

Politics in the Moral Universe: Burmese Buddhist Political Thought

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation is a work of comparative political theory that draws attention to how religious beliefs can generate fundamentally different conceptions of what is political. I argue that Theravāda Buddhism is the source of the conceptual framework within which most Buddhists in Myanmar think about politics. Specifically, being embedded in the Theravāda moral conception of the universe, Burmese Buddhists understand the political as a sphere of moral action, governed by particular rules of cause and effect. Within this framework Burmese Buddhists vary as to their interpretation of particular concepts and the degree to which they see Buddhist teachings as relevant to politics; however, I demonstrate that this framework and Buddhist conceptions of politics continue to be salient for contemporary political practice in Myanmar. There are also variations between Theravāda Buddhism as it is practiced in Myanmar and in other countries, as well as important differences in interpretation and emphasis among Burmese Buddhists themselves. I examine these variations while also comparing Burmese Buddhist political thought with other religious and cultural traditions.

Buddhism in Myanmar has provided a repertoire of “raw materials” which people have used to make sense of their political environment. These include a particular conception of

human nature, an understanding of the universe as governed by a law of cause and effect that works according to moral principles, a conception of human existence as fundamentally dissatisfactory, and the acceptance of a range of methods to overcome and escape its dissatisfactory character. I explore how Burmese Buddhists have used these ideas in deploying arguments regarding the nature of politics, the proper ends of politics, alternative conceptions and methods of political participation, and a range of understandings of “democracy.” My findings not only illuminate a relatively unexamined tradition of political thought, they also help us to understand some of the challenges facing a democratic transition in contemporary Myanmar.

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## INTRODUCTION

On September 24, 2007, tens of thousands of Buddhist monks marched down the main thoroughfares of Yangon in Myanmar<sup>1</sup>, a sea of dark maroon robes creating the lasting image of what the media would deem the “Saffron Revolution.” This was the sixth day of monastic demonstrations in downtown Yangon, the culmination of a wave of dissent that had begun with citizen protests against the removal of fuel subsidies the month before and had escalated after reports that the Burmese military had violently subdued monks demonstrating in the northern city of Pakokku earlier in September.<sup>2</sup> Beginning on September 18, the ranks of the monks had swelled each day and similar actions were taking place in urban areas across the country. This day they marched along with tens of thousands of lay people, although the monks had initially asked lay people not to join the demonstrations. Gradually, however, they did, initially joining hands to create protective barriers around the monks as they marched, and eventually raising the banners of opposition groups, including the National League for Democracy (NLD) and even the long-outlawed student union.

While some monks began the march each afternoon at their home monasteries, eventually converging on Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon, growing numbers gathered at the foot of the iconic golden dome of the Shwedagon Pagoda, a mile or so north of downtown. These monks met to chant protective prayers before marching, but the significance of the location was not lost on any Burmese observers. In addition to being the most revered Buddhist site in the country (strands of the Buddha’s hair are allegedly buried beneath it), it has also been the focus of political activity since the colonial period. The martyred leader of the independence movement, General Aung San, gave speeches in front of the pagoda in the 1940s and over forty years later, his daughter, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, invigorated

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars writing about Myanmar face the challenge of deciding which name to use for the country. The military government changed the name from “Burma” to “Myanmar” in 1989, but a number of individuals, organizations, and countries have refused to acknowledge what they consider an illegitimate name change. In this dissertation, I use “Myanmar” when speaking about the country after the change and “Burma” when speaking about the country before the change; I use “Myanmar” when discussing the country or state in general terms not linked to a specific point in time. I use “Burmese” to refer to the citizens of the state. While this term is problematic because of its linguistic associations with the dominant majority ethnic group (more on this below), there is no other term that is sufficiently clear in denoting citizens of the Myanmar state. I do not intend for my choice of terminology to imply a particular position regarding the government of the country.

<sup>2</sup> The 2007 demonstrations were only the most recent examples of monastic political activism in Myanmar. After military rule began in 1962, monks protested government attempts to expand authority over the *sangha* in 1965; joined students to protest the lack of government recognition of the funeral of the former secretary general of the UN, U Thant, in 1974; and participated in demonstrations across the country in 1988 and 1990, including monks who took over the duty of maintaining public order in Mandalay after the administration essentially collapsed following protests.

the democracy movement of 1988 with a speech in the same location.<sup>3</sup> The rhetoric and protest repertoire of the monks perfectly mirrored the Shwedagon Pagoda's combination of religious and political symbolism. While some monks' groups had issued statements with explicitly political demands and a number of the marching monks also chanted political slogans, the primary tactic of the demonstrating monks was to recite the *mettā sutta*, a Buddhist protective chant that radiates indiscriminating loving-kindness out to the world.<sup>4</sup> This was their chosen method of political action.

Western media coverage of the events was quick to recognize the overwhelming respect that the mostly Buddhist population of Myanmar had for the monks, juxtaposing their assertion of moral authority against the military dominance of the Burmese regime. Some articles discussed the religious "boycott" that the monks had imposed on the military regime; by refusing to accept their donations the monks denied them an opportunity to earn merit that would bring them a better rebirth in their next lives. Some opined that the military government would not dare attack the monks since it would risk losing whatever legitimacy it still retained. However, most reports either ignored or dismissed as naïve statements from both monks and laypeople who believed that this mass display of piety and compassion would, as a fundamentally moral action, actually be able to bring about political change by itself. Many observers also misunderstood the complexities of the monks' tactics, either referring to them as "militant monks" or expressing incredulity that supposedly "peaceful" and "detached" Buddhist renunciates could be moved to such displays of outrage. What is needed in order to fully grasp the significance and meaning of the monastic demonstrations of 2007, as well as to understand some of the challenges facing the current democratic transition in Myanmar, is a sense of the shared moral framework that Burmese Buddhists inhabit. In my dissertation, I seek to advance this understanding.

In this dissertation I argue that Theravāda Buddhism is the source of the conceptual framework within which most Buddhists in Myanmar think about politics. Specifically, being embedded in the Theravāda moral conception of the universe, Burmese Buddhists understand the political as a sphere of moral action, governed by particular rules of cause and effect. (Below I explain how my characterization of a "moral universe" differs from the dominant scholarly discourse of the Theravāda "cosmology.") Of course, within this framework Burmese Buddhists vary as to their interpretation of particular concepts

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<sup>3</sup> "Daw" is the female honorific in Burmese.

<sup>4</sup> Beginning in Chapter 1, I provide footnotes in Burmese script for every Burmese term that I use and for every quote in Burmese that I have translated. Because of this, I have decided to transliterate Burmese terms in the simplest way for non-Burmese readers, meaning that I do not always follow conventional transliteration practices and my transliterations are not always consistent. I acknowledge that this may be jarring for some readers who are familiar with the Burmese language and common transliterations, but hopefully it makes the overall text more accessible, especially since I am expecting readers to become familiar with a number of Burmese and Pāli terms.

and the degree to which they see Buddhist teachings as relevant to politics; however, even allegedly “secular” Burmese appear to reason about politics through this Theravādin moral lens. This is a particularly important point on which I challenge the conventional view of certain political figures as embodying “secular” political positions. By demonstrating that, even as they espoused a separation of religion from the state, these individuals continued to reason about politics from within a Theravāda moral conception of the universe, I assert that this framework and Burmese Buddhist conceptions of politics continue to be salient for contemporary political practice in Myanmar.

There is, however, variation between Theravāda Buddhism as it is practiced in Myanmar and in other countries, as well as important differences in interpretation and emphasis among Burmese Buddhists themselves.<sup>5</sup> Part of this is due to unique ways in which Buddhists in Myanmar understand specific Buddhist concepts and I point out some of the places where Burmese Buddhist views diverge from those of their Theravāda neighbors in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. Equally important is Myanmar’s own political and religious history. Religious debates (particularly within the *sangha*, the community of monks) have influenced the attention that Burmese Buddhists have paid to certain subjects; at times these debates have been expanded and shaped by the political appropriation of Buddhist concepts. The relationship between religious and political authorities has also proceeded differently in Myanmar than in other countries; the relative independence and decentralization of *sangha* authority throughout much of Burmese history and the rise of a lay Buddhist ethic and practice in the last century have both posed challenges for successive political leaders. Additionally, religious and political figures in the country have been influenced by ideologies and philosophies from outside of their own tradition and have incorporated these ideas into their overall Buddhist moral framework in creative ways. Finally, Myanmar’s own political history (including the experience of British colonialism, civil war after independence, and decades of military rule) has shaped the ways in which Buddhists in the country have used their religious beliefs to make sense of politics.

As an examination of Burmese Buddhist political thought, I consider this dissertation to be a work of comparative political theory. The study of non-Western religious cultures does not merely illuminate how alternate moral codes or systems of belief can influence politics; it draws our attention to how religious beliefs can generate fundamentally different conceptions of what is political. Buddhist

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<sup>5</sup> A variation in emphasis or interpretation often constitutes the distinguishing area between different “types” of Buddhism, whether school (Theravāda vs. Mahāyāna), country (Burmese vs. Thai), or sect (Shwegyin vs. Thudhamma). In many (if not most) cases, Buddhists of various traditions are working with similar conceptual materials. What differentiates a particular Burmese Buddhist perspective might not be a concept that is unique to Burmese Buddhism (although this is sometimes the case), but rather a greater emphasis on a particular aspect of Buddhist doctrine or an innovative way of combining Buddhist ideas with those of other traditions.

beliefs and practices provide a moral framework that delineates the boundaries of the political as well as what constitutes political subjects and legitimate forms of political authority and participation. However, while I argue that the overarching moral framework of these beliefs has remained relatively consistent over time, the ways in which Buddhists understand and apply them are always in flux. That is, while there is no singular, unitary Burmese Buddhist perspective on politics, the Theravāda moral universe provides the conceptual structure for a range of related ways in which Burmese Buddhists make sense of the political sphere. Buddhists in Myanmar are created *as political subjects* by this tradition, yet they are also contesting, refining, and reformulating those boundaries of political legitimacy, authority, and participation. Furthermore, I argue that they are doing this in ways that (while they may interact with ideas from other traditions) are drawn directly from their own Buddhist tradition and that reasoning about politics takes place within the moral framework provided by Theravāda Buddhism.

Buddhism in Myanmar has provided a repertoire of “raw materials” which people have used to make sense of their political environment. These include a particular conception of human nature, an understanding of the universe as governed by a law of cause and effect that works according to moral principles, a conception of human existence as fundamentally dissatisfactory, and the acceptance of a range of methods to overcome and escape its dissatisfactory character. It should not be surprising to us that Burmese political thinkers have constructed Buddhist arguments to both legitimate and criticize various forms of political authority and political ideologies. As Peter Jackson has observed, “Fundamental to the ongoing significance of Buddhist teachings, in particular, has been their interpretative plasticity, that is, their capacity to continue to be used to confer symbolic legitimation upon the exercise of political authority and the structures of political power, whether those structures have been founded upon absolute monarchical rule, military rule or upon a popularly elected government” (2002, 157). It is the “interpretive plasticity” of Burmese Buddhist concepts that I explore in this dissertation, examining the way those concepts are deployed in arguments regarding the nature of politics, the proper ends of politics, alternative conceptions and methods of political participation, and a range of understandings of “democracy.”

### **The Question of “Secularism”**

If the monastic demonstrations of September 2007 produced a number of questions regarding Burmese Buddhist understandings of politics, the tone of electoral and legislative politics since November 2010 (the first democratic elections in Myanmar in decades) has provided a sharp contrast with the explicitly Buddhist nature of those demonstrations. Virtually none of the candidates or parties in the November 2010 or April 2012 elections mentioned Buddhism as influencing their political ideas.

Even Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), whose speeches and writings in the 1990s were suffused with democratic reinterpretations of Buddhist political concepts and moral ideals, has said virtually nothing about this aspect of her views on politics in recent years. It is certainly understandable that contemporary political figures might be concerned about the polarizing and divisive effects of religion in the political sphere. Many people still believe that former Prime Minister U Nu's efforts in the late 1950s to recognize Buddhism as the state religion antagonized non-Buddhist ethnic groups and were at least partially responsible for the military coup in 1962.<sup>6</sup> Ethno-religious unrest among Muslim Rohingyas and Buddhist Arakanese in Western Myanmar that began in June 2012 has highlighted the precarious nature of inter-religious relations in the country. Under these circumstances, and in the midst of a tenuous transition in a democratic direction, it seems that elected officials in Myanmar have tried to avoid conflict and emphasize the secular nature of their new government by keeping religion out of political discourse.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that since candidates are not vying for the support of popular monks and elected officials are not justifying government policies in terms of Buddhist values, as was common in the parliamentary period of the 1950s, Buddhism is no longer a part of the Burmese political landscape. Not only is Myanmar only a few years removed from a mass demonstration of monastic moral power on the political stage, but as I argue in Chapter 5, monks are occupying the space that political figures have vacated and addressing the intersection of politics and religion through their sermons, books, and regular interactions with lay people. While only a few monks speak explicitly about politics and Buddhism, every monk in the country plays a role in reinforcing the validity of the framework of the Buddhist moral universe and its relevance to the everyday conduct of the citizens of Myanmar. Not only that, I argue that this moral framework remains an important lens through which Buddhists in the country understand, interpret, and act on politics.

With that in mind, I also seek to offer a corrective to what I believe has been a misleading categorization of Burmese political figures and ideas as "Buddhist/traditionalist" on the one hand and "secular/modernist" on the other. The paradigms of these two poles are usually the post-independence Prime Minister U Nu, invariably portrayed as a Buddhist traditionalist and the independence leader Aung San, equally commonly portrayed as secularist or modernist. In his book *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Donald Smith described the cycle of Burmese politics as "General Aung San's secular state...to Premier Nu's state religion...and back to a secularist orientation following General Ne Win's coup" (1965, vii).

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<sup>6</sup> This view is not confined to Burmese. One ambassador of a Western country explained to me at length that it was this failure of U Nu's that exacerbated ethnic and political conflict in Burma in the late 1950s and that the present government must take pains not to allow religion to re-enter the public sphere.

Josef Silverstein, in his introductory essay to a collection of Aung San's political speeches claimed that "Buddhism...did not provide Aung San with a dominant theme in his political thought, as it did with several of his contemporaries, not did it provide a basis for his speeches and actions" (1993,5). While Silverstein acknowledged that Aung San didn't evade religion, I challenge his claim that Aung San "did not employ religion in the service of politics" by showing in the following chapters that, while he may not have used religion to justify government policies (as did U Nu), Aung San did indeed reason about politics using Buddhist ideas (ibid., 6).

Silverstein saw a divide in Burmese politics in the first part of the twentieth century. On the one side was an urban population that embraced liberalism and constitutionalism as part of their drive to independence; on the other was a rural population that was looking to restore pre-colonial values and institutions (Silverstein 1996, 216). He placed the nationalists of the *Dobama Asiyone* ("We the Burmese" organization) in the first category and the *wunthanu athins* (a network of mostly rural nationalist organizations) in the second. However, this account mischaracterizes both groups, since many members of the *Dobama Asiyone* incorporated Buddhist rhetoric and reasoning in their political ideology, while the *wunthanu athins* were also using modern political organizing techniques.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, as I will argue, both groups operated within the logical framework of the moral universe of Theravāda Buddhism.

Undoubtedly there were differences in beliefs, in methods, and in goals between the groups and individuals scholars have categorized as "traditionalists" and "modernists." In some cases these differences were solidified by the rhetoric of the "modernists" themselves, who saw certain Burmese beliefs as backward and anachronistic.<sup>8</sup> What I try to demonstrate in this dissertation is that, while they may have had contrasting visions of the role of the state vis-à-vis religion and used religious symbolism and rhetoric in different ways, both the "Buddhist traditionalist" U Nu and the "secular modernist" Aung San reasoned about politics from within a particular framework—derived from Theravāda Buddhist beliefs about cause and effect—that conceives of the universe as functioning according to moral

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to offering an important critical perspective on the dominant colonial discourse surrounding the Saya San Rebellion of 1930-32, Mairii Aung-Thwin also gives evidence that challenges the simple "traditionalist-modernist" divide, including the spread of modern political methods such as boycotts through the rural *wunthanus* (2011, 147-48).

<sup>8</sup> For example, many nationalists saw the Burmese belief in a traditional cosmology as hindering their attempts to modernize the country. In the foreword to a 1939 book written by U Hla Pe called *The World's Political Map*, U Ba Hein told of a prison conversation that he had with Thakin Soe, who would later become a famous communist leader. They lamented the fact that, since most Burmese couldn't read modern maps and their conception of the world revolved around a mythical cosmology that did not accord with the world's geography, their potential audience would have no framework for understanding the world's political history that the young nationalists were translating into Burmese (Zöllner 2008).

principles. Some may object by arguing that Aung San and other politicians have used Buddhist imagery and language in their speeches and writings not because they believed in the ideas, but because they knew that it was the conceptual vocabulary of their audience. I believe that accounts of Aung San's Buddhist piety (not to be confused with the acknowledged "religiosity" of U Nu) provide evidence to counter this argument, but even if his Buddhist logic was employed instrumentally, the fact that he felt the need to regularly express political ideas using Buddhist examples and concepts demonstrates the degree to which the moral conception of the universe is deeply embedded in the Burmese Buddhist worldview.<sup>9</sup> Today in Myanmar monks and lay teachers continue to reinforce the relevance and centrality of the moral universe through their sermons and writings and throughout the dissertation I note points at which this conceptual framework is both explicit and implicit in speeches of and interviews with contemporary political actors, despite the recent absence of religious rhetoric in the political sphere. Clarifying the logic of the Burmese Buddhist moral universe gives us a way of analyzing the political reasoning used by political figures (even when its Buddhist origins are not explicit) and of identifying potential challenges to democratic consolidation in Myanmar's current transition.

The critical aspect of my argument here is that a politician like Aung San could advocate for a secular state (one not allied with any particular religion or its beliefs) while still thinking about politics from within a religiously-derived moral framework. The separation of church and state in the West does not prevent political figures from making moral arguments about political issues that are rooted in religious reasoning. Studies of Myanmar that have distinguished between "religious" and "secular" political figures based on their attitudes toward religious and political authority have neglected the ways in which ostensible secular discourses are situated within particular cultural and religious worldviews.<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz captured this dynamic well: "As we are dealing with meaning, let us begin with a paradigm: viz. that sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their worldview—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (1965, 3). This is not to suggest that people cannot or do not challenge those worldviews, but the fundamental conceptual structure that they provide remains deeply influential; these worldviews provide the logical structure with which their inhabitants make sense of the world around them. My formulation of a persistent

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<sup>9</sup> McCarthy, for example, suggests that it was likely that Aung San "intentionally brought Buddhist sentiments into his speeches primarily because he was addressing Burmese people, the majority of whom are Buddhist" (2006, 163). This perspective accords with McCarthy's interest in rhetorical uses of Buddhism among Burmese political figures.

<sup>10</sup> Houtman (1999) also argues strongly against the prevailing view of Aung San as a "secular" politician.

belief in the moral nature of the universe avoids the oversimplified distinction between “traditional” and “modern” by recognizing a crucial point of continuity. It also provides a point of entry for those wishing to understand Buddhist influences on contemporary Burmese politics in a world where few people adhere to a traditional cosmology and religious rhetoric is more muted in the political sphere.

### **Cosmology, Colonialism, and the Persistence of the “Moral Universe”**

Most of the academic work on Theravāda Buddhism and politics refers to the role of the Theravāda cosmology in legitimating power and providing models of political organization.<sup>11</sup> Prior to the advent of colonialism in Southeast Asia, this cosmology was a totalizing, self-contained framework that explained both the physical structure of the universe and the laws that governed existence. It implied a natural hierarchy in which individuals were ranked according to their actions in the past and the results of those actions in the present. Explanations of the cosmology included detailed descriptions of the many realms that existed besides the human one: hells filled with unimaginable suffering and heavenly abodes of incomparable bliss. Kings, their ministers, and the monks they supported used images of these other realms to provide moral guidance to the population, either through the threat of incalculable punishment or the promise of virtually unending pleasure. The cosmology also legitimized the monarchical model of political rule. Its characterization of humans as fundamentally flawed and driven to immorality by desire and craving necessitated a powerful leader whose position was justified with reference to his actions in the past as well as his continued governance according to moral precepts.

Scholars have commonly presented this legitimating cosmology as static. Individual monarchs came and went, but people’s understanding of the world remained consistent. Stanley Tambiah famously characterized the system as a “galactic polity” where power radiated out from individual monarchs, weakening with distance and overlapping at the margins where it met with other power centers (1976, Chapter 7). While individual polities pulsed and shifted over time, the framework that indicated people’s proper place within the social order persisted. Very little changed until the encounter with Western political thought and institutions—through the intrusion of colonialism—fundamentally altered Theravāda Buddhists’ conceptions of themselves, their communities, and even the nature of their existence as human beings. Charles Keyes challenged this model, arguing for a dialectical view in which “the tension between the world as it is imagined through cultural works which reproduce the

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<sup>11</sup> Some prominent examples include Heine-Geldern (1942), Reynolds (1972), Tambiah (1976), and Aung-Thwin (1985). In another work Tambiah presents cosmologies as “performative blueprints” and “designs for living,” that help people to describe and understand the world but also provide prescriptions for action (1985, 4).

past...and the world as it is actually lived in” results in a more accurate depiction of how Buddhism is understood and practiced in particular contexts (1987, 130).<sup>12</sup> Keyes cites significant transformations in practices of the Thai *sangha* to show that a “totalizing” framework obscures the dynamic nature of Buddhism as a lived tradition in particular contexts. Victor Lieberman’s work has also challenged the static model, identifying patterns of periodic collapse among mainland Southeast Asian polities in the pre-modern period but also a sustained trend towards increased political and social integration (1984, 2003).

