daw Vimala, Daw Dhamma, (the aforesaid) Daw Vanna , Saya Goun, Daw Uttara and Saya Hsun among others are well-known.

In the case of Saya Htat, she was known exclusively by that name instead of her formal nun's title of Daw Esari . She hailed from the Gu Talone Gyaung

which has been mentioned in connexion with Saya Mae Nat Pey. The nun specialized in the higher doctrines (Abhidhamma) and all nuns of that time were taught in this subject by her. Even Daw Vanna was said to have learnt Abhidhamma from her. She also wrote an analytical work on the Compendium of the Higher Doctrines. This work taking up 193 pages on the demy format was printed by the Myanmar Aswe Press in ME 1255 (1893 AD) with a first run of 500 copies. Many nuns have learnt their Abhidhamma from this book.

The preface to this mentions that it was undertaken during King Mindon's reign, that it was written by Junior Nun Htat, also known as *Mae Esāri*, who enjoyed the charitable gifts of the king together with the Senior Nun Mae Nat Pey and that it was aimed at teaching these doctrines to men and women who had not the chance to study this matter in depth and that the cost of printing this book was undertaken by Princess of Kyauk Yit, adored daughter of King Mindon to whom the merit of producing this charitable work belonged.

An interesting point in this preface is the use of the term 'thîla the' (literally 'practitioner of the precepts') in describing herself. It seems that this term was much more popular than the modern term of 'thîla

shin “ (literally ‘observer of the precepts’). The Princess of Kyaukyit mentioned therein was the eldest daughter by the Seywataiksar Queen (ie queen holding fief over a circle of ten villages) and the princess whose formal title was “*Srînandadevî* ’ and her fief was the town of Kyaukyit.

Saya Htat passed away in ME 1255 (ie around 1893AD) . The nunnery at Gugale Gyaung was then taken over by Daw Vanna but it was only temporary and she left in ME 1260 (1898 AD) to raise a nunnery at Thit Hseint Gyaung (Myrobalan Retreat) in the Sagaing hills. At that time the only nunnery in existence in the Sagaing hills was the Gutalong Gyaung so that Thit Hseint Gyaung was then known as the ‘new retreat’. Daw Vanna was held in great esteem by the minister of the interior and the royal flotilla (U Chein, an author of note himself) and with the help of elders from the Wachet village, the nunnery grew from about fewer than ten members at its inception to about eighty by the time Daw Vanna died in ME 1277 (1915 AD).

Meanwhile, the Gugalay Gyaung (the Solitary Grotto) in Mingun was under the care of Saya Ei (also known as Daw Citra) who was Saya Htet’s protégée. She was a handsome woman and known for her scholarship and courage.

Saya Kinn's protégée, Daw Vimala remained throughout her life at the Gotalone Gyaung, noted as Saya Kinn's place. Daw Dhamma was another well-known protégée of Saya Kinn. She was an elegantly beautiful woman who was widely respected. She taught at Guni Gyaung (Red Grotto Retreat) in the Sagaing hills.

Saya Goun (also called Daw Goun) was another stalwart of Saya Kinn. she used to stay at the Mingun Monastic Complex (now known as Paungdawthi monastery) When the Venerable Maha Gandayoun Sayadaw came over to the Sagaing hills religious community to practise and preach insight meditation, she came down from Mingun to attend his sermons. At his urging she took on four nuns who had come up from Rakhine. Somewhere around ME 1265 (1900 AD) she founded a new community for nuns named Maggin Gyaung (Glade of the Right Path). She was known to be taciturn and strict so that some called her prideful. A saying at that time was that "Daw Dhamma for beauty, Daw Vanna for charity and Daw Goun for aloofness".

Another pupil of Saya Kinn, Daw Uttarā who had stayed with Saya Kinn when she was at the royal city later attended to the needs of the ageing and ailing Venerable Htutkhaung Sayadaw. After that ven-

erable monk passed away she spent the rest of her life in the vicinity of the great image of Mandalay (Maha Myatmuni Image).

Saya Hsun was another of Saya Kinn's pupils. Of her it is said that she stayed in the Mingun-Sagaing region at first but on one occasion one of Prince Kanung's concubines by the name of Khin Khin came to her to take up the life of a nun. As the latter had come to her after running away from the palace, she felt that they were no longer safe in the present area and together headed downriver into territory occupied by the British and later founded a nun community in Twante township by the name of Tharyargoune Nun-nery.