More recent scholarship has provided detailed investigations of particular periods of transformation. Michael Charney’s 2006 book *Powerful Learning* explored the way in which a small group of literati from a provincial area in Burma helped both to strengthen and transform the legitimating rhetoric and symbolism of the Konbaung dynasty in the second half of the eighteenth century. By showing how these regional intellectuals used their royal connections to assist the monarchy while at the same time asserting the dominance of their own tradition of monastic practice, Charney demonstrated that there were significant fluctuations in the concepts that underwrote political rule well before colonialism provoked a crisis in traditional Burmese thought. Charney’s work built on the scholarship of Anne Blackburn who also challenged the idea that colonialism was the sole catalyst for the transformation of thought in the Theravāda Buddhist world (2001). Her study of monastic textual practices in eighteenth century Sri Lanka demonstrated that the changes commonly attributed to Western colonial influence beginning in the nineteenth century were actually rooted in indigenous reforms of the prior century.

In some cases, scholars have also overstated both the centrality and the persistence of this cosmology, either in specific aspects or as a whole. Thus, Michael Aung-Thwin’s controversial claim that the imposition of military rule in 1962 represented for Burmese people a welcome return to the cosmological sense of order that both the British colonial administration and the democratic parliamentary government lacked ignores some of the fundamental ways in which the fall of the monarchy and the engagement with non-Buddhist political ideas transformed Burmese Buddhists’ ideas about political authority and the role of citizens as participants in politics (1985a). Similarly, while Mikael Gravers’ work adds much to our understanding of the understudied intersection of religion and ethnicity in contemporary Myanmar, he too overstates the permanence and immutability of the cosmology,

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<sup>12</sup> Keyes also developed an earlier critique of Tambiah’s more static “totalizing” model in which he accepted the claim that there was a Theravāda Buddhist “worldview,” yet argued that it was a more dynamic orientation, particularized to the lived experience of various groups, and that in contemporary Theravāda countries it was no longer equitable with “a cosmology predicated upon the ‘two wheels of the Dhamma’” (Keyes 1978, 165).

claiming that “the concepts and ideals of the Buddhist cosmology are universal and everlasting, and they constitute a total model of the society and for its future development” (Gravers 1999, 17).

While the pre-colonial political model may not have been as inert as was once assumed, colonialism certainly brought along with it a series of challenges to the fundamental social order, destabilizing many elements of the traditional cosmology and mirroring in some ways the “disenchantment” that Max Weber identified as part of the West’s move toward rationality and modernity. Juliane Schober has explored the ways in which the “galactic polity” paradigm was transformed beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, sometimes gradually, through reinterpretations of Buddhist ideas, and sometimes abruptly, as after the fall of the Burmese monarchy in 1885 (1995). Mid-nineteenth century political, administrative, and religious reforms, instituted in Burma by King Mindon and in Siam (Thailand) by King Mongkut altered established relationships between the state, the *sangha*, and the society.<sup>13</sup> Schober describes the result as a “rationalized” cosmology, shorn of elements that did not accord with modern science. As part of this process of realignment of social relationships, she also notes an increased “laicization” of Buddhism, evidenced by the proliferation of lay meditation and religious study groups, areas previously reserved for monks.

I agree with Schober’s claim that “modern Buddhism relinquished a totalizing cosmology in which all aspects of life cohered across cultural, social, economic, scientific bodies of knowledge” (2011, 8).<sup>14</sup> However, I argue that while beliefs about the material structure of the universe, the position of the king, and a cosmologically ordained hierarchy may have disappeared among most of the population of contemporary Myanmar, the Buddhist belief in the world as a place governed by particular moral rules persists. The logic of cause and effect that supports this worldview has largely been bolstered rather than shattered by scientific innovations and, from the beginning of the twentieth century Buddhists in Myanmar and elsewhere have argued that their moral framework represents an important element that is lacking in the Western political tradition. The political interpretation of these moral rules has varied widely through Burmese Buddhist engagement with a number of other ideologies as well as based on their own political experiences. Yet this framework remains an important lens through which Buddhists in Myanmar make sense of politics. As such, even in the absence of Buddhist rhetoric by public officials, analyzing political developments in Myanmar will require an understanding of the Burmese Buddhist

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<sup>13</sup> Mongkut’s reforms (including the creation of the more strictly disciplined Thammayut sect in 1833) were followed by King Chulalongkorn’s 1902 *Sangha* Act, which consolidated the Thai monkhood under central royal authority (Suksamran 1982, Chapter 2). The “demythologizing” discourse also developed in late nineteenth century Cambodia, encouraged by the rationalist influence of the Thai Thammayut sect and French criticism of the Khmer Buddhist cosmology (Hansen (2004, 53).

<sup>14</sup> Although the pre-modern engagement with that cosmology might not have been as totalizing as we assume.

conception of the moral universe, changes in that conception over time, and its application to contemporary political questions.

In this dissertation I have chosen to use the term “moral universe” to denote what I believe has been the aspect of the traditional cosmology that outlasted the fall of the Burmese monarchy, was transformed as a result of its encounter with colonialism and modernity, and continues to shape Burmese Buddhist political views today. I use this term to refer to the moral law of cause and effect that constitutes the logical framework within which Burmese Buddhists reason about the world.<sup>15</sup> Identifying this particular aspect of the cosmology helps to clarify an element that has remained consistent from the pre-colonial era to contemporary Myanmar, albeit subjected to different interpretations.<sup>16</sup> This clarification also moves beyond the “traditionalist-modernist” classification, by recognizing the influence that this moral understanding of the universe has had on nearly all Buddhist political figures, whether they advocated for a return to the monarchy or for a secular state.

### **A Note on “Buddhism”**

Referring to the widely varied schools of thought and religious practices that have been derived from the teachings of Siddhatha Gotama (the Buddha) as “Buddhism” is misleading at best.<sup>17</sup> Buddhist traditions have followed very different trajectories of development as they have been carried around the globe and significant doctrinal disagreements separate many of the main schools. Buddhists in Myanmar are part of the Theravāda tradition, which is also dominant in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka. Other major schools of Buddhism include Mahāyāna (commonly practiced in China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam), Vajrayāna (a sub-school of Mahāyāna common among Tibetans), and Zen (which originated as Chán in China before spreading to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan). Of course, all of

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<sup>15</sup> Here I disagree with Schober’s assertion that one of the universal elements of the Burmese Buddhist worldview is a “pervasive concern with the realms of existence and their hierarchy” (1989, 5-6). While these beliefs persist among a portion of the population and influence people’s understandings of politics, they are also increasingly rejected by many Burmese Buddhists who see themselves as continuing the efforts of their early twentieth century predecessors to “rationalize” Buddhist belief and practice. Note that I am not arguing that belief in the more traditional “cosmology” will inevitably disappear, nor that it is irrelevant to studies of political thought, in fact, I examine its influence on the interpretation of particular political concepts in various places in this dissertation. However, I do not believe that it is a universal element of the Burmese Buddhist worldview in the same way as the belief in cause and effect as a moral law.

<sup>16</sup> There is likely also variation between Theravāda countries regarding the persistence or rejection of other elements of the cosmology. For example, Grant Evans has suggested that despite (or maybe because of) the communist attempt in Laos to modernize Buddhism in the 1970s and 80s, “an older Buddhist discourse on Lao history,” centered on righteous kings, has emerged to fill the space vacated by a discredited communist ideology (1998, 70).

<sup>17</sup> Trevor Ling has discussed the problems of labeling the diverse range of Buddhist beliefs and sects as “Buddhism” in Ling 1993, (Ch. 1).

these schools have since spread beyond the boundaries of Asia to find root in countries across the world.

Buddhism is the majority religion in Myanmar, with smaller percentages of Muslims, Christians, and other groups. Official demographic data is notoriously unreliable in the country, due in no small part to the fact that Buddhism has been a primary part of the identity of the majority ethnic group (the Burmans) and, by extension, of Burmese national identity. Estimates of the Buddhist population range from 85-90% but most scholars believe that figures for non-Buddhist populations are under-reported (Jordt 2007, 175). While Theravāda Buddhism is the dominant practice, in many parts of the country Theravāda beliefs provide a flexible framework that has incorporated a number of traditional and animistic practices, including the worship of ancestors, natural spirits, and an officially recognized pantheon of thirty seven *nat* spirits. At the end of Chapter 1 I revisit the syncretic nature of religious belief and practice in Myanmar and its relevance to Burmese perspectives on politics.

However, I must acknowledge that this dissertation does contribute to reifying the already dominant position of Buddhism in Burmese society. While the majority of Myanmar's citizens practice Buddhism, more attention to non-Buddhist groups is absolutely necessary in order to recognize these under-represented populations. John Brohm's characterization aptly describes the inadequacy of our scholarly categories: "There is only one religion practiced by the Burmese people about which we can legitimately speak. For want of an established term, we can only call it Burmese religion. The scriptural referents of Burmese religion are Theravāda Buddhist, and Buddhism is unquestionably an important element in the larger system; but the characteristics of Burmese religious behavior tend to be traditional and not necessarily scripturally derived" (Brohm 1963, 167). The anthropologist Melford Spiro challenged this categorization, arguing that animist practices focused on results in the material world and the enlightenment-focused salvation doctrine of Buddhism constituted two distinct religions in Myanmar (1996, 264-80). Yet he also acknowledged that Burmese Buddhist practices were themselves often oriented toward worldly goals, rather than exclusively toward enlightenment. Scholars face the challenge of appropriately describing a field of religious practice that, while containing a number of core concepts, varies widely in terms of practice in particular contexts.

This dissertation unfortunately suffers from a shortcoming that has characterized almost all of the scholarly work done on Buddhism in Myanmar. Although we claim to be studying "Burmese Buddhism" (a term that I will use uncritically throughout the dissertation), scholars refer almost

exclusively to the Buddhist beliefs and practices of the majority Burman ethnicity.<sup>18</sup> This claim will be controversial to many Buddhists in Myanmar who believe that there are no meaningful differences between the Buddhism of the Burmans and that of other ethnic groups, including the Arakanese, Karen, Mon, or Shan. While there is a good deal of consistency, there is also evidence of significant differences in practices and beliefs.<sup>19</sup> Anthropological studies of non-Burman ethnic groups were common during the colonial period but have been limited since the 1950s, hampered by ongoing violence in many ethnic states as well as government restrictions.

Differences in practice, in the understanding of particular concepts, and in the use of texts would suggest that, just as there are variations in Buddhism among ethnic groups in Myanmar, there are also variations in Buddhist political thought. In this dissertation I reveal a wide range of interpretations of core Buddhist concepts, mostly in Burman polities and within Burman-dominated political groups; we might expect similar variation among non-Burman groups. Part of my original intention for this work was to explore differences in Burmese Buddhist political thought between ethnic groups in Myanmar. Unfortunately, I was not able to find enough data to be able to comment on this critical gap in our understanding. First, there is limited scholarship on non-Burman Buddhism in the country. Second, a lack of linguistic expertise prevents me and most others interested in the subject from being able to read primary source materials, which are themselves rare.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the political situation in Myanmar at the time of my field work was not conducive to studying non-Burman perspectives on Buddhism and politics. Many areas were accessible, but outside of large urban areas such as Yangon or Mandalay, neither I nor my potential informants felt comfortable discussing these subjects in detail. Based on conversations with friends and colleagues I decided to limit that part of my research.

The new, quasi-democratic government that came to power in March 2010 has instituted a number of reforms that have opened up some space for public political discussion and opportunities for

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<sup>18</sup> Although our data on ethnic distribution is an approximation, Martin Smith estimated that Burmans make up sixty to seventy percent of the population (1999). The next largest groups are the Shan and Karen, each of which makes up less than ten percent. Following these groups (and with much smaller proportions of the population) are the Kachin, Chin, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine, Wa, and Naga, along with many other smaller groups. However, population figures are a contentious topic in Myanmar and the last generally accepted census took place in 1931. Census figures often conflate ethnicity with religion, classifying non-Burman Buddhists as “Burman” and members of non-Burman groups with majority Buddhist populations as “Buddhist” without regard to their actual religious beliefs (ibid., 30).

<sup>19</sup> A recent issue of the journal *Contemporary Buddhism* that was devoted to Shan Buddhism discusses some of these texts and practices (2009, 10:1).

<sup>20</sup> Persistent civil conflict in many non-Burman areas has created conditions in which the preservation of documents is challenging and most likely not a priority compared with survival. More importantly, the former military governments severely limited opportunities for teaching and learning in non-Burman languages (Callahan 2004). The result has been a gradual “Burmanization” of Buddhism in Myanmar.

citizen participation. Yet even as the government was signing historic cease-fires with the Karen in early 2012 (ending the longest-running civil conflict in the world), violence flared in the Kachin State in June 2010 and in Rakhine and Shan States in June 2012. In seeking to end these persistent conflicts and bring about national reconciliation, both the government and many members of the democratic opposition have responded critically to avenues of inquiry that might reveal or (from their perspective) reinforce ethnic differences. It is my belief, however, that a democratic, multi-ethnic Myanmar will be strengthened by more attention to the cultural particularities of the groups that inhabit it. I hope that in the future there will be more opportunities for scholars to conduct research on the varieties of Buddhism in Myanmar and that this work will include more scholars from inside the country. Eventually we may even be able to consider the Buddhist political thought of different ethnic groups and their alternate interpretations of political concepts that have been either ignored or actively suppressed by political authorities since before the colonial era. Until then, the category of “Burmese Buddhism” has as its primary referent the Buddhism practiced by Burmans.

### **A Brief Political History and Cast of Characters**

Pre-colonial Burmese history consisted of a succession of kingdoms and smaller political units, led at different times by various ethnicities, and expanding and contracting their nebulous areas of control through warfare and intermarriage.<sup>21</sup> The Burman king Anawrahta (1014-1077) founded the Pagan Dynasty in the early eleventh century and Theravāda Buddhism and Burman language and culture gradually became dominant over the next few centuries. The rulers of the final Konbaung Dynasty (founded by King Alaungpaya in 1752) were forced to contend with the incursions of the British colonial state, losing territory gradually beginning in 1824 and ending with the British deposition of King Thibaw (1859-1916) in 1885 and the formal annexation of the entire territory in 1886. The penultimate king, Mindon (1808-1878), instituted a series of reforms in the economic, political, and religious spheres, designed to strengthen the Burmese state against the colonial threat, but was largely unsuccessful.<sup>22</sup> Several of his ministers pushed for even more significant reforms; the most famous were U Kaung (1821-1908), who traveled to Europe several times from 1872-74 and published a diary of his experiences, and

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<sup>21</sup> In the interest of brevity I have compressed this pre-colonial period to a few sentences which cannot do justice to the diverse forms of political organization that existed in the territory now known as Myanmar. For more detailed studies, see Lieberman (1984, 2003) and Aung Thwin (1985b, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> See Koenig (1990) and Myo Myint (1987) for a detailed examination of politics and society during the Konbaung era.

U Hpo Hlaing (1830-1883), whose political writings advocating a more limited monarchy figure prominently in this dissertation.<sup>23</sup>

The destruction of the monarchy threw much of Upper Burma (the last area that the British had conquered) into disarray. Multiple insurgencies and rebellions broke out in the years following annexation, many led by charismatic men with royal claims who sought to restore the monarchy. The British also refused to appoint a *sangharaja* (head of the *sangha*, the community of monks), causing a general decline in moral conduct among both monks and lay people.<sup>24</sup> Some of the first mass membership organizations in the country (including the Young Men's Buddhist Association, YMBA, founded in 1906) were founded to combat this moral decay and to revive a Burmese Buddhist culture that they perceived to be threatened.<sup>25</sup> The first several decades of the twentieth century in Burma saw the rise of predominantly Burman Buddhist nationalism, encouraged by the YMBA, the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA, founded in 1920 but originally formed in 1917 as the General Council of Buddhist Associations), and the *wunthanus*, a network of village and town level nationalist groups that led agitation against the British.

A number of prominent monks were at the forefront of this first wave of Burmese nationalism, spreading the desire for independence and self-rule to the rural population.<sup>26</sup> U Ottama (1879-1939), educated in India, brought back techniques of boycotting and civil disobedience from the Indian independence struggle and gave fiery speeches denouncing colonialism and imperialism. He died in prison during a hunger strike in 1939, following another famous Burmese monk U Wisara (1895-1929), who died from a hunger strike in 1929. An ex-monk named Saya San (1876-1931), who was associated with the GCBA and the *wunthanu* movement, led a rebellion from 1930-31 that took the British by

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<sup>23</sup> Bagshawe (2006) has published a translation of U Kaung's London diary and Aung Than Tun (2009) provides a great deal of biographical information about him as well. U Htin Fatt's edited version of U Hpo Hlaing's *Rajadhammasangaha* (Maung Htin 2002) contains a detailed biography and that entire work has been translated into English by Bagshawe (2004).

<sup>24</sup> With no central authority to impose discipline or adjudicate disputes, many monks became more lax in their adherence to the *vinaya* (rules for monastic conduct). A number of the anti-colonial rebellions that occurred in the years following the British victory were led by or included monks. Since monks are expected to provide an example of ideal conduct for the laity, many Burmese Buddhists worried that, as monastic behavior deteriorated, lay conduct would as well.

<sup>25</sup> Alicia Turner's (2009) dissertation has a wealth of information about Buddhist organizations in Burma at the beginning of the twentieth century.

<sup>26</sup> Maung Maung (1980) describes the arc of the nationalist movement beginning with monastic agitation in the 1920s and early 30s before transitioning to lay leadership in the 1930s.

surprise and served as an inspiration to the second generation of Burmese nationalists that rose to prominence in the 1930s.<sup>27</sup>

The *Dobama Asiayone* (“We, the Burmans” or “We, the Burmese” Association) was founded in 1933 and quickly came to include many young students who would lead both the independence movement and the subsequent national government, including Aung San (1915-1947) and Thakin Ba Thaug (1901-1981).<sup>28</sup> Many of these young men (who called themselves “*thakin*” or “master” to assert their right to self-rule) were also responsible for the spread of Marxism in Burmese politics, particularly through the publications of the *Nagani* (Red Dragon) Book Club, which was founded in 1937 by U Tun Aye (1917-2001) and Thakin Nu (1907-1995).<sup>29</sup> The philosophical father of the Thakin movement was Thakin Kodaw Hmaing (1876-1964), a poet whose social commentaries situated the tactics and goals of the nationalists within the Burmese Buddhist cultural tradition. The *wunthanus* and the GCBA were continuing to organize, calling for strikes and mass demonstrations throughout 1938-39, with the *Thakins* gradually assuming leading positions in the movement.

A small band of Burmese nationalists, including Aung San made contact with the Japanese and trained secretly with them in the early 1940s. This group, known as the “Thirty Comrades,” supported the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942 during World War II. The conflict pitted the Japanese and their mostly Burman allies against the British and their allies, drawn predominantly from the non-Burman ethnic groups. Although the Burmans eventually turned on the Japanese, joining with the British to drive them out in 1945, the atrocities of the war exacerbated ethnic divisions, producing a muddled collection of different visions of an independent Burma. It was clear, however, that the British sought a quick withdrawal from Burma and they were willing to negotiate a rapid path to independence with Aung San and his party, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL). Tragedy struck, however, when Aung San and several members of his cabinet were assassinated in 1947 by a political rival, eliminating the one figure who seemed to have the trust (if not the full backing) of many of the ethnic and political factions in the country.

U Nu (no longer using his “Thakin” title) stepped into the leadership position vacated by Aung San and became Prime Minister when Burma declared its independence on January 4, 1948. The situation at independence was political turmoil that only worsened over the next few years. The Red

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<sup>27</sup> See Aung-Thwin (2011) and Herbert (1982) on the Saya San rebellion and the many ways in which it has been misunderstood.

<sup>28</sup> Khin Yi’s (1988) book is the best history thus far on the *Dobama Asiayone*.

<sup>29</sup> Hans-Bernd Zöllner’s Myanmar Literature Project has provided commentary on and at least partial translations of most of the *Nagani* Book Club’s publications.

Flag Communist faction, led by Thakin Soe (1906-1989) had rebelled in 1946 and was followed by Thakin Than Tun's (1911-1968) White Flag faction in 1948. Ethnic Rakhine nationalists had also rebelled prior to independence and were joined by the Karen and several other ethnic groups in 1949. The AFPFL struggled to maintain its fragile political coalition and gradually the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Armed Forces) pushed back the rebels, regaining control over most of the country throughout the 1950s.<sup>30</sup> The ongoing civil conflict took its toll on the government, however, and personal and ideological differences led to a split in the AFPFL in 1958.

While politics in the country leaned left during the 1950s there were still contentious debates over the compatibility of Buddhism and Marxism and the proper way to implement both socialism and democracy in a Burmese context. In 1958, General Ne Win (1911-2002), the head of the armed forces and one of the Thirty Comrades, stepped in to lead a caretaker administration, which succeeded in efficiently consolidating law and order.<sup>31</sup> Many observers were surprised when the military handed power back to a civilian government in 1960. U Nu's faction of the AFPFL won re-election in 1960, but religious conflict over a proposed amendment to make Buddhism the national religion as well as demands from non-Burman ethnic groups for more autonomy in their local administration meant that civil unrest continued. Ne Win took power again in a 1962 military coup and established socialist one party rule under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Some non-Burman ethnic groups rebelled before the coup, while others joined soon after.

The BSPP sought to implement the "Burmese Road to Socialism," an ideology developed by U Chit Hlaing that combined Marxist dialectical reasoning with Buddhist moral teachings.<sup>32</sup> The country then turned inward, limiting opportunities for political organization and implementing an economic policy that was largely responsible for Burma's decline to Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 1987.<sup>33</sup> Sporadic periods of unrest flared, such as the student protests in 1974 against the government's minimal recognition of the death of U Thant, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, but they were quickly and violently suppressed by the government. Students led mass demonstrations in 1988, sparked by a currency devaluation that further impoverished the population of the country. Aung

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Callahan (2003) provides an excellent narrative of this period in which war-fighters became de facto state-builders.

<sup>31</sup> There is some dispute as to whether U Nu asked General Ne Win to form a caretaker government of his own accord or whether he was forced to make the request.

<sup>32</sup> This Chit Hlaing is not the same as the Chit Hlaing who was a famous politician in the 1930s and 40s and leader of the GCBA.

<sup>33</sup> Mya Maung's book *The Burma Road to Poverty* (1991) contains a strong critique of the military government's economic policies.

San Suu Kyi (b.1945), the daughter of Aung San, emerged as a leader of the democratic opposition during this period. The BSPP government collapsed in a military coup and was replaced by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which quickly and violently suppressed the protests.<sup>34</sup> Surprisingly, the new rulers announced that they would hold elections in 1990.<sup>35</sup> Despite facing intimidation and attacks from the government, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won the election in a landslide, expecting to immediately form a government. The SLORC did not accept this, however, and continued to rule, holding a drawn-out constitution-writing process and sporadically harassing and imprisoning members of the democratic opposition.

In 2003 former General Khin Nyunt (b.1939) introduced a seven step "Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy." The government revived the long defunct constitution-writing process but economic pressures again triggered protests in mid-2007, this time organized by veterans of the student movement, calling themselves the 88 Generation Students Group. They were quickly imprisoned, but this time members of the *sangha* took up the cause, organizing marches of tens of thousands of monks across the country, calling for the regime to apologize for having beaten protesting monks, release political prisoners, and address the economic suffering of the citizens. Dubbed the "Saffron Revolution," these mass demonstrations were also met with violence and the government forcibly disrobed many monks and closed a number of monasteries. The government, however, continued with its incremental democratic transition, even holding a constitutional referendum across most of the country mere days after Cyclone Nargis struck the southern coast in May 2008. The humanitarian response to the crisis galvanized civil society groups, particularly among Buddhists, who had previously been underrepresented in social service and community development projects.

In November 2010 the country held elections for a new Parliament, although many elected MPs were recently retired members of the military and the Constitution mandated that twenty-five percent of the seats be automatically allocated to active military members. Despite skepticism from observers inside and outside of the country the new quasi-civilian government that came to power in March 2011, led by former General Thein Sein (b.1945), began to implement a number of political and economic reforms. Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been under house arrest for most of the previous twenty years, was

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<sup>34</sup> Lintner (1990a) and Fink (2009) provide detailed accounts of the 1988 demonstrations and the government's violent response.

<sup>35</sup> Observers and participants have subsequently debated this series of events in detail. While the coup leaders initially indicated that the elections would be for a new government, there is some evidence that they changed their minds (or hedged their bets) and clarified that the voters would elect members of a constitution-writing committee. Unsurprisingly, many people believed they were voting for a new government and candidates also campaigned as if that were the case.

released just after the November 2010 elections and a significant (but not total) release of political prisoners in January 2012 brought many members of the democratic opposition back into the political sphere. The NLD virtually swept a by-election in April 2012, bringing the former opposition into the government for the first time as groups inside and outside of the country have continued to press for more political and economic reforms.

### **Looking for Burmese Buddhist Political Thought**

With a few notable exceptions, the texts of the Theravāda Buddhist canon largely ignore explicitly political themes, and most scholarly investigations of Buddhist political thought focus on royal inscriptions and chronicles. This is a stark contrast to Buddhist philosophy, which has been the subject of inquiry of much of the commentarial literature as well as scholarly analysis. Frank Reynolds, however, emphasizes that although only a small percentage of the early Buddhist literature deals with kingship or politics, these sources are necessary for our understanding of how Theravāda Buddhism functioned within particular social and political contexts (1972). This literature “provided a commonly accepted, orthodox basis for the richer and more complex patterns of royal symbolism and political involvement which were developed during the subsequent periods of Buddhist history” (*ibid.*, 23). While we may be skeptical of Reynolds’ claim that these texts represented “orthodoxy,” Burmese thinkers have engaged with the themes these texts generated as part of the diverse tradition of Theravāda Buddhism.

Scholars of Western political thought have a clearly delineated tradition and canon from which to draw. Interventions from people inside and outside of the Western tradition have challenged the boundaries of the Western canon and significantly expanded the kinds of ideas and texts that we understand to be part of political theory, but this has not destabilized the existing canon so much as widened the scope of inclusion (Kateb 2004). Farah Godrej (2006) has attempted to systematically lay out a set of guidelines for scholars engaging in the study of political thought from non-Western cultural or religious traditions, the sub-discipline known as Comparative Political Theory (CPT). I return to the subject of CPT at the end of this Introduction, but examining Godrej’s criteria is useful in this discussion of Burmese sources because it reveals some of the challenges of cross-cultural engagement and attempts at “comparison.” She presents two primary qualifications for a work to be considered “political theory” (*ibid.*, 88ff). First, it must engage with concerns regarding political life and second, it must do so in a way that is both provocative and enlightening. Godrej wisely rejects the common requirement that works be “rational” or “systemic,” which might exclude dramatic or mythological texts, but also wants to distinguish between examples of philosophy and theory as opposed to folk traditions (*ibid.*, 103ff).

While the latter can undoubtedly enlighten our understanding of the political world, Godrej argues that they lack the critical element of reflection or reflexivity.

Godrej's criteria are a useful starting point in looking beyond the Western canon because she creates space for texts that might not necessarily mirror Western works in form, but can still be characterized as sustained reflection on questions of interest to political life. However, this inquiry also highlights the general dearth of writing by Burmese Buddhists (and among Buddhists in general) on political topics. In fact, even with a generous framework of inclusion there are probably only a few pieces among the many texts that I examine in this dissertation that would qualify as examples of Burmese Buddhist political theory. U Hpo Hlaing stands out as a prime example of a political theorist within the Burmese Buddhist tradition. An advisor to Mindon and Thibaw, the last two kings of the Konbaung dynasty in pre-colonial nineteenth century Burma, he attempted to combine insights from his own intellectual tradition with Western knowledge that he encountered. His *Rajadhammasangaha* ("Rules of Kingship"), a manual of advice written for King Thibaw in 1878, is a creative yet pragmatic work that attempts to interpret contemporary political situations using learning drawn from Buddhist texts. Within the Burmese tradition he was undoubtedly an innovator and although he was not arguing for a democracy<sup>36</sup>, I use his work frequently to highlight a number of Buddhist ideas regarding politics that have remained surprisingly consistent since his time.

Two other Burmese scholars whose work could be described as political theory are Thakin Kodaw Hmaing and U Chit Hlaing.<sup>37</sup> Thakin Kodaw Hmaing was a famous poet and writer of the 1930s and 40s, whose *tikas* (commentaries) on public life galvanized the Burmese independence movement.<sup>38</sup> His works are challenging to read because of their somewhat obscure versified style, but his arguments about politics were deeply rooted in Burma's Buddhist tradition. U Chit Hlaing was the chief ideologist of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the party that General Ne Win created to rule the country after he took power in a military coup in 1962 (Badgley and Aye Kyaw 2009, vi).<sup>39</sup> U Chit Hlaing's *Lawka Amyin* ("Man's Worldview") was an extended treatment of the guiding philosophy of the party that

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<sup>36</sup> The Burmese scholar Maung Maung (1961) asserts that U Hpo Hlaing first introduced democracy to Burma, a claim that U Htin Fatt, the editor of the *Rajadhammasangaha* echoes (Maung Htin 2002). While the text contained radical ideas, including measures intended to limit arbitrary royal power, this claim seems to be a stretch, made to try to "indigenize" the idea of democratic governance. Houtman more appropriately describes U Hpo Hlaing's suggested reforms as similar to a constitutional monarchy (1999).

<sup>37</sup> "Thakin" was a title meaning "Master" that a group of young Burmese nationalists adopted in the 1930s to assert their capacity and right to rule themselves.

<sup>38</sup> E. Sarkisyanz called Thakin Kodaw Hmaing "Burma's Rabindranath Tagore" (1965, 173).

<sup>39</sup> The Chit Hlaing who was the ideologist for the BSPP was a different man than the famous politician U Chit Hlaing, who was a prominent president of the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), a network of political groups in the 1920s and 30s.

expanded on the government's brief "The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment." It weaved together Marxist dialectical methods and Buddhist understandings of human nature and the social world. While many scholars (Burmese and non-Burmese) have dismissed it as a thinly veiled and convoluted attempt to indigenize socialism and legitimize the BSPP, *Lawka Amyin* does represent a work of political theory in the Burmese Buddhist tradition and resonates with many of the ideas that were prominent in the country in the 1940s and 50s.<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, there are a number of shorter essay-length pieces written by Burmese scholars and political figures from the early twentieth century to the present day. An edited volume entitled *Bounwada hnint Dobama* (Socialism and the Dobama) contains articles written by a number of prominent leftists from the 1940s-60s, including Aung San (the "father" of the country who was assassinated only months before independence), U Nu (the man who took his place to become Prime Minister throughout most of the country's first fourteen years of independence), and Thakin Soe (an early ally of the previous two who went on to lead a communist insurrection against the government). Moving ahead in time, several of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's essays deserve the label of political theory as they demonstrate her reflecting on contemporary political challenges using conceptual vocabulary drawn from human rights discourse and from Burmese Buddhism.

This is not to say that the texts that, according to Godrej's definition, fall outside of the category of political theory do not contain reasoned appraisals of politics, nor are they irrelevant for my inquiry here. Articles from journals, newspapers, and other publications provide perspective that reinforce, shape, and challenge the ideas contained in the more theoretical reflections and I use them extensively in my analysis. Here we might usefully make a distinction between political "theory" and political "thought." While there are limited examples of the former in the Burmese Buddhist tradition, there are many resources that contribute to our understanding of the latter, less formal category. In the Conclusion I return to the topic of Burmese Buddhist political theory, considering some reasons for the relative inattention to this area and expressing hope that the current political transition in Myanmar will create opportunities for more sustained reflection on political matters in the country.

## Research Methods

With a limited number of textual sources on which to draw, I have augmented my research with data drawn from field work in Myanmar and Burmese communities in Thailand, conducted from

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<sup>40</sup> John Badgley and Aye Kyaw have recently published a partial translation of *Lawka Amyin* that also includes translations of other works by Burmese nationalists and is a very important resource in a field where so few translated materials are available (2009).

January-August 2011 on a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship.<sup>41</sup> However, research in Myanmar presents a number of challenges. Since the government does not issue student or research visas, scholars must enter and leave the country every month or two. The former military government generally did not officially sanction research by foreign scholars and my topic of Buddhist political thought would have been seen as particularly threatening after the monastic demonstrations of 2007. Even though a new, quasi-civilian government took power during the course of my field work, the reform process it has initiated was still tentative during that period, so I remained cautious in my activities and inquiries. While in the country I conducted myself in as low profile a manner as possible, avoiding explicitly political events with prominent figures. Although this may seem counter-intuitive given my research subject, I saw it as a necessary precaution to protect my friends, colleagues, and informants.

The former military government did not hesitate to imprison people suspected of political activities. If I was also suspected of engaging in politics the worst that would have happened to me was expulsion from the country, whereas those connected with me could have been subjected to far worse treatment. In daily interactions I usually presented myself as a foreigner studying Buddhism, only revealing the nature of my research to friends and informants over a longer period of vetting. The work in this dissertation, therefore, focuses on written texts, using field data to add nuance to the concepts I examine and to try to track some of the ways in which people understand those concepts in contemporary Myanmar.

Buddhist monks are one of the strongest and most consistent influences on Burmese Buddhists, reinforcing the moral laws of Buddhism and connecting them to political and social situations through their writings and video messages, public sermons, and daily interactions with lay people. The spread of new communication technology has meant that monastic teachings move more quickly throughout the population, and watching DVDs of monks preaching and sharing books on Buddhism with friends are part of many people's daily religious practice. I conducted participant observation at dozens of public sermons, mostly in Yangon; where possible I also acquired DVDs of those sermons so I could confirm my notes.<sup>42</sup> I also attended a number of public and private religious ceremonies (taking notes at the latter only with the permission of the hosts) at monasteries and homes. In most cases it would have been rude

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<sup>41</sup> I also received a Blakemore-Freeman grant for in-country language study for the 2007-08 academic year, which I spent primarily in Yangon.

<sup>42</sup> While a researcher might be viewed suspiciously in other contexts, it is perfectly normal to see attendees at a sermon taking notes on the monk's words. In this instance, I was simply another conscientious listener and in fact, this gave me an opportunity to compare notes with others after the event.

or suspicious to take notes during the events, so I usually wrote up the accounts in my research journal later in the day.

Adding to the challenge of a small number of textual sources is the limited availability or accessibility of the works that do exist. As an American I was not able to gain access to some of the major libraries in the country, particularly those at universities. However, several colleagues provided me with an introduction to libraries with extensive collections, including the monastic library at Kaba Aye Pagoda. Between these resources, several private collections, purchases in book stores, and assistance from Western scholars who have digitized a good deal of material, I was able to assemble a wide range of books, pamphlets, journals, magazines, periodicals.<sup>43</sup> The sources I have drawn on for this dissertation are by no means comprehensive and there is still significant work to be done in recovering texts and documents. Hopefully the present political transition in the country will continue to make works available for foreign scholars and Burmese citizens.

I also conducted several dozen interviews with monks, scholars, NGO workers and political activists.<sup>44</sup> Because of the limitations on conducting research I cannot claim that this sample is necessarily “representative,” but the interview data does help to give a sense of how Buddhists in Myanmar today continue to interpret politics through a moral lens, particularly with regard to conceptions of democracy. I used a snowball method to develop a pool of interview subjects, attempting to talk to people differently situated with regard to age, gender, socio-economic class and ethnicity.<sup>45</sup> I developed two sets of interview questions, one that asked about Buddhist beliefs and practices and another that contained more explicitly political questions.<sup>46</sup> In a few cases I was able to record the interviews but, given most people’s justifiable wariness to be seen in that situation, I usually simply took notes that I expanded after the interview. In many cases a “formal” interview was either impossible or would have appeared rude or culturally inappropriate. In those instances the “interview” appeared more like a conversation that I guided with occasional questions and I wrote up notes on the

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<sup>43</sup> I also used the Library of Congress’ extensive collection of Burmese periodicals, journals, and books.

<sup>44</sup> Because of my reluctance to be identified as connected to politics, I avoided meeting with or interviewing particularly prominent political figures, especially those associated with the opposition NLD.

<sup>45</sup> Conscious of the fact that some of my methods (attending monks’ public sermons, for example) could have resulted in an informant pool of individuals who were particularly pious or active Buddhists, I also tried to talk with people who self-identified as culturally Buddhist but not necessarily involved practitioners.

<sup>46</sup> While I always explained to informants the nature of my research and asked their permission to use their responses, in almost every situation I encountered, asking for a signature on a release form was prohibitively difficult, if not impossible. In addition to being culturally unfamiliar and excessively formal, that level of documentation would have made potential informants uncomfortable, given the already potentially dangerous nature of the conversation. Rose Metro has devoted a chapter of her (2011) dissertation to a thoughtful consideration of the balance of ethical and practical concerns of research under these conditions.

event later in the day. I was less constrained during interviews in Thailand, but given the precarious legal status of many of the Burmese refugees in that country as well as the presumed presence of Burmese intelligence personnel, I conducted my research activities there in much the same way.

## **Studies of Buddhism and Politics in Myanmar**

If Buddhist political philosophy is rare, academic studies of the topic are just as difficult to find. While there are a number of works on Buddhism and politics in Myanmar, most address the topic from an empirical perspective. Donald Smith's *Religion and Politics in Burma* (1965) remains the quintessential political science study of the subject and numerous articles and books by John Badgley (1963, 1965), Jan Becka (1991), John Cady (1953) Frank Trager (1960), and Fred von der Mehden (1961) effectively cover the first two thirds of the twentieth century. The Burmese scholar Maung Maung's (1980) book *From Sangha to Laity* also provides a great deal of information on the involvement of religious figures in the early Burmese nationalist movement.<sup>47</sup> More recently Jacques Leider (2004, 2008) has taken a closer look at the political elements of Buddhist belief and practice in the pre-colonial period outside of the dominant Burman polity and earlier in this Introduction I mentioned Michael Charney's (2006) excellent study of the role of monastic literati in developing and expanding the legitimating ideology of the Konbaung kings in the eighteenth century. William Koenig's *The Burmese polity, 1752-1819: a study of Kon Baung politics, administration, and social organization* (1990), while not a work of political theory, nevertheless includes an extensive explanation of the ideas that legitimated and sustained the Burmese monarchy.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Robert Taylor's book *The State in Myanmar* (2009, originally published in 1988 as *The State in Burma*) contains a great deal of theoretical analysis in addition to a phenomenal amount of information on the development of the Burmese state.

The two books that most closely approximate a political theory approach are Manuel Sarkisyanz' *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (1965) and Gustaaf Houtman's *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics* (1999). Sarkisyanz's sweeping study argued that U Nu's 1950s administration should be assessed within the context of Burmese Buddhist understandings of politics. He used a wide range of Burmese sources to identify a number of important concepts in Burmese Buddhist political thought and the work continues to be a valuable resource for scholars interested in this topic.

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<sup>47</sup> The author of this book (also known as Brigadier Maung Maung) should not be confused with another scholar and politician Dr. Maung Maung, who played various roles in Ne Win's military government and briefly served as president during the 1988 crisis (Taylor 2008).

<sup>48</sup> The Burmese scholar Myo Myint (1987) also wrote a dissertation on statecraft during the Konbaung dynasty that is less analytical but a useful supplement to Koenig's work.

Houtman's equally seminal work presented the democratic opposition since 1988 as engaged in a moral/spiritual contest with the military regime. He also used Burmese sources to expand many of Sarkisyanz's insights, revealing persistent motifs in Burmese Buddhist perspectives on politics.<sup>49</sup> One of his main arguments, that Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) was adopting a political position rooted in a kind of soft moral power derived from *vipassanā* (insight) meditation to oppose the generals' forceful, acquisitive *samatha* (concentration meditation)-based power is probably no longer applicable to post-2010 politics in Myanmar, but this does not take away from the importance of the work. Probably the only weakness in these books is the density of information and concepts, which can be challenging for a specialist in Burmese Buddhism, let alone a reader unfamiliar with the topic. One of my goals in this dissertation is to build on their work, presenting themes and arguments in Burmese Buddhist political thought in ways that do justice to the complexity of the concepts and their embeddedness in a particular religio-cultural worldview, yet are accessible to readers from different disciplines. Stephen McCarthy has also written several articles (2004, 2008) that examine the political implications of Burmese Buddhist rhetoric and ideas and a book (2006) on political legitimacy and tyranny that used Aristotle's theory of benevolent despotism to examine Myanmar and Singapore. While his work is undoubtedly an example of comparative political theory, his interest was in the deployment of Buddhist ideas as political rhetoric more than the content of Burmese Buddhist political thought.

E. Michael Mendelson wrote several insightful articles on Burmese Buddhism (1960, 1961, 1963, 1964) before leaving the field without explanation in 1967. Fortunately John Ferguson, who himself wrote an excellent dissertation entitled *The Symbolic Dimensions of the Burmese Sangha* (1975), was able to edit Mendelson's field notes to produce *Sangha and state in Burma : a study of monastic sectarianism and leadership* (1975). This monumental work provided a detailed look inside the Burmese monastic world, in many ways humanizing the institution and the monks who inhabit it, as well as

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<sup>49</sup> Many readers have found the concept of "mental culture" in Houtman's book to be difficult to grasp. As the common English translation of the Burmese word *bawana* (Pāli *bhāvanā*), this practice includes all of the activities that cultivate a beneficial mental state, such as *vipassanā* (insight) meditation, observance of the moral precepts, and the development of certain qualities that assist individuals in both their daily interactions with others and their progress on the path to enlightenment. The confusion regarding Houtman's use of the cumbersome (yet accurate) term "mental culture" indicates the challenge that accompanies projects of comparative political theory in which one language has neither the linguistic nor conceptual resources to adequately express ideas that are common in another culture.

alerting scholars to the political and social importance of sectarian differences in the *sangha*.<sup>50</sup> Mendelson's was the first and last comprehensive study of Burmese monasticism and was an important counterpart to the equally influential works of the anthropologist Melford Spiro. While most contemporary scholars agree that the analytical framework of his *Buddhism and society; a great tradition and its Burmese vicissitudes* (1982) misrepresents the complex overlap of theory and practice in the Burmese tradition, the ethnographic data of his studies remains valuable.<sup>51</sup>

Recently, the subject of Buddhism and politics in Myanmar has garnered more attention from anthropologists, some of whose work has contributed significantly to the kind of philosophical study in which I am engaged. Ingrid Jordt's book (2007) on the political dynamics and implications of the mass lay meditation movement in Myanmar suggests that relationships of political and religious authority have been in an extended period of change over the twentieth century, with lay people seeking to assert the increased moral authority they gain through meditation in subtle ways in the political realm, given restrictions on politics in the country. Juliane Schober's recent book (2011) on Burmese Buddhist engagements with modernity and the subsequent transformation of relationships of political and moral authority builds on her previous work that has studied the complex dynamics of religious symbols and rhetoric in political legitimation (1997). Alicia Turner's dissertation (2009) on Buddhism and activism during the colonial period also provides a wealth of information on Burmese Buddhists' engagement with questions and challenges of politics from within their changing worldview. English speaking scholars are fortunate that Guillaume Rozenberg's study (2010) of the paradoxes of Burmese sainthood has been translated from the French, as it provides an important window into the complexity of moral conduct and social standing that I find has influenced so much of Burmese Buddhist thinking about politics. Similarly, Mikael Gravers has added to his work on Buddhism and politics with a recent article (2012) about conceptions of moral and material power that complements the work I do in this dissertation.