Modern Day Buddhist Nuns

I have traced the history of nuns from its origins in the white-robed *Paribbā-jika* order to that of the Bhikkhunî order of the ordained nuns during the lifetime of the Buddha , and the disruption of its lineage later to the developments in the female side of the religious order during the past periods in the history of the Myanmar Nation. I have also dealt with the terms used in their case through the times and in particular localities. In the study of these developments it is clear that apart from very prominent Bhikkhunî

nuns very little has been written on this momentuous female movement in contrast with the case of monks who have been much more extensively chronicled by the *Sāsanā Vumisa*, and the *Sāsanā Lan̄kāra* among others. Even the life stories of Saya Kinn and Saya Mae Nat Pey who had lived only about a century ago are not very completely known among the nuns who nevertheless have drawn inspiration from them.

Saya Kinn had during the period about ME 1200 to 1244 (1838-82 AD) had reigned supreme at the head of the community of nuns which had existed as disparate entities before her. She had brought them all together under her wing and almost all the well-known nuns during her period had been under her tutelage. They in turn have nurtured a number of famous protégées so that it could be said that their lineage could be traced back to Saya Kinn.

According to a reply made by the Parliamentary Secretary during the August 1960 session it is learnt that there were a total of 8753 nuns in the whole country.

Although there are no figures on their numbers during the time of King Mindon it may be fairly said that it would have a been a much greater figure.

Their numbers gradually declined after the British Annexation. However from the time of regaining

independence onwards their numbers seemed to have been on the increase again. There is a valid reason for this.

The Sagaing-Mingun hills region, Monywa, Mandalay, Yangon, Pyaw and Mawlamyine each support sizeable communities of nuns. The nuns in the Sagaing-Mingun area can be quite accurately known because of the Malun Rice Donating Association and the figures for the other areas interpolated from its figures. According to an exhortatory pamphlet number (68) issued by this association which mentions figures for a span of 18 years from ME. 1308 -25 (1946-63) there were a total of 1172 nuns in this area in ME 1308 and 1641 in ME 1325. This shows an increase of 469 during that period or an increase of 25 per year roughly. The figure for ME 1326 is 2651 showing a sharp increase of 1010.

In addition to this quantitative increase, qualitative progress made is evident in the number of nuns appearing for the yearly scriptural examinations. Their numbers are increasing yearly as well as in the increasing numbers of successful candidates. Up to 1965 the number of nuns who have passed teachership examinations on the scriptures amount to 123.

This is because as late as about a decade ago older nuns were actively discouraging younger nuns

from sitting for such examinations because they feared that it might lead to involvements with the younger monks. Their fears have been largely unfounded and the numbers of nuns who have been successful in their teachership examinations are increasing yearly.

The Situation in the Nuns' Retreats

Nuns being women have the natural tendency to keep their nunneries, the rest houses, the shrines they worship at and the precincts of their retreats clean and neat. They devote their efforts particularly on the image room where they worship which is kept pristine clean and redolent with the fragrance of flowers. They also maintain strict discipline regarding their schedules for prayers, for study and devotions and going out or entertaining visitors require permission from the presiding nun herself. Visitors are not allowed into their dormitories even though they may be relatives. They are to be met only at a designated place in the open-sided congregational halls.

In the matter of daily sustenance theirs is a much harder lot compared to the monks who partake of food already prepared and offered by others. About twice every week they have to go out on rounds through the lay communities to gather rice in the grain. Their daily meals are cooked on the basis of two or three to a group unlike monks where meals for the whole mon-

astery including lay pupils and lay devotees are prepared when necessary.

In the matter of donors too, they have to rely mainly on their relatives to donate sundry necessities. Charitable occasions where they are invited are rather few compared to monks. Based on my own experience I find that nuns in the lower part of the country are better supported than their sisters from upcountry. It is said that in some of the cities in the downriver country some nuns are even better provided than the young scholar monks. But on the whole it may be said that they do not receive as much support than the amount given to monks .

However, it is heartening to see that despite all these hardships that they face their institution is a thriving one.

Conclusion

In a land where women have traditionally (or at least formerly) treasured luxuriant tresses, the shaving off of ones' hair symbolises that the postulant has turned her back on the world and society that had been so familiar to her when she becomes a nun. As such it is fitting that if she continues to live the life of a nun she would first try to get an education in the otherwordly doctrines while still young and turn to their practical application later. This is the laudable scheme of things followed by senior nuns.

A nun's work can be roughly divided into three parts according to her age. Up to the age of about thirty she will be engaged in having a doctrinal education. From the age of forty to about fifty .she will be disseminating her learning to newly admitted nuns and young girls. After that they spend the rest of their lives in practical application of the doctrines in meditation. This tradition has been set by nuns from the past and

has been duly followed by wave upon wave of their followers. Thus the only time that nuns come into contact with the mundane world are when they go on their rounds of collecting rice offerings.