I have generally limited this brief literature review to those works that deal exclusively or substantially with the subject of Buddhism and politics. I do, however, rely on several other studies of

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<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, this phenomenon seems to have receded since Mendelson's work in the late 1950s and 60s. It is likely that increased government regulation and control of the *sangha* (discussed in Tin Maung Maung Than 1993) contributed to the declining importance of sectarian factors, since any monastic political involvement that might have exacerbated them was now strictly prohibited. I often asked about sectarian differences in my interviews and apart from a general consensus that the *Shwegyin* sect was stricter in its expectations of proper conduct of both its monks and lay supporters, no one seemed to consider sectarian divides to be present or particularly important in the contemporary Burmese *sangha*.

<sup>51</sup> Manning Nash also contributed several important anthropological studies of Burmese Buddhism and rural life (1963, 1965, 1966).

Burmese politics (mostly engaging with Marxism or Communism from the 1940s-60s) throughout the course of this dissertation. Additionally, I must note the important contribution made by Hans-Bernd Zöllner and those associated with the Myanmar Literature Project. They have undertaken translations and studies of most of the publications of the *Nagani* (Red Dragon) Book Club, a group of young Burmese men who would become some of the leading figures of the independence movement and in the Burmese government. Their work and other projects like this will be critically important in making Burmese writings on politics from previous eras more accessible to scholars but also to Burmese citizens who are only now beginning to enjoy the freedom to learn about and critically examine their own political history.

### **On Comparative Political Theory**

I situate my work within the relatively new field of comparative political theory (CPT), which has encouraged scholars to see non-Western systems of thought as just that: coherent *systems* of thought, with distinctive epistemological and ontological assumptions that sometimes differentiate them from the Western tradition in which most academics operate. We can see this growing subfield not only as a “corrective” to the cultural specificity of the Western canon in political theory, but, increasingly, as an important contribution to learning in other fields, particularly in a globalized and interconnected world. Fred Dallmayr was a pioneer in the subfield, adopting a dialogical approach that situates CPT within the Gadamerian hermeneutical tradition of mutual interpretation (1999 and 2004). He recognizes that the outcome of this “dialogue” should not be an easy synthesis, but rather should retain the inherent tensions that come from the interaction between two different traditions. Dallmayr also pushes us to retain the critical aspect of CPT, that is, the *political* element, meaning not just the study of political theories, but of the essentially contested nature of the inquiry itself.

From this perspective, we can see CPT as an enterprise that contains the possibility of transformative encounters, but also the necessity of risk (the potential to destabilize one’s own views). A continual concern in this work is the limits of mutual intelligibility and the possibility of an actual Gadamerian “fusion of horizons.” When conducting comparative projects one must be conscious of over-stating both similarity *and* difference, and an essential element of CPT is the tension that characterizes attempts to translate and re-present ideas in different cultural and linguistic contexts. Chapters 4 and 5 present a number of challenges in trying to assess Burmese Buddhist attitudes toward “political participation” and conceptions of “democracy,” neither of which has a direct translation in Burmese. In addition to being a relatively new subfield, most research in CPT has focused on the political thought of Confucianism (for example, Jenco 2010 and Ackerly 2005) or Islam (for example, Euben 1999

and March 2009). My dissertation expands the field of CPT to include contemporary Buddhist political and complements a rich literature on Buddhism and the culture of power in Sri Lanka and Thailand, by exploring the Burmese tradition.<sup>52</sup>

I see this dissertation as fulfilling a number of complementary purposes. First, no one has yet undertaken a general study of Burmese Buddhist political thought. While this work is far from a complete overview of the entire subject, I do try to identify a number of key concepts within the tradition, noting how they have been transformed in response to internal debates, external stimuli, and people's experiences of politics. I hope that the current political transition in Myanmar allows more scholars (particularly Burmese scholars) to not only engage with Burmese Buddhist political thought as part of their intellectual history, but also produce theoretical works that challenge, broaden, and invigorate the tradition. As a comparative political theorist I seek to display the diversity of perspectives *within* non-Western traditions, belying overly simplistic accounts that claim to represent the (singular) perspective of "Buddhist political thought." Therefore, I try to recognize the range of different interpretations of fundamental concepts and ideas put forward by Burmese Buddhists.

Political theory is an inherently comparative enterprise; however, most of the work in the discipline has involved the comparison of different avenues of thought *within* the Western philosophical tradition. In this dissertation I am studying and attempting to explain aspects of the political thought of a non-Western tradition. One purpose of research in the sub-field of comparative political theory is to expand the range of ideas available to theorists through the study and description of non-Western traditions of thought. As Farah Godrej has noted, the purpose of CPT is not merely to study the political thought of other cultures for their own sake (2006, 7). If we believe that the reflections on political matters within a given tradition have value, then we also need to be able to present those reflections in ways that make cross-cultural theoretical engagement possible.

At the same time, Leigh Jenco has highlighted the difficulty that scholars face when we attempt to conduct cross-cultural inquiry (2007). She suggests that, instead of automatically adopting critical discourses from the Western tradition, we take the time to try to understand the methods of inquiry used by other cultural traditions, essentially, learning how to reason philosophically from within those traditions. This is not simply a nod to "local knowledge," but acknowledgment of, as Russell Fox puts it, the "authoritative possibility of local understandings" (1997, 55). Jenco's more self-reflexive approach to cross-cultural study creates the "possibility of launching critique from within discourses other than those

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<sup>52</sup> One of the few recent pieces to engage with Buddhist political thought is Frechette 2007, although her focus is on Tibetan Buddhism, which is part of the Mahāyāna tradition. Studies of Theravāda Buddhism, politics and power include Smith (1978a & 1978b) and Harris (1999 & 2007).

to which the researcher is already culturally accustomed” (Jenco 2007, 742). Her concern is that the common method of conducting comparative theoretical work (the inclusion of non-Western “voices” in a dialogue about political ideas) too often loses the words and meanings of these “voices” because much of what they say remains unintelligible when framed within the concepts of Western political thought. “The ‘local understandings’ believed to result from such vocalizations of experience are pressed into the service of a methodology that renders much of their context irrelevant” (Jenco 2007, 744). Thus, an initial task of comparative political theory is to investigate and explicate other systems of thought *on their own terms*, questioning the confining political concepts that we often assume are unproblematic, while also remaining continually aware of the dangers of misinterpretation and misrepresentation.<sup>53</sup>

Misunderstanding is always a risk simply because of the essential un-knowability of another. However, this should not paralyze our research as much as provide us with motivation for examining and explicating the limits of what we can say about and to others. A common response of political scientists is to assume the universal nature of political concepts and categories commonly in use within the Western discourse of politics and to ignore the possibility of seeing alternate systems of thought in operation in other cultures, instead, vaguely and dismissively coding these as “cultural” influences. As much as possible I try to begin from Pāli and Burmese concepts, of course using English terms to describe them, but not letting an English concept “stand in” for another term inappropriately. I often describe a Pāli or Buddhist term in detail (sometimes noting explicit differences with similar concepts in Western political thought) in order to continue using it throughout the text, rather than using a more familiar but less precise English word. In this way I recognize comparative political theory to be an inherently cross-linguistic and cross-cultural field, one in which I, as a researcher, have a responsibility to try (to the best of my ability) not to obscure or do violence to terms and concepts in the process of comparing different traditions of thought.

I recognize that this dissertation only partially fulfills these expectations for a work of comparative political theory. Most of what I do in the following pages is to immerse myself in a particular religio-cultural tradition to explore how the worldview contained within it has influenced the political thought of its adherents. That is, I try to present a diverse tradition of Burmese Buddhist political thought on its own terms and using its own logic. At the same time I try to make these nuances and particularities intelligible to individuals situated outside that tradition and its specific moral

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<sup>53</sup> Rudolph (2005) discusses the problematic usage of culturally situated concepts and categories in political science, particularly when dealing with non-Western traditions.

framework. For that reason I consider this to be a work of interpretive, rather than normative political theory. I analyze the normative arguments of thinkers from the Burmese Buddhist tradition, but do not offer my own normative perspective on politics. I only occasionally suggest areas where Burmese Buddhist understandings of politics can offer resources to broader cross-cultural conversations in political theory, but this is precisely because so little work has been done on the tradition itself. I feel that the contents of this dissertation are necessary groundwork to enable myself and others to engage in further cross-cultural comparative work. I also hope that this work is useful for Burmese Buddhists who want to learn more about their own cultural and intellectual history since many of the sources I examine here have, until recently, been outlawed in the country. I certainly believe that the Burmese Buddhist tradition of political thought provides insights that will be valuable in assessing present political circumstances in the country. As a Buddhist who has adopted Burmese forms of practice, I see myself as a political theorist situated within both the Western and Burmese traditions and I look forward to building on what is here to continue to engage the reasoning and critical insights of both streams of thought.

## Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter 1, I lay out the basic concepts that make up the Burmese understanding of the Theravāda moral universe. I begin with some elements of belief that are common in daily practice, including the “Three Gems” (the Buddha; the *dharmma*, his teachings; and the *sangha*, the community of monks) and the Five Precepts that constitute the basic moral code of conduct. I then transition into a series of doctrinal elements via a brief biography of the Buddha. The Four Noble Truths are the Buddha’s primary insights that describe the problematic nature of existence and the path to overcoming it. Most important are the three characteristics of existence: *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (dissatisfactoriness<sup>54</sup>), and *anattā* (no-self). I present a number of Burmese explanations of these concepts, including a unique interpretation of *anattā* as “no control.” Next I look at several concepts that Burmese Buddhists frequently use to talk about both Buddhism and politics, *taya* (alternately understood as “truth,” “laws,” or “the Buddha’s teachings”) and *thila* (Pāli *sīla*, “morality”). The Buddhist view of process is shaped by something that we could consider a universal law of cause and effect; *kan* (Pāli *kamma*) refers both to intentional actions and to the results of those actions. As a moral concept it serves as both an explanation for present circumstances and a progressive doctrine of human

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<sup>54</sup> The common English gloss of *dukkha* is “suffering,” but this word is both insufficient to describe the full meaning of the Pali term and is also misleading due to the connotations of the English word “suffering.” In Chapter 1 I explain my translation of *dukkha* as “dissatisfactoriness,” yet also note the ways in which some common Burmese translations and usages mirror the limited English translation of “suffering.”

empowerment, depending on how it is interpreted. I also introduce the distinction between *lawki* (Pāli *lokiya*) and *lawkouttara* (Pāli *lokuttara*), the worldly realm and the path to overcoming worldly dissatisfaction, respectively. This distinction, and the range of Burmese Buddhist views on the relationship between *lawki* and *lawkouttara*, will be one of the most important factors in conditioning variation in Burmese Buddhist political ideas. I end the first chapter with a discussion of some other elements of Burmese Buddhist practice that are relevant for discussions of politics, including monastic-lay interactions and practices of *dana* (Pāli *dāna*, donation or generosity).

In Chapter 2 I begin to look at texts from the Pāli and Burmese traditions that either deal with politics or have been interpreted in political ways. In this chapter my interest is in the ways in which Buddhists in Myanmar have understood the nature of politics. I demonstrate how the moral framework of the Theravāda universe has provided Burmese Buddhists with a template for understanding how political authority came to be, why it is necessary and in what ways it can be limited. I begin this chapter with a brief examination of various Burmese understandings of the word “politics” (usually translated as *nain ngan ye*). I then move on to consider two Pāli *suttas* and Burmese interpretations of the lessons they hold for politics; I use these *suttas* as reference points for the discussions in this chapter and the next. The *Aggañña Sutta* tells the story of the degeneration of humanity from a previously immaterial state and the subsequent institution of political authority for the purpose of order. The *Cakkavatti Sutta* contains advice for an ideal king, a vivid description of the collective consequences for humanity when rulers do not act morally, and an account of the perfect future king whose rule will usher in the age of the next Buddha. Of fundamental importance here is a degree of ambivalence that I argue fundamentally structures Burmese attitudes towards politics and political authority: are humans primarily defined by their desire-driven natures or by their capacity for liberation and enlightenment? Additionally, I identify a principle that Burmese Buddhists have consistently drawn on in explaining the nature of politics and in developing political critiques: the belief that the moral actions of both leaders and members of communities have tangible effects in the material world. Finally, I use these ideas about the nature of politics to examine the concept of “unity” as it is understood and deployed in a Burmese Buddhist context.

In Chapter 3 I expand on several of the concepts from the previous chapter, posing two primary arguments from Buddhists in Myanmar regarding the proper ends of politics. Emphasizing the desire-driven, acquisitive, and corrupt aspects of human nature, one argument stresses the need for a form of political authority for the maintenance of order. Both the structure of this order and the ways in which various actors have legitimated it have changed over time, but what has remained consistent is a

recognition of the need for some authority to instill moral discipline in the population and guard against anarchy. In the rhetoric of legitimation, order is consistently subordinated to a higher goal of politics, liberation. Initially conceived of as referring to the ultimate Buddhist objective of enlightenment (liberation from desire and *dukkha*), Buddhists in Myanmar also developed more mundane conceptions of liberation as freedom from political and economic conditions that are not conducive to moral development. The political understanding of liberation meant freedom from British colonial rule and national independence. Beginning in the late 1930s, Burmese Buddhists began to use Marxist ideas in formulating arguments for liberation from the economic inequalities of imperialism and capitalism, promoting the creation of a *lawka neikban* (worldly nirvana). Interpretations varied, as some saw political and economic reforms as necessary to create the social conditions conducive to proper moral practice, while others believed that economic justice and political freedom would only come about through government policies that encouraged or even enforced correct individual and collective moral behavior. I end this chapter with a look at political authorities' practices of "purification," which I suggest represent a blend of both arguments regarding the ends of politics.

In Chapter 4 I turn to the subject of political participation, noting that there is no word or phrase in Burmese that encapsulates the connotations and implied practices of the English term. The pre-colonial monarchical system restricted participation through arguments about morality and order, but the fall of the monarchy in 1885 and the disintegration of many elements of the traditional cosmology, along with increased engagement with ideas from Western political thought at the beginning of the twentieth century, generated arguments for citizen participation in politics rooted in a more empowering interpretation of *kan*. Many Burmese Buddhists, however, have continued to question the moral worthiness of inherently flawed human beings to effectively participate in practices of self-governing. Next I look at methods of political participation among monks and the recent increase among civil society actors of perceptions of social work as a form of political participation. Finally, I examine Burmese Buddhist arguments that individual moral practice constitutes political participation. These views come from the logic that I explained in Chapter 2—where collective effects can emerge from individual action—as well as from a particular understanding of the interconnectedness of the *lawki* and *lawkouttara* realms. In comparing Burmese Buddhist ideas regarding individual moral practice as political participation with those of other cultural traditions, I argue that the nature of Buddhist moral practice as being oriented towards overcoming ego and recognizing the illusory nature of the "self" can ideally foster more inclusive, community-focused practices of politics.

Chapter 5 explores contemporary Burmese Buddhist conceptions of democracy. While Burma had a brief experience with parliamentary democracy for most of the first fourteen years after its independence, the political system from 1962-2010 was more or less authoritarian military rule. “Democracy” was the battle cry of opposition political forces in 1988, the regime developed its own roadmap to “discipline-flourishing democracy” in 2003, and a 2008 referendum on a new constitution led to elections in November 2010 and again in April 2012. Despite this apparent transition in a democratic direction, political actors in Myanmar appear to mean a number of different things when they speak about democracy. I examine understandings of democracy among three groups: the former military government, the democratic opposition and other activists, and monks. While there are a number of important differences both within and between these groups, there is consistency in conceiving of democracy as a fundamentally moral practice. Individuals from all three groups commonly qualify their discussions of democracy with reference to rhetorics of “unity,” “discipline,” and “morality.” While concepts drawn from liberal democracy are common, they often sit uncomfortably next to perspectives that see democracy as a practice of *taya* (A Burmese word that usually refers to *dhamma*, the Buddha’s teachings, or the truth that these teachings contain). At the same time, some individuals hint at a broader conception of democratic practice that moves beyond electoral politics to include a sort of “democratic” (and not surprisingly, Buddhist-inspired) ethos in all interactions with others.

In the conclusion I look forward to the re-emergence of a vibrant tradition of Buddhist political thought in Myanmar. A struggling educational system and limitations on publication have meant that most Burmese Buddhists have no connection to the political discussions in their history. This situation is gradually changing and I expect that an emerging public discourse on questions of human rights, environmental politics and democratic governance will continue to draw from Buddhist ideas while also engaging more deeply with the Burmese tradition. I also consider the strength and persistence of the Theravāda moral framework. While acknowledging that it will likely transform over time in response to internal and external debates, I argue that the continued presence of the *sangha* as the guardians of this moral perspective ensures that it will remain central to the political reasoning of Burmese Buddhists, even in those periods where religious rhetoric is absent from public political discourse.

## CHAPTER 1: THE THERAVĀDA MORAL UNIVERSE OF BURMESE BUDDHISM

“Democracy means acting in accordance with *taya* [*dhamma*/truth].” (Ashin Eindaga, public sermon given at the Thirty-fourth Street *Taya Pwe* on January 31, 2011)<sup>1</sup>

The central argument of this dissertation is that the Theravāda moral conception of the universe provides the framework within which Buddhists in Myanmar have thought about politics and continues to be a relevant lens for understanding and interpreting Burmese Buddhist political thought. The above quote from a Buddhist monk’s sermon illustrates the impossibility of parsing Burmese Buddhist views on, for example, democracy, without reference to the Buddhist concepts that they use to describe political beliefs and practices. As I demonstrate in this chapter, the Burmese word “*taya*” has multiple layers of meaning that can refer to justice, law, truth or the Buddha’s teachings (*dhamma*). Not only this, but there are also multiple conceptions of “truth” that operate within Theravāda doctrine, as well as different levels on which people can grasp the Buddha’s teachings, dependant on their moral and spiritual progress.

Analyzing this simple statement that equates democracy with *dhamma* (the Buddha’s teachings) or “truth” (an interpretation potentially at odds with liberal democratic models endorsed by some political figures in Myanmar) requires an understanding of the logic of the Theravāda worldview and the moral nature of the laws that govern existence. This, I argue, is the consistent set of beliefs within which Buddhists cognitively organize their social and political world. In this chapter I lay out the building blocks of the Burmese Buddhist worldview, drawing primarily from Burmese sources. Occasionally I note areas where Burmese interpretations of these basic components may differ from the more general conceptions that scholars designate as “Theravāda,” as well as ways in which they differ from other Buddhist traditions. I also point toward some of the ways in which Burmese thinkers have understood these principles to be relevant in navigating the social and political spheres, which I will develop in later chapters. In many cases, Burmese Buddhists are working with ideas that are part of the common conceptual framework of Theravāda Buddhism and in some cases, of Buddhism more generally. The uniqueness of certain aspects of Burmese Buddhist political thought comes from a stronger emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> Bur. ဒီမိုကရေစီဆိုတာ တရားနှင့်အညီ လုပ်နေကြတာလေ။

a particular concept, a distinct interpretation of a common idea, a discussion or debate specific to Burmese society, or a response to a particular political and economic context.<sup>2</sup>

Some readers may object to my claim that Buddhists in Myanmar hold a clearly-defined, common worldview rooted in Theravāda Buddhist teachings. Ingrid Jordt (2007, 206-210) has addressed similar concerns in defending her adoption of a holistic view of the effects of Burmese Buddhist cosmology.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the broad effects that Buddhist beliefs and practices have on social and political interactions in Myanmar does not necessarily entail ignoring or suppressing individual agency; in fact, it is only from within specific worldviews that individual action acquires meaning. Additionally, asserting that most Buddhists in Myanmar subscribe to an understanding of the universe as governed by fundamentally moral laws does not discount the variety of interpretations of those moral principles nor the multitude of practices that complement them. I seek to highlight the range of political perspectives and interpretations of Buddhist doctrine held by people in Myanmar, while arguing that those perspectives are conditioned by the common thread of a particular moral logic regarding the way the universe works.

In presenting Burmese understandings of the Theravāda moral universe, I draw from books and pamphlets written by Burmese monks and lay teachers and from the work of Western scholars from a variety of disciplines. In her work on Buddhism among Shan people in Thailand, Nicola Tannenbaum describes monks' sermons as expressing Shan concepts of "the universe, its structure, its operation, the nature of the beings that inhabit it, and the relationships among them" (1995, 101). I follow her appraisal of the value of monastic sermons and use them as source material here.<sup>4</sup> In addition, I include notes from interviews and discussions with Burmese monks and lay scholars of Buddhism. These sources help to illuminate the logical structure of the Theravāda moral universe, particular Burmese understandings of concepts within that structure, and variations within those Burmese understandings.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Gombrich states that the simple equation of Mahāyāna Buddhism with the embodiment of selfless love (through its Bodhisattva ideal) is entirely too simple, as is the equation of Theravāda Buddhism with individualism and self-restraint (1995). Although there are doctrinal differences, the ideals of each school are generally present in the other. It is, however, a "question of emphasis," something that I try to attend to in the comparative examples in this dissertation (ibid. 375).

<sup>3</sup> See my discussion in the Introduction of the differences between my use of "moral universe" and her use of "cosmology."

<sup>4</sup> Prior to the twentieth century in Myanmar, common monastic practice for a "sermon" was the recitation of texts or a technical explanation of a specific aspect of Buddhist doctrine. Since that time, however, it has become more common for monks to preach a sermon that relates Buddhist teachings to contemporary concerns; this occurs even among more conservative sects such as the Shwegyin. While there are important differences between these practices, both convey to listeners an overarching moral framework and, in the case of the more contemporary style, its relevance to daily life.

Many of the concepts within the Theravāda Buddhist worldview are interdependent and need to be understood within a complete, holistic context. It is difficult to present a thorough explanation of particular concepts without also understanding other related concepts. In this chapter, I begin from some of the most basic elements of Burmese Buddhist practice and belief, gradually moving on to more complex ideas. Occasionally, I return to previously discussed concepts to add further explanation or to refine them in light of newly added elements. This means that some initial descriptions will be provisional and incomplete, in the understanding that I will return to add more detail as the shape of the entire moral conceptual structure unfolds. I hope that this method allows readers unfamiliar with Burmese Buddhism to follow along with the basic outlines of the Theravāda moral universe while also providing specialists with indications of Burmese Buddhist interpretations or practices that might diverge from other Buddhist communities. In the appendix I provide definitions of the most commonly used terms. At the end of the chapter, I review this outline, incorporating all the elements into a worldview that is consistent in its logic, yet allows for variation in interpretation.

### **Daily Buddhist Practice in Myanmar**

Many, if not most, Burmese Buddhists begin their day with a ritual veneration of the Buddha, conducted in the shrine area (Bur. *hpaya zin*) of their home.<sup>5</sup> Wealthier or more pious Buddhists may have an entire room dedicated to this purpose, but many people simply reserve an area in their homes for a small shrine.<sup>6</sup> The veneration of the Buddha often includes the entire family and can be as short as bowing and briefly reciting some Pāli verses.<sup>7</sup> An extended version would include offering food, water or flowers to the Buddha and reciting longer Pāli verses. In most cases, Burmese Buddhists begin their daily veneration of the Buddha with a show of reverence called the *kadaw-kan*; they bow to a statue or picture of the Buddha and “take refuge” (a practice I explain below) in the “Three Gems.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Burmese: ဘုရားစင်. The literal translation is “Buddha shelf” but in many cases the area includes more than just a single shelf and statue; a better translation might be “Buddha altar.”

<sup>6</sup> Spiro (1982, 209) claims that shrine areas are always placed on the auspicious, Eastern side of the house, but I have seen them in various positions. In fact, in a nod towards the ways in which technology has altered this practice, a more pressing consideration for placing the shrine might be proximity to a power outlet, since many families include lit Buddha displays or pictures featuring neon lights emanating from the Buddha as an indication of his enlightenment.

<sup>7</sup> Pāli is the language of the Theravāda scriptures and as such, is a common denominator across countries that practice Theravāda Buddhism. Monks receive some training in reading Pāli, but lay people rarely learn the language. However, most Burmese Buddhists memorize verses and chants in Pāli beginning from a very young age, and many continue to remember them much later in life, often without having ever learned what the words mean.

<sup>8</sup> Burmese: တန်ခိုးတောင်းခံခြင်း. Another common phrase for this action is to “pay reverence to the Buddha” (Bur. *hpaya shikoe*, ဘုရားရှိခိုး).

The Three Gems are the Buddha, the *dhamma* (his teachings, Bur. *dama*), and the *sangha* (the order of monks, Bur. *thanga*).<sup>9</sup> These three elements form the foundation of belief and practice for Buddhists of any tradition. While the ritual veneration of Buddha images and pictures often appears to be similar to “worshipping” a god, some Burmese Buddhists stress that, since the Buddha was merely a human being, he has no “eternal” presence and therefore, should not be worshipped as adherents of other religions might treat their god(s). Instead, Buddhists should offer their respect and gratitude to the Buddha for striving over the course of many lifetimes to realize the path to Enlightenment and for sharing it with others through his teachings. The respected Chan Myay Sayadaw,<sup>10</sup> who runs meditation centers in Myanmar and in other parts of the world translates the Pāli phrase that scholars usually render as “take refuge” into Burmese terms that mean “to believe/trust” and “to serve/revere” (1992, 17).<sup>11</sup> When they “take refuge,” Burmese Buddhists pay respect to the Buddha for teaching the path to liberation, they assert their faith in his teachings and they express their appreciation for and trust in the *sangha* as the protectors and propagators of those teachings.

Although for many this practice has become automatic and mechanical, taking refuge in the Three Gems is a daily reminder of the centrality of the Buddha, his *dhamma*, and the *sangha* in the lives of Buddhists in Myanmar. A common text produced by the Burmese government’s DPPS (Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the *Sāsana* [Buddhist community]) even claims that taking refuge in the Three Gems can protect one from harm (1992, 5).<sup>12</sup> Additionally, it is a common preaching topic for monks, since it is easy for practitioners to overlook the significance and deeper meaning of paying respect to the Three Gems in the *kadaw-kan*. At a public sermon in Yangon, the monk Ashin Wiriya explained that the *kadaw-kan* helps to remind Buddhists that theirs is a religion in which each person has to rely on himself to practice and reach enlightenment. In a formulation commonly used by monks in Myanmar, he emphasized that the Buddha was *not* a savior; instead, he showed humans the path to liberation. Buddhists could (and should) follow his example but it was his *dhamma*, preserved

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<sup>9</sup> Burmese: ဓမ္မ and သံဃာ. In this case I will continue to use the Pāli spellings of these words because they will be more familiar to readers and because the Burmese usage of these concepts does not differ from the standard Theravāda understanding.

<sup>10</sup> *Sayadaw* (ဆရာတော်) is an honorific usually applied to a monk who is the head of a monastery. A more precise translation would indicate an aspirated “s” through the spelling “*Hsayadaw*” but here I use the more common “*Sayadaw*” for ease of reading.

<sup>11</sup> In Pāli the phrase is *gacchami*. The Burmese words the *Sayadaw* uses are ယုံကြည် and ဆည်းကပ်. Unless otherwise stated, the definitions of Burmese terms in this dissertation come from *The Myanmar-English Dictionary* published by the Department of the Myanmar Language Commission (2006 edition).

<sup>12</sup> The same book declares that anyone who has faith in the Three Gems can be considered a Buddhist (DPPS 1992, 24).

and taught by the *sangha*, that would show the way and each individual's effort that would lead to enlightenment.<sup>13</sup>

Many Burmese Buddhists also include another element in their morning ritual, the *aw-ga-tha*.<sup>14</sup> In an attempt to make Buddhist practice less foreign to Western observers, the Burmese scholar Pe Maung Tin (1964) has called this the "Buddhist Common Prayer." While there is usually very little in Buddhist ritual that mirrors Christian ritual in content or in form, in this case the term seems appropriate because the *aw-ga-tha* is more of a supplication than most Buddhist recitation. Beginning again by paying homage to the Three Gems, the person reciting the *aw-ga-tha* then expresses the wish that her devotion may deliver her from a long list of hindrances and states of suffering and that she may attain enlightenment quickly.<sup>15</sup>

The *aw-ga-tha* provides a reminder of things to avoid and the potential consequences of wrong actions. In addition, it also reminds the people who recite it that proper moral conduct is not merely correct actions, but also appropriate thought and words. Another common topic of monastic sermons is the three types of actions: physical acts (Bur. *kaya-kan*), speech acts (*wisi-kan*), and thoughts (*manaw-kan*), as well as the effects of those acts.<sup>16</sup> Proper Buddhist moral conduct must encompass right action, speech, *and* thought, since the mind is where the intention to perform any act originates, whether good, bad, or neutral. While controlling one's actions is a necessary step on the path to moral perfection, controlling one's mind is necessary to attend to the subtle levels of mental defilement (Pāli *kilesa*, Bur. *kiletha*) that prevent one from attaining moral perfection in word, deed, *and* thought.<sup>17</sup> These increasingly refined levels of moral purity inform Burmese Buddhist conceptions of human nature, multiple understandings of "liberation," and the relationship between moral purity and political participation.

<sup>13</sup> Sermon given by Ashin Wiriya at the *Lanmadaw Lan Myo Neh Taya Pwe* on March 22, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Burmese: ဩကထာ. This Burmese word marks a moment of submission before a prayer and is used by Burmese as shorthand for the most common prayer that I describe here.

<sup>15</sup> These hindrances and states vary in different forms of the recitations, but can include the four states of woe (Bur. *a-peh*; these include rebirth in one of several hell realms, as a demon, as a ghost, or as an animal), the three disasters (Bur. *kaq*; these include war, famine, and epidemic), the eight unfortunate states of birth (Bur. *yaq-pyiq*; these include being reborn in hell, as an animal, as a ghost, as a spirit, or as a human who is either far away from other humans, has heretical views, is incapable of understanding the Buddha's teachings, or is not exposed to the Buddha's teachings), the five enemies (Bur. *yan-thu*; these include kings, thieves, fire, water, and other foes), the four misfortunes (Bur. *wi-paq-ti ta-ya*; these include tyrannical kings, wrong views, physical deformities, and lack of intelligence), the five forms of loss (Bur. *bya-tha-na ta-ya*; these include loss of relatives, wealth, health, right belief, and morality), the ninety-six diseases or injuries (Bur. *a-na*), and the sixty-two wrong beliefs (Bur. *meiq-hsa deiq-hti*) (Chan Myay Sayadaw 1992, 11).

<sup>16</sup> Burmese: ကာယကံ, ဝစီကံ, မနောကံ

<sup>17</sup> Burmese: ကိလေသာ

The final common element of daily individual ritual practice that I will examine here is taking the vow to keep the five precepts (Pāli *pañca-sīlāni*, Bur. *nga pa thila*).<sup>18</sup> Many Burmese Buddhists claim that the precepts are not direct prohibitions, like the ten commandments of Christianity, although the expected outcome of proper moral behavior may be similar. That is, the result of breaking the precepts is not a “punishment” but rather the outcome of a consistent, relatively predictable and unavoidable process of cause and effect. The Buddha taught the precepts to his followers but he did not create the moral laws of the universe. Each time they take the precepts, Buddhists vow to abstain from actions that will harm themselves and others.<sup>19</sup> The Reverend U Thittila describes the precepts as the “preliminary ideals of a virtuous life” (1987, 19). As such, they form the basis of the Buddhist conception of correct moral conduct. The five precepts are:

- 1) To abstain from taking life.
- 2) To abstain from taking that which is not given.
- 3) To abstain from sexual misconduct.
- 4) To abstain from lying.
- 5) To abstain from taking intoxicants.<sup>20</sup>

The reasoning behind precepts 1-4 should be clear, as they are common to other religions. The fifth precept’s importance comes from the perception of intoxicants as a gateway to other immoral or inappropriate practices.<sup>21</sup> When Melford Spiro interviewed monks in Burma in the 1950s, many told him they believed that the fifth precept was the most important because intoxication promotes reckless behavior and increases the likelihood of breaking the other precepts (1982, 98-102). In addition, Buddhists in Myanmar place a high value on mental control and restraint, as it is one of the most

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<sup>18</sup> Burmese: ငါးပါးသီလ.

<sup>19</sup> While the goal is to follow the guidelines of the precepts in one’s daily life, it is taking the vow to abstain from certain behaviors that is a regular part of Burmese Buddhists’ practice. I return to this practice below to revisit some of the implications in light of later explanations of Buddhist views on cause and effect.

<sup>20</sup> Although these five precepts are the most common, there are also additional lists of eight or ten precepts. The first four precepts contain moral injunctions, whereas the fifth precept (and the additional precepts in the longer lists) marks a shift to a particular disciplinary practice that assists one’s progress on the moral path. While the five precepts are common for daily recitation, the eight precepts are usually reserved for lay people entering a meditation retreat. They alter the third precept to include any type of sexual behavior and add precepts to avoid eating after noon, to avoid singing, dancing, watching entertainment and adorning oneself with perfume or make-up, and to avoid sleeping or sitting in high, luxurious places. Novice monks or nuns take the list of ten which splits the precept about watching entertainment and adorning oneself into two parts and adds a tenth precept to avoid taking money. Some Buddhists in Myanmar also include a list of nine precepts, which takes the list of eight and adds a vow to spread loving-kindness (Pāli *mettā*, Bur. *myitta*, မေတ္တာ) to all living beings.

<sup>21</sup> Frost notes that one of the driving forces behind the Sinhalese nationalist movement in the early twentieth century was a Temperance Campaign that Buddhists appropriated from Catholics and made a central part of their attempts to mold villagers into “responsible citizens” (2002, 964).

important elements of successful meditation practice. As such, any mental impairment caused by intoxicants is contrary to the ideal of awareness and mindfulness of the present moment, which is the foundation of meditation. Of course, in practice very few Buddhists in Myanmar (or anywhere) follow this strict prohibition and adherence is generally only expected of monks and nuns.<sup>22</sup>

These three daily practices (taking refuge in the Three Gems, the supplication of the *aw-ga-tha*, and taking the vow to uphold the precepts) are undoubtedly the most common among Buddhists in Myanmar, although many add additional prayers or chants. The first and last are also common practices among Buddhists in the other Theravāda countries (Gombrich 1995, 76). For our purposes, they serve as an introduction to the daily orientation toward correct moral practice that is reinforced through Burmese Buddhists' regular rituals. I now turn to a brief telling of the story of the Buddha's life and enlightenment as an introduction to some of the basic elements of his teachings.

### **The Story of the Buddha<sup>23</sup>**

Siddhatha Gotama, the man who would become the Buddha, began his life as a prince in what is now India. When he was born, a hermit came to his father, the king, and predicted that the infant Siddhatha had the markings of a great man. He would either scale the heights of secular power as a world-conquering king or provide spiritual guidance to countless beings as a world-renouncing Buddha.<sup>24</sup> The hermit explained that a series of four visions would compel the prince to leave his royal life and seek enlightenment.<sup>25</sup> Unsurprisingly, his father preferred the former path for his son and, in an attempt to shield him from worldly sorrows that might inspire a spiritual quest, kept the young prince locked in his palace and provided with everything he could possibly desire.

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<sup>22</sup> Many people take a generous interpretation of the fifth precept by claiming that it is drunkenness that is contrary to mindfulness and leads to immoral conduct, so imbibing a smaller amount of intoxicants is acceptable and would not be breaking the precept.

<sup>23</sup> What follows is a very brief biography of the early life of the Buddha, as a prelude to an explanation of his teachings. I have drawn this account primarily from Bishop Bigandet's 1866 version of the life of the Buddha (Bigandet 1911), which itself relies on a number of Burmese sources, and from a contemporary depiction of the Buddha's life written by Min Yu Wai (2008). Former Burmese Prime Minister U Nu also wrote a biography of the Buddha (1961). Burmese depictions of the life of the Buddha usually depart very little from traditional accounts of his life within the Theravāda tradition, except to emphasize the claim that, prior to forming the *sangha* in what is now India, the Buddha met two Burmese merchants who became his first lay disciples. He gave them two pieces of hair from his head, which Burmese believe are still contained as relics inside the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. Longer biographies include Strong (2001) and Armstrong (2001) and I indicate in the footnotes places where Burmese accounts diverge from each other or from the common Theravāda narrative.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Tambiah was the first to use these now common phrases in his 1976 book *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*.

<sup>25</sup> The hermit's detailed explanation to the king that includes the four visions is a common element in Burmese accounts, but in other versions he simply presents the king with the two options for the prince's future.

However, one day Siddhatha left the palace and had the first of a series of four encounters.<sup>26</sup> These experiences would form the basis for his rejection of worldly life and as such are central images in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, often depicted in sculptures, murals, and other Buddhist art. First he saw an old man, then a sick man, then a corpse. In most Burmese accounts, each encounter occurred several weeks or months apart and after each experience, his father attempted to distract him with additional gifts and pleasures and increased the number of guards and attendants who were to keep him from encountering the suffering of the world.<sup>27</sup> Having been shielded from any previous experience of suffering, these meetings affected Siddhatha profoundly and he felt a deep dissatisfaction when faced with evidence of the impermanence of life and the inevitability of loss. His final encounter was with an ascetic and it was this experience that convinced him that a life of renunciation was the way to free oneself from the suffering inherent in existence.

Having resolved to find a way to overcome suffering, Siddhatha fled the palace, leaving behind his wife and child, and took up the life of a mendicant, living on donated food, with no permanent home, undertaking various austerities and meditational practices.<sup>28</sup> He studied with several prominent teachers and mastered their methods but realized that, despite his achievements, he had still not overcome suffering. He eventually rejected the extremes of luxury and complete self-denial, coming to the conclusion that the best route to understanding was a balanced, Middle Way between the two extremes. After years of practicing, he finally achieved Enlightenment, liberation from suffering. Popularly, we often understand Enlightenment to be a higher spiritual stage of bliss and harmony and many Burmese Buddhists share this notion. However, there is also a more specific definition related to the Buddha's analysis of the nature of human existence in his quest to understand and overcome suffering. Next, I turn to that analysis in order to clarify the concepts of "suffering" and "Enlightenment."

### **The Four Noble Truths**

The Buddha's teachings are often presented in lists, and one of the central lists is the Four Noble Truths. Briefly, these are the truths of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering; I explain each of the four in this section. The First Noble Truth

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<sup>26</sup> Bigandet's account relates that these encounters were arranged by *nat* spirits (who I describe in more detail below) who sought to assist the prince's progress on the path to Buddhahood (1911, 52).

<sup>27</sup> Non-Burmese accounts of the Buddha's life commonly depict these four encounters as occurring on the same day, one after the other.

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Herbert has noted that the Buddha's departure from his family (the "Great Renunciation") is a favorite scene for Burmese artists to depict (1993, 15).

(Pāli *dukkha ariyasaccāni*, Bur. *doukkha ariya thitsa*) is usually called the truth of suffering.<sup>29</sup> In fact, this gloss of the Pāli word *dukkha* (Bur. *doukkha*) is insufficient to convey the meaning of the concept and has undoubtedly contributed to a persistent popular conception of Buddhism as pessimistic or even nihilistic. A more precise (but still incomplete) translation might be “unsatisfactoriness.” However, this definition also needs to be qualified. *Dukkha* includes the sorts of everyday difficulties that we might describe as suffering, but its scope is actually much wider. It can also refer to the characteristic impermanence of all things. In order to more fully explain *dukkha* it is necessary to turn to another topic, the three characteristics of existence.

### **The Three Characteristics of Existence: *Anicca, Dukkha, Anattā***<sup>30</sup>

The Buddha taught that everything that exists is characterized by *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and *anattā* (no-self).<sup>31</sup> The characteristic of *anicca* can be understood with reference to multiple time frames. On a longer view, we know that things are impermanent. All living things will eventually die. All created things will eventually deteriorate and decompose, albeit at different rates. Likewise, feelings, emotions, and states of mind are impermanent. Of course, we tend to recognize the transience of joyful situations more than miserable ones, but upon reflection, all of these also come and go. In Burmese people most often explain *anicca* as “*ma mye bu*” which means “not permanent.”<sup>32</sup> In their sermons, monks also use the verb pair “*hpyit*” and “*pyet*” (meaning “to come into being” and “to cease to exist”) as shorthand for *anicca*.<sup>33</sup> Everything that comes into existence will inevitably pass away, whether thoughts, feelings, material objects, or living beings.

Most Burmese gloss *dukkha* as “*hsin ye gyin*” which generally means “misery” and conforms to the common English translation of “suffering” mentioned above.<sup>34</sup> It can also mean “poverty” and people commonly use the word *dukkha* to indicate “trouble” or “difficulty.” However, in order to understand the deeper meaning of *dukkha*, we must also understand *anattā*, the doctrine of “no-self.” The characteristic of *anattā* applies not only to human “selves” but to all phenomena of existence.

<sup>29</sup> Burmese: ဒုက္ခအရိယသတ္တ

<sup>30</sup> In this dissertation I will use the Pāli spellings of these common terms (*anicca, dukkha, anatta*) instead of the Burmese (*aneitsa, doukkha, anatta*). Burmese understandings of the first two generally coincide with the usual definitions of the Pāli words and, while I note a particular Burmese conception of *anatta* below, the spelling is the same in both languages. Bur. အနိစ္စ, ဒုက္ခ, အနတ္တ

<sup>31</sup> While “no-self” is the standard translation and understanding in the academic literature, I explain below that Burmese Buddhists more often understand *anatta* as “no control.”

<sup>32</sup> Bur. မမြဲဘူး။

<sup>33</sup> Bur. ဖြစ် / ပျက်

<sup>34</sup> Bur. ဆင်းရဲခြင်း

Because everything is impermanent, existing only from moment to moment and arising and passing away instantaneously, there can be no permanent, lasting essence of anything.

This is perhaps easiest to see with regard to inanimate objects. While we may accept the claim that a chair has no permanent essence, we are more resistant to the idea that, as human beings, we are also characterized by *anattā*. In the *Milindapanha* (The Questions of Milinda), the monk Nagasena uses the example of a chariot broken down into its constituent parts to teach King Milinda that beyond the grouped parts and processes that we experience and understand to be an individual, there really exists no abiding “person.”<sup>35</sup> Nagasena reaches the “conclusion” of no-self by deconstructing the self into its aggregate parts; all individual experience, that which we commonly refer to as our “selves,” consists of combinations of these aggregates.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, according to the Buddha’s teachings, there is nowhere to situate a self that is permanent, even within our own minds and bodies.