That this should be the way is a good sign for they have bid goodbye to the lay life of raising families and being embroiled in these affairs.

However, times have changed and the visitations of modern imperialistic warfare have brought down moral standards. It is now possible to entice people to discard their traditional cultural, moral, ethical and religious values through the offer of material welfare.

This opportunity is not lost on foreign missionaries who offer material welfare in order to convert them to their faith. Our people who are needy in a lot of things are often led away by their offer of free education, looking after the destitute, the sick and the halt etc. Foreign missionaries, particularly Christian missionaries have opened primary, middle and high schools, industrial trade schools, orphanages, nurseries, clinics and dispensaries, hospitals, shelters for women, leprosariums, schools for the blind and the deaf-mutes in the various states and divisions of the Union. These centres for education, assistance and welfare attract converts.

The Roman Catholic Church , the American Baptist Mission and the Anglican Church are vying with each other in their quest for converts through these agencies.

The Roman Catholic Church has been particularly successful in training their nuns for such educational, social assistance and welfare programmes. These Christian nuns fraternise with the local womenfolk and give them education, help and succour. Their schools are crowded with students, their welfare centres and clinics throng with people and to these people they have assumed the stature of saviours. In the end they have become a haven for destitute women.

Christianity reached this country during the reign of Tanwingane Min (1714-23 AD) of the Nyaungyan Dyanasty. Therefore it has taken root on this soil for about 250 years. The advent of Christian nuns to this country took place more than a century ago. Christian missionaries had branched off into about 15 missions soon after their arrival and by operating various schools, orphanages, child care centres and invalid homes with great zeal and dedication they have been naturally successful.

When it was found that the nuns were making more headway than the male missionaries, convents were founded all over the country. Converted women

from the populace became nuns and after graduating from their training courses were sent out to bring in more converts. Thus Buddhist women were converted to Christianity in large numbers.

This tendency was noted after independence and monks also became aware that the Buddhist community would be slowly whittled down. Thus many associations and educational institutes were founded. However, this action had been preempted by others more than a century ago so that the strategy was not to prevent other faiths from their missionary work but rather to stem the deterioration of the Buddhist faith. Moreover their efforts in the fields of education, relief and social welfare have not been quite effective. The monks had to operate within the bounds of their Vinniya code of conduct. The Parahita (Welfare) schools could only take in destitute boys while the girls who are literally the life-source of the nation could not be cared for.

While there was no Buddhist institution to care for the girls, it had the result of giving nuns from other faiths the whole field to carry out their missionary work. In this way a decade passed after the attainment of independence.

Meanwhile there were isolated instances of heroic work done by Buddhist women. They were Bud-

dhist nuns who founded orphanages in Myeik, Taung Oo and Mandalay. However these are only in their incipient stages and more women of their fibre are needed.

They should also strive to progress from running orphanages to mission schools, dispensaries then homes for the aged. Hospitals managed by nuns should also be founded. It will not be necessary for nuns to go through the time and resource consuming medical training. Rather, possession of managerial skills should be enough to enable nuns to run a hospital. Professional medical care can be provided by either voluntary or salaried doctors and nurses. As the saying goes "only faith in the preacher makes one appreciate his sermon", the all important first step of establishing rapport with the people can be done only when we begin to take care of those who are suffering.

This however does not mean that all Buddhist nuns are to take up social work. Of the two paths consisting of striving in the education of the scriptures or *Ganthadhüra* and striving in insight meditation or *Vipassanā dhüra*, those following the path of insight meditation should continue to strive in that direction. However, those striving in the *Ganthadhüra* path could very well spend some time in educational, relief and welfare according to their volition.

Nuns embarking on this mission of mercy might meet with indifference or even ridicule at first but they might well be reminded that their first foray into the sitting for teachership examinations were met with a similar reaction which they successfully surmounted.

A person on a mission of mercy is naturally protected by his compassion. Any ridicule or scorn directed at that person will do him or her no harm and moreover there is no need for him or her to offer an explanation. This is evident in one of the Buddha's discourses in the Samyutta division quoted below.

“yassa sabba maho rattim; ahimsārato mano; mettam so sabba bhūtesu; veram tassa na kenasi”

“A person who has compassion for all living things and rejoices in not causing harm to any being whether day or night, has no cause to quarrel with anyone.”