Although scholars and writers consistently translate *anattā* as “no-self,” Buddhists in Myanmar consistently use a different expression. In almost every circumstance I encountered, when asked to explain *anattā* in Burmese, people replied “*a-so ma ya bu*” or “no control.”<sup>37</sup> (Even monks gave this response, with the one exception being those, such as the Chan Myay Sayadaw, who frequently interact with native English speakers. Chan Myay Sayadaw commonly explains *anattā* in English as a doctrine of “no self” or “no soul.”) Another variation on this, used by Ashin Eindaga, the Twante Sayadaw is “*nga ma pain bu*” or “no ownership over the self.”<sup>38</sup> In a study of Shan Buddhist communities in Thailand, Nicola Tannenbaum also noted a similar interpretation of *anattā* as “no control” (1993, 1995).<sup>39</sup> However, being unfamiliar with Burmese Buddhism, she posited this as a particular Shan construction of Buddhism. To my knowledge, no other scholars of Buddhism in Myanmar have discussed this understanding of *anattā*.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> While the *Milindapanha* is not part of the Pāli canon in most Theravāda countries, it was included as part of the *Tipitaka* produced by the Sixth Buddhist Council convened by U Nu in Rangoon in 1954.

<sup>36</sup> These five aggregates (Pāli *khanda*) are physical phenomena (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), recognition (*saññā*), volitional activities or desires (*saṅkhāra*), and self-consciousness or awareness (*viññāṇa*).

<sup>37</sup> Bur. အစိုးမရဘူး။

<sup>38</sup> Bur. ငါ မပိုင်ဘူး။ Sermon given by Ashin Eindaga at the Thirty-fourth Street *Taya Pwe* on January 31, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Despite a common history among Shan in Myanmar and Thailand as well as some similar practices and beliefs, there are also significant differences between the communities in the two countries. As noted in the Introduction, there are also differences in practice between different groups of Shan *within* Myanmar. While Tannenbaum’s conclusions may not apply to all or any of the Shans living in Myanmar, she seems to be the only other scholar of Buddhism in Southeast Asia who has encountered this interpretation.

<sup>40</sup> This formulation of *anattā* is not completely foreign to the Theravāda tradition. As Collins points out, the “Discourse on the Characteristics of *Anattā*” (the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*) contains the argument that the

An understanding of *anattā* as “no control” or “no ownership over the self” would appear to be more relevant in its application to daily practice, since the concept of the soul remains abstract. This could help to explain why monks in Myanmar most often describe *anattā* as “no control,” since their goal is to help their audiences realize the value of non-attachment and of the *dukkha* that follows from assuming permanence and control. It also accounts for certain monks’ continued usage of “no soul,” as this explanation would resonate with English speakers coming from religious and cultural contexts influenced by Christianity.

Ledi Sayadaw, a famous Burmese monk who was partly responsible for developing lay interest in meditation and advanced Buddhist study in the early twentieth century, combined both conceptions of *anattā* in his explanation: “Often the world shows us that things do not do what we want—in other words, that we often cannot control what we take to be our soul. Thus, because a person cannot control them, physical and mental phenomena are not the essence of a person, which means that a person has no essence” (cited in Braun 2008, 378). As a scholar of Buddhist philosophy (*abhidhamma*), he would have been sensitive to the anti-*atman* origins of *anattā*, but as a teacher who was invested in imparting to his students an experiential understanding of Buddhist concepts, “no control” would have been a useful formulation, and remains so for most monks in contemporary Myanmar.

With this explanation of *anicca* and *anattā* we can now return to an explanation of *dukkha*. We experience “suffering” (or dissatisfaction) when we encounter unpleasant things, when we are prevented from encountering pleasant things, and when pleasant experiences do not last. While pain is obviously *dukkha*, pleasure is also *dukkha* because it will not last.<sup>41</sup> Thus, *dukkha* refers to the suffering or dissatisfaction that occurs because of our ignorance of the other two characteristics of existence, *anicca* and *anattā*. In fact, we could extend this definition and say that *dukkha* describes and encompasses the conditioned, impermanent nature of existence.<sup>42</sup> The Chan Myay Sayadaw connects this understanding of *dukkha* to the everyday definition of “misery” or “suffering” with a metaphor of lightning during a storm. Although there are moments of happiness in our lives, they are as brief as a

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constituent of the body are “not-self because there is ‘no exercising of mastery’ over them” (1982, 97). However, this understanding of *anattā* does not appear to be common in any other contemporary Theravāda countries and has likely, as Collins surmises, come to be expressed through aphorisms that emphasize the unavoidable nature of sickness, old age, and death.

<sup>41</sup> Although *dukkha* is usually contrasted with *sukkhā* (pleasure), from the Buddhist perspective even *sukkhā* is also part of *dukkha* because of its inherent impermanence. However, we should note that monks and lay teachers in the Theravāda tradition regularly posit *sukkhā* as at least a proximate goal of practice, presumably to give adherents something to strive for that is less abstract than complete liberation.

<sup>42</sup> This is also the way that the Burmese Buddhist scholar and author Nandar Thein Zan has described *dukkha* in his books, his classes, and to me in personal communication.

bolt of lightning, and much of the rest of our time is either spent in suffering or in worrying that the moments of happiness will not last (2006, 126).

The First Noble Truth, then, is the truth that everything that exists is characterized by impermanence (*anicca*) and is beyond our control (*anattā*). Because we are ignorant of these characteristics and live our lives as if we did have control, everything is also *dukkha*, or unsatisfactory, whether from unwanted negative experiences of suffering or from the inevitable passing away of pleasurable experiences. Having established *dukkha* as the primary ill, the Buddha then turned to the Second Noble Truth, (Pāli *dukkha samudaya ariyasaccāni*, Bur. *doukkha thamudaya ariya thitsa*), the origin of *dukkha*.<sup>43</sup> According to his insight, the source of *dukkha* is craving (Pāli *taṇhā*, Bur. *tahna*).<sup>44</sup> Dr. Mehm Tin Mon, a prominent Burmese lay scholar, glosses *tahna* as “greed” (Pāli *lobha*, Bur. *lawba*)<sup>45</sup> and while Burmese formulations of the Second Noble Truth usually use the word *tahna*, Burmese commonly use *lawba* to talk about greed and desire in everyday life (Mehm Tin Mon 2003, 42).

The Second Noble Truth of the origin of *dukkha* does not simply deal with our craving for pleasurable experiences and our aversion to negative experiences, although that is the way in which we regularly encounter it. The Buddha taught that the *dukkha* of existence is compounded and perpetuated by a deep-seated craving for the continuation of life itself. This, according to Buddhist belief, is the reason why individuals are constantly reborn again and again in different forms, always bound to an existence filled with *dukkha*. In describing this continuous round of rebirths (Pāli *samsāra*, Bur. *thanthaya*)<sup>46</sup>, Burmese commonly use metaphors of being adrift on an ocean of suffering or caught in a never-ending cycle of dissatisfaction.

In order to explain this cycle, the Buddha laid out twelve causally related stages that detail each step of a cycle of attachment, leading inevitably to *dukkha*. The crucial element of this brief explanation is the fact that that the cycle begins with ignorance (Pāli *moha*, Bur. *mawha*).<sup>47</sup> Because we are ignorant of the three characteristics of existence (*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*) we cling to people and possessions as if they were permanent and as if we could control them. On a broader scale, we have such a strong desire for continued existence that even at the moment of death, our craving for permanence results in

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<sup>43</sup> Bur. ဒုက္ခသမုဒယအရိယသတ္တ

<sup>44</sup> Bur. While in everyday usage, *tahna* can more specifically mean “lust,” in a Buddhist context it is understood that the word signifies “craving.”

<sup>45</sup> Bur. လောဘ

<sup>46</sup> Bur. သံသရာ

<sup>47</sup> Bur. မောဟ

continued existence in a new life. In Burmese this is the doctrine of dependent origination (Pāli *paticca-samuppada*, Bur. *pateitsa thamoutpa*) and it locates the origin of *dukkha* in craving and ultimately in ignorance.<sup>48</sup>

Because of this ignorance, our lives are characterized by and perpetuated through craving and desire. “Suffering” occurs because we act according to that craving, but with the misunderstanding that craving can actually be fulfilled. The Buddhist path to liberation (freedom from suffering), on the other hand, is a path in which all craving and desire is extinguished. And part of the realization of that path is the understanding that craving cannot be fulfilled, precisely because of the impermanence of everything that exists and our inability to control the conditions of our own life. This is what makes the Burmese explanation of *anattā* so compelling. While the lack of a self may be abstract and difficult to grasp, our ultimate lack of control is evident in virtually every aspect of our lives, as is the suffering that comes from our ignorance or denial of this condition.

The first two truths paint a bleak picture of the world (although Burmese Buddhists might argue that it is simply a picture of the world as it is, and we bring our own preconceptions to it).

Misunderstanding of these teachings has undoubtedly contributed to perceptions that Buddhism is a pessimistic or nihilistic belief system but the Buddha’s message was ultimately one of liberation from *dukkha*. Thus, the Third Noble Truth (Pāli *dukkha nirodha ariyasaccāni*, Bur. *doukkha niyawda ariya thitsa*) states the possibility of the cessation of *dukkha* through overcoming ignorance and craving.<sup>49</sup>

At this point it is probably necessary to add a few words to clarify the specific, focused nature of the Buddha’s teachings. Although his initial goal upon leaving his royal life was to find a path to overcome suffering, his path to enlightenment entailed the realization of a notion of *dukkha* that was more comprehensive than the common understanding of “suffering.” If all of existence is impermanent and beyond our control, this means that everything we encounter, whether we take pleasure in it and cling to it or find it distasteful and avoid it, is unsatisfactory. This was a radical redefinition of the problem of “suffering” to also include every single pleasurable experience in a person’s life. With such a radical redefinition came a radical solution: The only way to completely overcome *dukkha* is to rid oneself of craving and attachment completely, in every single circumstance. Simply stated, this is

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<sup>48</sup> Bur. ပဋိစ္စသမုပ္ပါဒ်။ In English this doctrine is also called Conditioned Genesis or Dependent Arising.

<sup>49</sup> Bur. ဒုက္ခနိရောဓအရိယသတ္တ

*neikban* (Pāli *nibbāna*), or enlightenment: a state in which there is no attachment and thus, no suffering.<sup>50</sup>

In stating the “solution” in that way, we must acknowledge that, while most Burmese Buddhists (and most Buddhists in general) recognize the value of total liberation from *dukkha* and are ultimately oriented toward that goal, in practice, very few hold enlightenment as a proximate goal.<sup>51</sup> Monks usually end their sermons by expressing their wish that lay practitioners try hard to purify themselves, develop insight into the Buddha’s teachings, and quickly reach enlightenment, but most of their preaching deals with more mundane issues of daily conduct and morality. In fact, when pressed, many interview subjects (including some monks) admitted that they were put off by or even frightened of a life of complete detachment, at least for the present.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, instead of being oriented towards *neikban*, most Burmese Buddhists profess more modest goals of good moral conduct in their present life so as to be born into better circumstances in the future, something I will explore in more detail below. I mention this not to dismiss, denigrate, or question their practice, but to emphasize the way in which Theravāda Buddhist practice in Myanmar, while retaining the horizon of the ultimate “goal” of *neikban*, more often focuses on moral conduct in daily life.<sup>53</sup> This orientation also shapes the way in which Burmese Buddhists view proper conduct in the political realm.

Although the goal of *neikban* and the cessation of *dukkha* may be far removed from most Buddhists’ daily expectations, the Buddha provided a clearly delineated path in the Fourth Noble Truths, the way to the cessation of *dukkha* (Pāli *dukkha nirodha gamini patipada ariyasaccāni*, Bur. *doukkha*

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<sup>50</sup> Bur. နိဗ္ဗာန်။ I will use the Burmese word *neikban* in what follows because a number of concepts specific to the Burmese tradition incorporate this term and it is particularly important for Burmese socialism.

<sup>51</sup> Indeed, although the liberation of all beings from desire and craving is technically possible, Buddhists of all traditions generally acknowledge that it is practically unattainable for most. A world (universe?) of entirely enlightened beings would eventually cease to exist as it is the collective force of individuals’ desire to exist that re-creates the world at every moment. However, some reformist Thai monks, such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, have urged their followers to consider *neikban* as an accessible goal for all practitioners, rather than reserved to a select few (Jackson 1989, 49).

<sup>52</sup> These findings are consistent with others who have conducted research on Buddhism in Burma, including Nash (1965, 1966) and Spiro (1982).

<sup>53</sup> The anthropologist Winston King wrote extensively on the challenge of deriving a social ethic from the ideal detachment of the quest for enlightenment, even suggesting that “Theravāda Buddhism must make up its mind in which world it expects to live and thrive” (1964, 270). In what follows I will address many of the arguments used by Burmese Buddhists to demonstrate that there is indeed a social ethic inherent in the Theravāda tradition.

*niyawda gamini patipada ariya thitsa*).<sup>54</sup> Buddhists refer to this as the Eight-fold Noble Path (Pāli *ariyo aṭṭharīgiko maggo*, Bur. *mekkin shitpa*)<sup>55</sup>:

1. Right Understanding (also called Right View)
2. Right Thought (also called Right Intention)
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

These are the eight facets of correct practice which, according to the Buddha’s teaching, will lead one to complete liberation from *dukkha*. The first two are grouped together in popular Buddhist practice as the “wisdom” aspects, the next three are grouped together as the “morality” or “ethical” aspects, and the final three are grouped together as the “concentration” aspects. Like the precepts and the three characteristics of existence, the Eight-fold Noble Path is a common subject of monastic sermons and books. The list is not necessarily consecutive, meaning one does not first master right understanding, then move on to right thought, and so on. However, Gombrich notes that many Theravāda Buddhists consider each grouping to be a prerequisite for the next (1995, 83). That is, some degree of right intention and understanding are necessary to begin practice; one can then cultivate the “morality” aspects regularly in everyday life (the most common focus of monks’ teachings in Myanmar) before moving on to advance meditation practices that will result in a deeper level of wisdom. Before moving on from the Four Noble Truths, I will briefly discuss Burmese notions of “truth,” as the concept will return, particularly with reference to ideas about democracy in Chapter 5.

## ***Taya* and “Truth”**

The Burmese word used for “truth” in naming the Four Noble Truths is *thitsa* (Pāli *sacca*)<sup>56</sup>, however, another word that can also signify “truth” is *taya*.<sup>57</sup> *Taya* carries several meanings, dependent

<sup>54</sup> Bur. ဒုက္ခနိရောဂေါပနိပဋိပဒါအရိယသတ္တာ

<sup>55</sup> Bur. မဂ္ဂင်ရှစ်ပါး

<sup>56</sup> Bur. သတ္တာ

<sup>57</sup> Bur. တရား။ I examine *taya* in more detail here because it is used more frequently than *thitsa* in the political texts that I look at in subsequent chapters and because, while *thitsa* almost exclusively denotes either “truth,” “loyalty,” or “vow,” the range of meanings and connotations of *taya* is more complex and context dependent.

on context. In a mundane sense<sup>58</sup> *taya* can refer to laws or a piece of litigation (although in this context it is usually clarified as *taya upadeh*<sup>59</sup>, where *upadeh* means law in a legal sense). It also has a general meaning of justice/fairness. It can refer to nature or a law of nature (although in this context it is usually *thabawa taya*<sup>60</sup>, where *thabawa* means nature or natural). *Taya* can also refer to moral principles, moral teachings, or a sermon. Finally, in a more explicitly Buddhist sense, *taya* refers to the “law” of the Buddha, the *dhamma*. While only the last sense refers explicitly to Buddhist doctrine, a Buddhist context is implicit in most of the other definitions. So, to speak of *taya* as a “law of nature” usually refers to the Buddhist understanding of natural, moral laws; *taya* as “moral teachings” usually refers to the specific moral teachings of Buddhism; and *taya* as a sermon most often refers to the sermons given by Buddhist monks.<sup>61</sup> *Taya* can carry multiple meanings because, from a Buddhist perspective, this last, overarching definition (the Buddha’s *dhamma*) encompasses all of the other definitions.<sup>62</sup> According to Theravāda teachings, the *dhamma* that the Buddha professed reflects natural law, applies equally to all beings, and provides humans with guidelines of proper moral conduct.

There is another way of looking at the overlapping elements of *taya* within the context of the Buddha’s teachings. Recall that the Buddha preached that everything in existence is characterized by *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. We can take these characteristics to be a “truth” of Buddhism, a description of “the way things really are.” So these teachings (the Buddha *dhamma*) are understood to be in accordance with nature, another point of overlap in the multiple meanings of *taya*. Just as *taya* can mean *dhamma*, it can also imply another central Buddhist concept, *thila* (Pāli *sīla*).<sup>63</sup> *Thila* can refer explicitly to the Buddhist precepts or to morals and moral conduct in general. In this way, the “truth” of the First Noble Truth, existence as *dukkha*, automatically implies the “truth” of the Fourth Noble Truths, the Eight-fold Noble Path to liberation from *dukkha*.

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<sup>58</sup> The Burmese word *lawki* refers to the mundane or secular world, and is contrasted with *lawkouttara*, which is the path to escape from worldly desires/attachments. I examine these words in more detail below.

<sup>59</sup> Bur. တရားဥပဒေ

<sup>60</sup> Bur. သဘာဝတရား

<sup>61</sup> One exception is the tendency among Burmese to use the phrase *taya haw de* (“preach a sermon”) to refer to public speeches by prominent non-monastic individuals. This appears to be an acknowledgement of respect for the speaker; thus, people might say that General Aung San or Daw Aung San Suu Kyi “preached a sermon,” but they would never use the same phrase to refer to a speech given by a member of the former military government.

<sup>62</sup> The Burmese historian Than Tun has explained that, while *taya* used to be a broader term encompassing any type of law, with the ascendance of Theravāda Buddhism in Burma, *taya* “became analogous with *dhamma*” (1988, 30).

<sup>63</sup> Bur. သီလ။ I will also continue to use the Burmese word *thila* since it occurs frequently in the Burmese works that I refer to throughout this dissertation.

## ***Thila* and “Morality”**

*Thila* is one of the central organizing principles of the Theravāda moral universe. In the eyes of Burmese Buddhists, it is also the basis for any other progress on the path to *neikban*. In their sermons, monks repeatedly stress the futility of “higher” practice, such as meditation, if the practitioner has not already purified her moral practice. In a formulation commonly taught by monks, the famous Sitagu Sayadaw described *thila* as the first stage of practice, consisting of bodily control and verbal discipline.<sup>64</sup> The emphasis here is on actual practice, as opposed to mere conceptual understanding of even the higher “truths” of Buddhism. Ashin Thittila, a Burmese monk who lived and taught in Burma and abroad throughout much of the twentieth century declared: “Practice of the moral life is the very core and essence of religion. It is action and not speculation, it is practice and not theory that counts in life. The will to do, followed by the doing, is the actual virtue; the will does not count much unless it is fulfilled” (1987, 54).

Monks and lay teachers often equate the practice of *thila* with another common Burmese word, *si kan*, which means “rules” or “discipline.”<sup>65</sup> Of course, it makes sense to see moral practice as discipline and, although the precepts are more properly understood as vows, many people do follow them as a set of rules. In later chapters I will return to these related notions of *thila* and *si kan* to examine their implications for action, effects, and legitimacy in the social world from the Burmese Buddhist perspective.

## ***Kan, Kutho, and the Doctrine of Cause and Effect***

One of the other primary conceptual building blocks of the Theravāda moral universe is *kan* (Pāli *kamma*, Sanskrit *karma*).<sup>66</sup> *Kan* literally means action. When we speak of *kan* in a Theravāda Buddhist context, we refer to the entire complex of processes associated with an action. *Kan* includes the action itself, as well as the result(s) associated with that action. Because Buddhists believe that the moral nature of an action determines its result, the Buddhist worldview is one of a universe governed by fundamentally moral laws. While the binary categories “good” and “bad” are too simple and rigid to appropriately describe the moral character of an action, they are the most common ways in which

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<sup>64</sup> VCD of a sermon given by Sitagu Sayadaw in Kuala Lumpur on February 18, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Bur. စည်းကမ်း

<sup>66</sup> Bur. ကံ

Buddhists in Myanmar gloss the moral nature of action. Burmese use the words *kutho* (Pāli *kusala*) and *akutho* (Pāli *akusala*) to distinguish between “good” and “bad” action and results.<sup>67</sup>

The moral quality of the action, either *kutho* (commonly translated as “wholesome” or “virtuous”), *akutho* (unwholesome), or neutral, determines the nature of the outcome and the circumstances which it produces. Thus, in a very real and direct way, each individual is responsible for the circumstances of his or her own life. A person’s past actions condition the situations in which he finds himself, with regard to wealth, health, social standing, abilities, and even psychological profile. In a lecture on Buddhism, Ashin Thittila explained that, “Buddhism points unequivocally to the moral aspect of everyday life. Though Nibbana [*neikban*] is amoral, in the sense that final peace transcends the conflict of good and evil, the path to wisdom is definitely a moral path. This follows logically from the doctrine of kamma [*kan*]. Every action must produce an effect, and one’s own actions produce an effect in one’s own life. Thus, the kammic force which carries us inevitably onward can only be a force for good, that is, for our ultimate wisdom, if each action is a good action” (1987, 29).