Thus I would like to conclude by endorsing that in addition to (a) which all nuns will have to follow, they should make a choice of either (b) or (c) out of the following :-

- (a) I urge nuns to persevere in their study of the doctrines to achieve the highest degree of attainment while observing the

rules and regulations set forth by the institution to which they belong:

- (b) Those who have achieved a high level of doctrinal study should take on the duty of educating others. If they should choose to pursue the practice of these doctrines through insight meditation they should do so.

However, should they feel a calling to pursue academic learning they should bravely take this path.

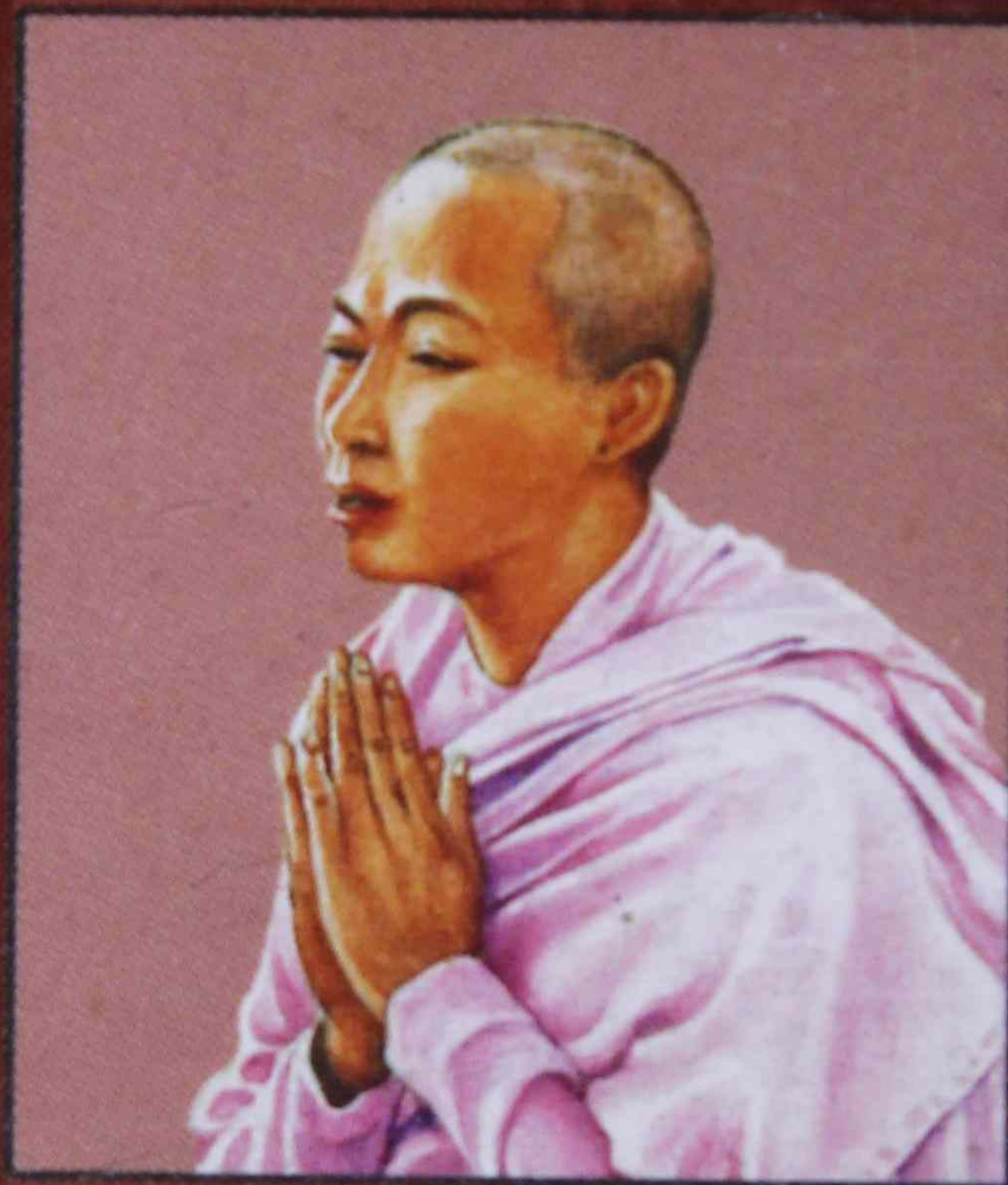
- (c) Those who have attained a solid knowledge of doctrinal matters and are not pursuing insight meditation, should, whether they have a foundation of academic learning or not, keeping the aim of furtherance of the teachings of the Buddha, take up either of the educational, or relief or welfare work whichever they may have an inclination for.

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Literati Da' of ME1326

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BUDDHIST NUN

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