Many people translate *kutho* into English as “merit” and the practice of “making merit” (*kutho ya gyin*) provides the basic structure of many Burmese Buddhists’ daily practice.<sup>68</sup> Certain daily practices, such as taking the precepts or making donations to monks, have a wholesome quality and, when done with correct intention, can also purify the mind. These proper moral actions will generate wholesome and beneficial results in the future. Although some teachers discourage thinking of *kutho* and *akutho* as a sort of cosmic ledger with positive and negative accounts, monks frequently reinforce the notion that good actions bring good results, most often highlighting future prosperity in this life or a better rebirth in the next.<sup>69</sup> In fact, earning *kutho* can be a strong motivating factor for any religious

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<sup>67</sup> Bur. ကုသိုလ် / အကုသိုလ်။ Common Burmese usage of *kutho* to mean “merit” or “meritorious action” differs slightly from the meaning of the Pāli word *kusala*, although it seems to be consistent with popular usage of similarly Pāli-derived words from other Theravāda countries. *Kusala* means “skillful,” which Gombrich suggests implies that progressing on the path to enlightenment requires the development of a set of skills that generate good mental states (2006, 63). This is why, he says, the Buddha used the word *kusala* (and its opposite) in places where we might expect to see the words “moral” or “virtuous.” *Kusala* emphasizes the need to apply both intention and effort to act in a moral way.

<sup>68</sup> Bur. ကုသိုလ်ရခြင်း

<sup>69</sup> Spiro claimed that, like the Calvinists described by Weber, many Burmese keep “merit account books” to keep track of their meritorious deeds and “karmic” standing (1982, 111). While I have not seen any evidence of this practice in Myanmar today, it does appear to be similar in some ways to the practice of some meditation centers that keep lists of the students who have reached a certain level of accomplishment, both to advance the prestige of the center and as a public record of that individual’s achievement (Jordt 2007).

activity, from something as momentous as building a pagoda to something as trivial as moving closer to the stage at a public sermon to make room for latecomers.<sup>70</sup>

Of course, the notion that certain types of actions bring certain types of consequences did not originate with the Buddha. In the Upanisadic tradition of early Indian religious thought, *karman* was the result of actions, usually either the correct performance of or the violation of ritual action. The quality of these actions would determine a person’s rebirth (Gombrich 1996, 31). However, whereas the Upanisadic understanding of *karman* was limited to action and its results, the Buddha virtually redefined the word to mean volitional action. The effect of this was to ethicize the concept, making intention central to the results of any deed. In some instances, intention itself is sufficient to bear some degree of consequence. So, for example, simply thinking unwholesome thoughts will have (some) negative effects. Those effects, or course, are magnified by actually committing an unwholesome deed. The important alteration in the Buddhist theory is in distinguishing between action in general (which does not necessarily generate *kan*), and intentional action (which does generate *kan* according to its nature).

This leads us to other interpretations of *kutho* among Burmese Buddhists. Sayadaw U Zawtika, a popular monk and prolific author, writes: “The things we call *kutho* and *akutho* are just a type of natural law. *Kutho* is a good type of *seit* (mind/desire/attitude, Pāli *citta*). *Akutho* is a bad type of *seit*. The benefit of a good type of *seit* is that it brings good situations, good experiences, and a good life. The bad kind of *seit* brings bad situations, bad experiences, and a bad life...Once you understand this natural law, if you want a good outcome, you have to have a good cause. If you want the conditions of your life to improve, you need to raise (improve) your *seit-hta* (attitude/nature)” (2002, 44-45).<sup>71</sup> U Zawtika’s explanation of *kutho* highlights the importance of intention in actions and their results, the ultimate responsibility that each individual holds for the conditions of her own life, and the critical role played by the mind in guiding speech and action, the other two activities that generate *kan*.

Since *kan* operates over time periods ranging from the briefest of moments to virtually uncountable eons, humans cannot fathom the specific and complex networks of cause and effect that

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<sup>70</sup> However, as emphasized by Obeyesekere (1968, 19), even wholesome actions—by themselves—are not sufficient to carry one to enlightenment. One needs these practices to begin and progress on the path, but final liberation can only come from eliminating all intentional (*kan*-producing) action.

<sup>71</sup> Bur. ကုသိုလ်၊ အကုသိုလ်ဆိုတာ သဘာဝနိယာမတစ်မျိုးပဲ။ ကုသိုလ်ဆိုတာ ကောင်းတဲ့စိတ်မျိုးကို ခေါ်တာ။ အကုသိုလ်ဆိုတာ မကောင်းတဲ့စိတ်မျိုးကို ခေါ်တာ။ ကောင်းတဲ့စိတ်ဟာ ကောင်းတဲ့အခြေအနေ၊ ကောင်းတဲ့အတွေ့အကြုံ၊ ကောင်းတဲ့ဘဝကို အကျိုးပေးတယ်။ မကောင်းတဲ့စိတ်ဟာ မကောင်းတဲ့အခြေအနေ၊ မကောင်းတဲ့အတွေ့အကြုံ၊ မကောင်းတဲ့ဘဝကို အကျိုးပေးတယ်။...ကိုယ်က သဘာဝနိယာမတွေကို နားလည်ပြီးတော့ ကောင်းတဲ့အကျိုးကို လိုချင်ရင် ကောင်းတဲ့အကြောင်းကို လုပ်ဖို့ပဲလိုတယ်။ ကိုယ့်ဘဝ အခြေအနေ တိုးတက်လာချင်ရင် ကိုယ့်စိတ်ထားကို မြှင့်ရမယ်။

connect actions and results. Ashin Thittila considers situations in which people claim that “right” action has led to a negative result. In this case, he says, we need to look at our actions further back in the past because, according to the doctrine of *kan*, “whatever comes to us is always just and must be accepted in the right spirit” (1987, 36).<sup>72</sup> Ashin Thittila clearly intends this “right spirit” to be one in which we review our actions with the intention of correcting unwholesome behaviors. He explains: “If properly understood, the doctrine of *kan* teaches us to be careful with our thoughts, words, and actions in daily life so that, as time goes on, it makes us better human beings, willing to perform better and nobler actions towards all and live more harmoniously with our fellow human beings.” (1987, 35) Ashin Thittila’s advice is intended to encourage people to reflect on their actions and alter their conduct in appropriate ways, an empowering message, but belief in the workings of *kan* can also have a strongly conservative effect on perceptions of society, legitimating hierarchies and conditions of suffering and inequality.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to stress that, according to Buddhist doctrine, *kan* is not deterministic. Instead, we should think of it as conditioning our lives. Burmese Buddhists regard the present circumstances of someone’s life (her social, economic, and political status; her particular skills and abilities; etc.) as, at least in part, the result of her *kan*, her actions in the past.<sup>74</sup> “According to Buddhism, the inequalities that exist in the world are due, to some extent, to heredity and environment, and, to a greater extent, to a cause or causes [*kan*] which are not only present, but proximate or remote past.” (Ashin Thittila 1987, 178) Keyes has stressed the way in which it provides Buddhists with “authoritative truths with which to confront...problems of meaning” (1983, 3). Since it is a central organizing principle of the Theravāda moral universe, people can use *kan* to explain (and in some cases, justify) present conditions, including extreme poverty, excessive wealth, moral authority, or political power.<sup>75</sup> The doctrine of *kan* can

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<sup>72</sup> The Burmese legal scholar and former Supreme Court Justice U Chan Htoon distinguished between two kinds of injustice (1958). The first he called “human injustice,” which were situations that people had the power to resolve. The second however, what he termed “natural injustice,” appeared to be unjust but was actually simply the results of previous actions. Correct understanding of *kan* would help a person to distinguish between the two and to realize that the latter instances were in fact “just” according to the logic of cause and effect.

<sup>73</sup> Keyes has described *kamma* (*kan*) as having “both explanatory and predictive aspects” (1983, 5). That is, it can help people to explain and “make intelligible certain types of experiences” (especially misfortune), but it also serves to “orient people toward certain courses of action” (*ibid.*).

<sup>74</sup> Negative perspectives on *kan* (the belief that one cannot avoid present misfortune and that it is the just result of one’s past actions) still seem to dominate popular conceptions and usage, however this could be the result of environmental effects. That is, decades of living under a colonial government and then a military government that severely limited citizens’ freedom of action could reasonably strengthen a fatalistic view of *kan*. Yang Sam also related that the “popular” Khmer view of *kamma* [*kan*] is of a “negative repercussion from a previous bad deed” and that Khmer people feel “awkward” using the phrase *kamma laa* (“good *kamma*”) (1987, 34).

<sup>75</sup> Peter Jackson has referred to this as the “sociological interpretation of *kamma* [*kan*]” (1989, 41).

influence the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies in a country like Myanmar and shape perceptions of political legitimacy.<sup>76</sup>

*Kutho* is related to a similar, but more elevated concept of *parami* (Pāli *pāramī*).<sup>77</sup> Burmese use the word *parami* in an everyday sense to refer to talent or ability, but it carries a specifically Buddhist meaning of “acquired virtue.” The ten principal virtues are charity, morality, renunciation, knowledge, effort, honesty, forbearance, loving-kindness, equanimity, and resolution. Wholesome actions that contribute to the development of these qualities not only result in related future benefits, many Burmese see these as the most important qualities one must develop on the path to moral purity, calling them the ten “perfections.” While one’s present circumstances are always to some degree the result of past actions, development of *parami* is explicitly connected to one’s circumstances with regard to progress towards *neikban*. For example, while Burmese Buddhists almost universally value meditation as an essential part of that path, very few people practice it regularly. Some interview subjects explained this as a result of their lack of *parami*. That is, either they did not possess the mental abilities to concentrate in meditation, or the circumstances of their life did not allow them to devote time to the practice.

Burmese social and political life has also been influenced by the related concept of *hpoun*.<sup>78</sup> I translate this word, which has referents in other Theravāda Buddhist cultures, as “merit” or “power achieved through merit,” while the dictionary also lists “glory/influence” and the “cumulative result of past meritorious deeds.” Any position of authority held by an individual can be explained or justified with reference to his *hpoun*. The Burmese concept of *hpoun* is related to understandings of *kan* in that *hpoun* refers to worldly power held by an individual that is attributed to their great store of *kutho* (merit) from past action. Both *parami* and *hpoun* result from meritorious moral actions in the past and, while both can refer to more worldly or material results, it is more common in Myanmar to use *parami* to discuss progress and success on the Buddhist path of moral purification and *hpoun* to discuss efficacy in the political or economic sphere.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The belief that social, economic, or political inequality are the “just” results of *kan* is not entirely incompatible with concerns of social justice. Jackson cites the Thai monk Phra Kittiwuttho as someone who holds this conservative view of *kan* yet still supports some social justice campaigns and has argued that socio-economic development in the country should provide benefits to the poorest workers (1989, 150-1).

<sup>77</sup> Bur. ပါရမီ

<sup>78</sup> Bur. ဘုန်း

<sup>79</sup> The word *hpoun* is part of a common name for monks, *hpoun-gyi*, which means one with great amounts of *hpoun*. While the discussion above indicates more resonance between *hpoun* and worldly benefits, the fact that Burmese monks are also seen as having great amounts of *hpoun* is a reminder of the ways in which spiritual

According to the Burmese scholar Min Zin, *hpoun* is the underlying assumption and logic of all unequal relationships in Myanmar and functions in all areas of society, not just the political realm. The challenge that *hpoun* represents in the social and political realms is that its logic is “self-legitimizing;” the possession of power is demonstration of the stores of merit that justify that power (Min Zin 2001).<sup>80</sup> In explaining *hpoun*, Ingrid Jordt contrasts the logic of Burmese politics with Western conceptions, arguing that in the traditional Burmese Buddhist configuration, the king’s power is not constrained by a social contract between the ruler and civil society (2007).<sup>81</sup> Instead, it functions according to a moral causal law (*kan*), where power is the product of meritorious actions of the past, demonstrating that those with power deserve that power. While I agree with both explanations, I disagree with Min Zin’s assertion of the totalizing influence of *hpoun* on Burmese society and in subsequent chapters will explore the ways in which democratic interpretations of Buddhism challenge the logic of *hpoun*.<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, this brief explanation highlights one critical aspect of my argument: conceptions of politics among Buddhists in Myanmar must make sense within a Burmese Buddhist worldview and the logic of *parami* and *hpoun* is consistent with the logic of *kan* and the rest of the moral universe I have been describing in this chapter.

While *kan* does condition the circumstances of our present life and our future, it is not the only factor involved. Since *kan* is closely connected to correct moral action, it is a common subject of monastic sermons, but monks and lay teachers continually remind their listeners that there are three forces that combine to determine the effects of our actions. Besides *kan* are *nyan* (wisdom, Pāli) and *wiriya* (effort, Pāli *virīya*).<sup>83</sup> In this case, *nyan* does not just mean general intelligence or wisdom, but

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practices and benefits often overlap with material practices and benefits in the Theravāda moral universe. This is a topic that I address in more detail later in this chapter and throughout the dissertation.

<sup>80</sup> John Wiant explains how people viewed Ne Win, the military dictator who ruled Myanmar for decades, through the lens of *kan*: “I continually encountered *karmic* explanations of his power; that is to say, that he ruled today not for any nominally political reasons but rather as the result of the *kan* he had acquired in an earlier existence. With his power derived from *kan* it makes little sense to challenge it since the source from which it was drawn is already lost in the past” (1981, 62). According to Min Zin, Burmese people saw Ne Win as the “king who never dies,” because of his seemingly endless store of *hpoun* (2001).

<sup>81</sup> Although there are instances, such as the eighteenth century Burmese king Bodawpaya, where specific kings’ coronation oaths bound them to act in meritorious ways or suffer dire consequences.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Keyes has also noted transformations in Thai beliefs regarding merit and the corresponding concept of “*bun*” (1973, 13). By the second half of the twentieth century, the idea of “having merit” had become more abstract and thus, less potent. While people respected the power and authority of the king, they knew that his *bun* was not the sole element that determined the course of the nation. This opened up space for individuals to consider their own role in generating their individual and collective kammic legacies (similar to the reasoning given by Burmese Buddhists in the early twentieth century that I explore in subsequent chapters).

<sup>83</sup> Bur. ဉာဏ်/ဝီရိယ

rather one's understanding of Buddhist truths, as it is this particular type of knowledge that will lead one toward right view and right action. Buddhists in Myanmar often repeat variations of a metaphor that demonstrates the importance of *nyan* with regard to the effects of one's actions. When faced with a door whose handle is burning hot, the person who knows the handle to be hot (who has the wisdom of right view) will touch it delicately and hurt herself less. However, the person who does not know that the handle is hot (who is afflicted by ignorance), will grasp it strongly, doing more lasting damage to herself in the process. Similarly, an understanding of cause and effect as a moral process helps people to be more cognizant of the effects of their actions.<sup>84</sup> U Zawtika, a monk whose books are very popular among Burmese, yet somewhat controversial in that they espouse a less traditional way of teaching Buddhism, explains that, of the three (*kan*, *nyan*, and *wiriya*), he places the most importance on *wiriya*. *Wiriya* is the source of progress in the other two aspects, providing the motivating factor for increasing one's wisdom and combining with the right view of developed wisdom to encourage correct action according to the principle of *kan* (2006, 46).

With this understanding of *kan* we can return to a reappraisal of the five basic moral precepts (the vows to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consuming intoxicants). The fact that the precepts are not commandments handed down by a deity is relevant for our understanding of the moral universe of Theravāda Buddhism. There are no "punishments" for breaking the precepts. *Kan* is an impersonal, yet unavoidable process. In outlining the precepts, the Buddha was giving his followers guidelines for correct action. Any "punishment" for performing incorrect actions is merely the result of a naturally occurring process of cause and effect. Additionally, since the precepts are conscious vows to abstain from wrong-doing, we can see them as intentional acts. From this perspective, taking the vow to observe the precepts is in itself a merit-making activity (it generates *kutho*), regardless of the outcome. Of course, actually abiding by the precepts is more meritorious, but taking the vow on a regular basis is valuable in that it re-orientes practitioners to the basic foundation (*thila*, morality) upon which the other elements of Burmese Buddhist practice are built.

Vowing to observe the precepts is not only a personal daily practice for many Buddhists in Myanmar, it is also often a central part of any public religious ritual. The five precepts are some of the first Pāli words that any young Burmese Buddhist will learn. Monk sermons, group recitations, offerings

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<sup>84</sup> U Nu, the Prime Minister of Burma for most of its first fourteen years of independence, wrote a short story that illustrated the role of *nyan* relative to *kan*. The headman of a village refuses an inoculation, arguing that he cannot do anything to oppose the results of his *kan*. The health officer replies, "Buddha didn't say that your karma (*kan*) is the only deciding factor. He said that there were three deciding factors, your karma, your intelligence, and your industry. Be intelligent, for Buddha's sake, and have this inoculation" (cited in Butwell 1969, 77).

to monks, visits to pagodas, and other activities commonly include a monk administering the five precepts to a group of lay people. First, this practice reinforces the standing of the monks and their position as both teachers and guardians of community morality. Just as importantly, it renews in the participants a sense of sharing in a common moral community, one bound by particular beliefs and one in which there is common agreement on the outcome of either following or breaking the moral precepts.

### ***Lawki and Lawkouttara: The Worldly Realm and Beyond***<sup>85</sup>

One of the other primary distinctions that defines the Theravāda moral universe separates it into the realms of *lawki* (the mundane world in which humans exist and act, Pāli *lokiya*) and *lawkouttara* (the realm governed by the absolute truths taught by the Buddha that both transcend and embody the everyday world, Pāli *lokuttara*).<sup>86</sup> *Lawki* is relatively easy to define, as it consists of the entire material world, the world of social interactions, economic transactions and politics. We could also say that *lawki* is the world of perception, both physical and mental.<sup>87</sup>

*Lawkouttara* is more challenging to define in that it is not entirely correct to understand it as a realm or place of its own, although that is often how scholars and teachers describe it.<sup>88</sup> Instead, *lawkouttara* refers to a method of perception that is consistent with Buddhist right view and right understanding. *Lawkouttara* means seeing the world as it truly is (according to the Buddhist perspective) instead of seeing it through eyes clouded by ignorance of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. It can also refer to the path towards that understanding or insight into Buddhist truth and is defined as “the way to escape from worldly desires and attachments.”

Epistemologically, Theravāda Buddhist doctrine recognizes two distinct notions of “truth,” each corresponding to separate understandings of “reality.” Ultimate truth (Pāli *paramattha sacca*, Bur. *paramattha thitsa*)<sup>89</sup> is that which can be ascertained by the direct experience of phenomena, by knowing things according to their characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. These characteristics,

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<sup>85</sup> Bur. လောကီ / လောကုတ္တရာ

<sup>86</sup> Again, I will use the Burmese words because of their prominence in terms specific to Burmese Buddhist thought and because I see the *lawki-lawkouttara* distinction as one of the primary axes around which Burmese Buddhist ideas about politics diverge.

<sup>87</sup> Technically, *lawki* also includes more subtle realms, such as those that exist above the human realm where beings are made of only thought, with no corporeality. However, since these worlds are far removed from the daily experience of most Burmese Buddhists, and since monks and other teachers usually use *lawki* as shorthand for the mundane, material world, I also follow that usage here.

<sup>88</sup> Many writers translate *lawkouttara* as “supra-mundane” which, unfortunately, does not provide much assistance to the person trying to distinguish it from *lawki*, so I avoid that translation here.

<sup>89</sup> Bur. ပရမတ္ထသစ္စာ

rather than any names or conceptual definitions humans assign to things, represent the true nature of reality and together are the “truth” that ideally guides Buddhist doctrine. Of course, when speaking about and acting in the world, we use concepts and terms that, while not technically “true” according to the standards of ultimate truth, are necessary for our existence in the world and interactions with others. So, for example, although the Buddha taught that the perception of a “self” as a permanent, abiding entity is actually a *mis*-perception based on ignorance of the characteristics of existence, in everyday practice, even the Buddha used words such as “I” and “self.” This type of speech is known as conventional truth (Pāli *sammuti sacca* Bur. *thamouttiya thitsa*)<sup>90</sup> and can often be effective in discussing Buddhist doctrine since the use of these common (albeit ultimately false) terms can help us to grasp concepts of ultimate truth.

In a public sermon given by Ashin Wiriya that I attended in Yangon, the monk explained the distinction between these concepts by clarifying the appropriate action for each.<sup>91</sup> First, he distinguished between the two types of truth, describing conventional truth as “conceptual truth” and ultimate truth as “true truth.”<sup>92</sup> One uses the first (conventional) type of truth to pursue the path of *kan* (better rebirth through meritorious actions).<sup>93</sup> Put another way, one uses this type of truth when acting in the world. Whether *kutho* or *akutho* (positive or negative action), because one is acting according to conventional truth, one generates *kan* through these actions. The monk contrasted this with using the second (ultimate) type of truth to pursue the path of *nyan* (wisdom achieved through insight).<sup>94</sup> Again in this case, rather than simply referring to “mind,” *nyan* indicates a higher spiritual development in the *lawkouttara* realm; it is the *nyan* that connotes right view.

This monk did not, however, discount any action taken on the path of *kan*. Instead, his point was to distinguish the action appropriate for each type of truth. In order to be in a position to act according to ultimate truth, moral purity is a necessary step. However, the dictates of ultimate truth and of *lawkouttara* (these are simply two different ways of stating the same thing) are not conducive to correct moral practice because they transcend form, concept, and even the duality of right and wrong.

Correct moral practice begins at its most basic level with the five precepts. These vows to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consuming intoxicants all deal with basic

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<sup>90</sup> Bur. သမုဒယသစ္စာ

<sup>91</sup> Sermon given by Ashin Wiriya at the *Lanmadaw Lan Myo Neh Taya Pwe* on March 22, 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Bur. သတ်မှတ်ချက်အမှန် and တကယ့်အမှန်

<sup>93</sup> Bur. ကံလမ်းစဉ်အတွက် အသုံးချတယ်။

<sup>94</sup> Bur. ဉာဏ်လမ်းစဉ်အတွက် အသုံးချတယ်။

interactions with others. However, seeing the world from a *lawkouttara* perspective means perceiving things according to their true characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. If, according to these characteristics, everything in existence has no permanent “self,” concepts such as “you” and “I”, “hers” and “mine”, and “true” and “false” have no meaning. Conventional truth is absolutely necessary (at least provisionally) in order to develop correct moral practice. And, this monk re-iterated, ultimate truth is useless for this practice; in fact, when used without proper understanding, it can lead people away from correct moral practice in the world.

One of the challenges of correct Buddhist practice in the Theravāda tradition is to balance *lawki pyinnya* (worldly knowledge, Pāli *lokiya paññā*) and *lawkouttara pyinnya* (ultimate knowledge, Pāli *lokuttara paññā*) and to apply each in the correct situations.<sup>95</sup> This is not an easy task, especially from the perspective of monastic teachers who see themselves as not only stewards of the Buddha’s teachings, but as guides of public morality. It is also a challenge faced by those Burmese Buddhists whose writings and speeches I examine in this dissertation as they have attempted to find appropriate ways to apply the Buddha’s teachings to worldly, political matters.

U Hpo Hlaing, a prolific 19<sup>th</sup> century Burmese writer and minister to the last two Burmese kings before British colonial rule, wrote a text about the correct practice to achieve enlightenment, the *Wimouttiyatha Kyan* (Taste of Freedom). In it he claimed that, while following the precepts and performing acts of generosity were admirable and necessary practices, they were not sufficient to move one along the path to enlightenment; only *lawkouttara*-oriented practice could accomplish this goal. The Mahavisuddha-yon Sayadaw (a leading monk of the era) was critical of the work, saying that, although U Hpo Hlaing was not technically incorrect in marking these practices as *lawki* actions, the effect of his writing would be to convince ignorant or lazy people that there was no need for them to follow the precepts (Maung Htin 2002, 78). Another Burmese monk, the Khan Tee Sayadaw, describes the elusive balance in this confounding manner: “Speak in terms of concepts with common vocabulary, but know in terms of ultimate realities” (quoted in Mehm Tin Mon 2010, 29).

In his later writing U Hpo Hlaing himself also warned against mixing knowledge appropriate to different realms. In his *Rajadhammasangaha* (Rules for a Just King) he cautions his reader that the laws and maxims for prosperity in the *lawka* (a synonym for *lawki*, also meaning mundane world) do not lead to prosperity in the *lawkouttara* realm. These laws, and the corresponding appropriate actions, are in fact opposed to each other because the benefits are appropriate to their respective realms (Maung Htin

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<sup>95</sup> Bur. လောကီပညာ / လောကုတ္တရာပညာ

2002, 156). Many prominent monks and political figures have reinforced this view and it remains dominant in Myanmar in discussions of Buddhist doctrine and Buddhism and politics.

U Hpo Hlaing, however, appears to soften this position in other sections of the same work. Earlier in the book he disputes others who claim that superseding old, accepted laws with new laws will lead to a decline in a country's prosperity. In arguing against this claim he states that it is only by discarding the ways of worldly people trapped in the revolving round of rebirths will one be able to achieve realization of the Buddha's law of deliverance from suffering and rebirth (*ibid.*, 145). Here it seems as if there is a closer connection between *lawki* and *lawkouttara* matters. Other monks and writers have challenged the neat separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* and, although their views remain outside the mainstream, they are part of the range of Burmese Buddhist understandings of politics that I will explore in later chapters.

Related to this distinction is the presumed binary of action vs. contemplation, usually associated with *lawki* and *lawkouttara*, respectively. Many scholars have criticized this artificial distinction, initially made by early Western interpreters of Buddhism and perpetuated by some later scholars.<sup>96</sup> In his study of sainthood in contemporary Myanmar, Guillaume Rozenberg examines the life and activities of the Winsein Sayadaw. This monk combined contemplation and widely acknowledged moral purity with great success in propagating Buddhism in Myanmar, building many pagodas, statues, and other religious structures. According to Rozenberg, this reflects the fact that, "in Burmese Buddhism, contemplation and action are intrinsically linked...they are mutually defining and complementary" (2010, 6). While I agree with Rozenberg that this is a model for many Buddhists in Myanmar, I also want to stress that, for many of the writers whose works I examine, the key to success, both spiritual and material (and the two are definitely connected in the Theravāda view), is the proper balance between these two poles and applying the proper methods in the correct realms.

As a result, my further interest in these concepts is to understand Burmese writers' different positions on the degree to which *lawki* and *lawkouttara* interact and to ascertain what, if any, relevance a *lawkouttara* perspective (and by extension, an understanding of ultimate truth) has for action that takes place in the *lawki* realm. This is a tension that runs through Burmese Buddhist political thought and sometimes manifests in ambivalence regarding the nature of the political realm, a topic I will explore in more detail in the next chapter. Briefly, we can see an example of this tension in the Brahmin's prediction at the Buddha's birth. The Brahmin declared that the Buddha would either become

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<sup>96</sup> For example, the anthropologist Melford Spiro's division of Burmese Buddhism into "Nibbanic," "Kammatic," "Apotropaic," and "Esoteric" Buddhisms has continued to be influential in scholarly understandings of religious practice in the country, even though he suggested that they should not be taken as distinct systems (1982).

a world conquering king or a renunciate who showed the world the path to liberation. Although the future Buddha's store of merit had elevated him to a position where either path was a possibility, the methods of accomplishment in each path were almost diametrically opposed.

Buddhism in Myanmar, as in the rest of the Theravādin world, exists alongside other spiritual beliefs and practices in the country. Burmese Buddhist scholars and monks often stress the supposed "purity" of Buddhism in Myanmar, but Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière reminds us that the picture is more complex (2009). Practice for many Buddhists in Myanmar includes worship (or at least propitiation) of *nats*, local spirits typically associated with certain places or activities; wearing tattoos, amulets, or other protective devices, imbued with power by holy men; and other activities which Theravāda purists would deem "non-Buddhist."<sup>97</sup> Brac de la Perrière explains that these practices and beliefs, many of which pre-date Buddhism in Myanmar, complement Buddhist ones and have been incorporated into the Theravāda moral universe.

Many practitioners see no dissonance in combining these beliefs, which accord with the logic of appropriate practices for the *lawki* and *lawkouttara* realms, respectively. That is, while many Burmese Buddhists value the path to enlightenment, they also hope to gain material advantages in this world.<sup>98</sup> Since the Buddha is no longer accessible for supplication, worshipping and giving offerings to *nats* can convince these spirits to use the powers they have gained through spiritual attainment to help humans acquire power or standing in the world.<sup>99</sup> This is similar to the logic of *hpoun*, and highlights the different perspectives on the separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara*. Some Burmese Buddhists maintain that the Buddha's spiritual teachings were meant to encourage progress on the moral path to enlightenment and any worldly powers or standing that an individual accrues because of attainment on that path are incidental and not to be used. Others see that standing as the logical outcome of correct practice and argue that it should be used and enjoyed in the world. According to this view, *nats* and

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<sup>97</sup> Spiro (1967) deemed these practices of spirit worship as "Burmese supernaturalism," a religious system that was distinct from "Buddhism." Subsequent scholars have challenged his artificial separation (based on the idea of Pāli Buddhism as the "great" tradition and local variants as "little" traditions), revealing the ways in which Buddhist and "non-Buddhist" practices adapt to each other and the ways in which local beliefs are situated within a broad contextual Buddhist framework (Tambiah 1984; Brac de la Perrière 2009).

<sup>98</sup> One middle-aged man who worked at a hotel in Yangon told me that while he didn't trust in *nats*, only the Buddha, he did follow some of the practices of those who propitiate and believe in the *nats*. If doing those things could provide tangible material benefits, he reasoned, why not do it? (Personal Interview #13 in Yangon; March 3, 2011)

<sup>99</sup> One young man explained to me that the picture of the guardian spirit Bo Min Gaung that he kept on his dashboard was there to bring him money. He prayed to Bo Min Gaung for prosperity but said that one couldn't ask the Buddha for things like that. From his perspective, his moral conduct as a Buddhist and his prayers to Bo Min Gaung were totally unrelated. (Personal Interview #34 in Yangon; July 16, 2011)

other powerful beings, while still ultimately subject to impermanence, have the ability to act in and on the world in ways beyond normal human capability. Thus, paying homage to them is an acceptable way to gain material benefits in the *lawki* and is not necessarily incompatible with other Buddhist practices. This is a brief explanation of the other components of Burmese religious practice, but I will return to the subject throughout the dissertation.

### **Additional Elements of Burmese Buddhist Daily Practice and Belief**

Having discussed some of the most basic concepts that structure the Theravāda Buddhist moral universe, I now return to several other elements that are common to the Theravāda tradition that Buddhists in Myanmar particularly esteem. First, while the story of the Buddha's life is obviously of paramount importance to his followers, the final existence in which he reached enlightenment was only the end of a long string of lives in which he gradually developed and perfected his moral conduct (Pāli *sīla*, Bur. *thila*) and virtues (Pāli *pāramī*, Bur. *parami*). These “birth stories” of the Buddha's previous existences are known as *jataka* in Pāli (Bur. *zat taw*).<sup>100</sup> By the usual Burmese reckoning, there are 550 *jataka* stories that detail the Buddha's past lives (including existences as various animals).<sup>101</sup> In Burmese society these tales function as parables, providing moral lessons related to proper social and political conduct. Burmese Buddhists pay particular attention to the stories of the Buddha's last ten lives, in which he perfected the ten *pāramīs* (virtues).

The *jatakas* are included in the *sutta pitaka* as one of the three main sections of the acknowledged Pāli canon of the Theravāda tradition. These three components are referred to as the “three baskets” (Pāli *tipiṭaka*, Bur. *pitaka thoun boun*): the life and teachings of the Buddha (Pāli *sutta*, Bur. *thouk*), regulations for monastic life (Pāli *vinaya*, Bur. *wini*), and the philosophical exposition of existence (Pāli *abhidhamma*, Bur. *abidama*).<sup>102</sup> I will revisit each of these in more detail later in the dissertation, but for now will mention two *suttas* that are particularly prominent in Burmese Buddhist discourse. The Buddha originally gave the *Mettā Sutta mettā* (discourse on loving-kindness, Bur. *myitta thouk*) as a form of protection for monks to placate ravenous beasts who occupied a forest where the monks wished to meditate.<sup>103</sup> By radiating indiscriminating *mettā* to everything around them, the monks created a safe space, while also developing their own practice, as *mettā* is one of the *pāramīs*

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<sup>100</sup> Bur. ဇာတ်တော်

<sup>101</sup> The Sri Lankan tradition recognizes 547 *jatakas* but there are many more non-canonical *jatakas* in the Theravāda tradition.

<sup>102</sup> Bur. ပိဋကတ်သုံးပုံ / သုတ် / ဝိနည်း / အဘိဓမ္မာ

<sup>103</sup> Bur. မေတ္တာသုတ်

(virtues). Today, reciting this chant is a regular part of Buddhist practice in Myanmar and many people see *mettā* as a transformative feeling or practice, not just for the individual, but for society as a whole. This is why the monks who marched in 2007 chanted *mettā*. Not only was it seen as appropriate action for monks (i.e. not explicitly political), many monks believed the act of generating *mettā* itself could spur social and political change.

The *Mangala Sutta* (discourse on blessings, Bur. *mingala thouk*) consists of thirty-eight auspicious practices or circumstances, and probably enjoys the widest circulation of any of the Buddha's teachings in Myanmar.<sup>104</sup> Monks and other prominent authors regularly write books about the *Mangala Sutta* and it is the subject of sermons, books for children, and even comics. This discourse includes prescriptions, such as paying respect to elders, and admonishments, including refraining from associating with fools. The *Mangala Sutta* plays a similar role as the *jātakas*, providing lessons on correct moral practice in daily situations and acting as a common text that unites Buddhists in Myanmar in a self-conscious moral community.

### The Dynamics of Lay-Monastic Interaction

The final element of the Theravāda worldview that I will examine in this chapter is the *sangha*, or community of monks. The Buddha initiated this body so that dedicated practitioners could remove themselves from worldly concerns and relationships in order to more effectively cultivate proper moral conduct and non-attachment. In the years since, this loosely organized collection of individuals, in theory bound together only by a common code of discipline, has become a more formalized societal institution, with varying degrees of centralization and hierarchy and subject to different levels of state control, depending on the country. Over the past two centuries the *sangha* in Myanmar has been one of the least centralized among Theravāda countries, although state reforms in the 1980s and 1990s have resulted in stronger government oversight and influence (Tin Maung Maung Than 1993).<sup>105</sup>

While scholars and practitioners alike have reinforced the alleged monastic ideal of separation from society and its attachments, in practice monks often share close connections with lay people. This is particularly true in Myanmar where, in contrast with some other Theravāda Buddhist countries, membership in the *sangha* is rarely a lifelong vocation. Traditionally, most young Burmese Buddhist men

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<sup>104</sup> Bur. မင်္ဂလာသုတ်

<sup>105</sup> This is by no means a new phenomenon in Burmese state-*sangha* relations. Charney notes that Bodawhpaya (who ruled from 1782-1819) was the first king to make a “significant and sustained attempt by the court to bring about a complete reform of the Religion” (2006, 91). Mindon, the penultimate king of Burma, also attempted a number of *sangha* reforms, but, because of his deteriorating rule over his shrinking territory, the result was a proliferation of sectarianism (Ferguson 1978; Mendelson 1975, 84-118).

would enter the *sangha* at least twice in their lives, once as young boys and once as young men, although more seem to be delaying or foregoing altogether this second initiation period. While some choose to remain in the order and pursue a life of scholarship, teaching, or meditation, most return to their lay lives after a short period, ranging from a few days to a few months. As a result, while there is a small and likely consistent population of “career” monks, much of the *sangha*’s population is transient, maintaining close ties with their families and communities.

Before the British took control of Burma,<sup>106</sup> education was mostly centered on the *hpoungyi kyaun* (monastery) (Schober 2007, Dhammasami 2007).<sup>107</sup> Although the educational role of monks was greatly reduced by the British during the colonial period and remains limited by the prevalence of state and private schools in urban areas, many Myanmar children, especially in rural areas, go to monasteries for parts of their education and monks and nuns often direct orphanages. Additionally, lay people consult with monks about personal difficulties and the monks provide a form of counseling and moral guidance. Monasteries are also traditionally known as centers for information gathering and dissemination, thanks to visitors, traveling monks, and through other communication technology. Monks and nuns have also become increasingly involved with local development projects. All of these factors combine to suggest that the ideal image of the monk as detached from worldly society (*lawki*) and focused entirely on spiritual (*lawkouttara*) matters is a mistaken one. In addition, monks’ close ties to the lay community are also reinforced through ritualized practices of donation, called *dāna* (Bur. *dana*).<sup>108</sup>

The word *dāna* means “charity” or “generosity” and Buddhists in Myanmar most often use the word with regard to donations or alms given to monks. For some this is a daily practice of joining with neighbors to provide food for the monks at a local monastery. Others occasionally donate supplies to monks such as robes or toiletries.<sup>109</sup> *Dāna* also includes donations made for larger religious projects, such as publishing a pamphlet, sponsoring a monk’s sermon, or building a monastery or pagoda. Apart

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<sup>106</sup> The British secured their control over Burma in a three stage process that began in 1824 and ended in 1886 with the fall of the Burmese monarchy in Mandalay. British rule extended until Burmese independence on January 4, 1948, with a brief interregnum of Japanese control from 1942-1945 during World War II.

<sup>107</sup> Bur. ဘုန်းကြီးကျောင်း

<sup>108</sup> Bur. ဒါန

<sup>109</sup> The Buddha allowed monks to possess eight “requisites,” the minimum number of items needed for life and practice. They include three robes (outer, inner, and a thick robe for winter), an alms bowl, a razor, a needle and thread, a belt, and a water strainer. Lay people can donate these items in addition to daily food, shelter, and medicines as *dāna*.

from proper moral practice in their daily lives, *dāna* given to monks is one of the most common ways in which lay Buddhists in Myanmar gain *kutho*.

The modalities of the practice of *dāna* have generated various interpretations. According to Spiro, in an interpretation still shared by many Myanmar Buddhists, religious donations, which include donating food and material requisites to the *sangha* as well as constructing religious buildings, provide the most *kutho* (1982, 104). In this interpretation, the moral worthiness of the recipient influences the *kutho* generated by a donation. Others argue that intention (Pāli *cetanā*, Bur. *sedana*) is of greater importance in generating merit<sup>110</sup>. From this point of view, it is the selfless intention of the lay donor, along with the qualities of the monastic recipient, that determines the resultant worthiness of the donation.<sup>111</sup> From another perspective, the quantity and repetition of giving enhances its efficacy, hence a rich person can earn more merit through the act of giving to monks, regardless of his mindset. Connecting *dāna* to right view, one monk reminded listeners at a sermon that “You must donate with *nyan* [wisdom],” otherwise there would be no *kutho* [merit] from the donation.<sup>112</sup> All of these interpretations represent a wide range of views on *dāna* among Myanmar Buddhists.

For Juliane Schober, *dāna* designates an interaction between monks, as recipients, and the lay community, as donors. They are linked by a ritual exchange system with the objective of gaining both religious merit and social status (2011). Naoko Kumada argues that this interaction can also take place among laymen, between monks and laymen, among monks, and even from monks or laymen to other sentient beings that are part of the Burmese cosmology (i.e. spirits, animals, etc). She interprets *dāna* as a lay form of asceticism, by which a layperson can partially practice renunciation regardless of his or her economic and social status. It is an asymmetrical and dynamic relation. Kumada also suggests that the use of the term itself by the actors has a social dimension: “It is important to note that the border between *dāna* and ordinary giving is not always clear. In the real world *dāna* is not free from its social context and is bound with worldly elements” (Kumada 2004, 4).

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<sup>110</sup> Bur. စေတနာ

<sup>111</sup> One monk, a teacher at a Buddhist university in Yangon, suggested that there are three levels of *dāna*. The lowest level is giving with the intention of trying to derive some benefit for oneself, such as wishing for better conditions in the next life. In the next level, the donor also gives with the intention of gaining a benefit, but in this case the intention is to achieve Enlightenment. Since this is regarded a more noble goal, it is seen as a more meritorious giving, but it is still not ideal. According to this monk, the purest form of *dāna* is that which includes no thought of reaping benefit, that is, the donor gives only to relieve the need or suffering of another person (Interview #30 in Yangon; June 29, 2011).

<sup>112</sup> Bur. ဉာဏ်နဲ့ လှူရတယ်။ Sermon given by Ashin Eindaga at the Thirty-fourth Street *Taya Pwe* on January 31, 2011. Here I would suggest that, in addition to meaning “wisdom,” *nyan* implies right view and the correct intention.

The ritual of giving *dāna* also draws monks into the worldly interactions and concerns of lay people and keeps them aware of the material conditions of their lay supporters' lives. Monastic involvement in protests in the summer of 2007 began with some monks' insistence that the government take steps to assuage the material, economic suffering of Myanmar's citizens. Apart from a general concern with alleviating suffering overall, their reasoning was as follows. If government mishandling of the economy has led to poverty, lay Buddhists can no longer afford to donate to the monks. This deprives lay people of one of their primary sources of *kutho*. In addition, the monastic community is completely dependent on lay support. Therefore, economic hardship also has a negative impact on the work of the *sangha*, especially their role in preserving the Buddha's teachings and maintaining public morality.

### **Conclusion: The Logic of the Theravāda Moral Universe**

The Theravāda moral universe is governed by *kan*, a logic of cause and effect, understood as an impersonal system in which each individual is directly responsible for his present circumstances, as a result of his past actions. Although from an ultimate (*lawkouttara*) perspective, good and bad are also simply constructs, in a worldly (*lawki*) sense there are certain behaviors that help to purify the mind and assist practitioners in gaining insight into the Buddhist truths of existence. These form the moral basis of the Theravāda universe. Made up of the precepts, the eight-fold noble path, the thirty-eight blessings (*mingala*), the ten virtues (*pāramī*), and other reflections of morality (*thila*), they not only provide a template for proper conduct, they also reinforce the omnipresence of *kan* in every facet of Burmese Buddhists' lives.

Taken as a whole, Burmese monks present *kan* and the logic of cause and effect not just as teachings of the Buddha, but as natural laws that govern the workings of the universe. Chan Myay Sayadaw declares that "The law of nature that no one can refuse is the law of causal relations. The relationship/connection between cause and effect is natural law" (2006, 39-40).<sup>113</sup> The consistent view among Burmese Buddhists is that the Buddha did not create this process, he merely came to understand the natural law and was able to explain it to others. This does not minimize his achievement, but emphasizes that the universe continues to function according to these processes whether or not someone like the Buddha has appeared to explain it and whether or not human beings are aware of it. Furthermore, even if there are particular types of action that are appropriate for the *lawki* and

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<sup>113</sup> Bur. ဒါ ဘယ်သူမှ လက်မခံဘဲ မနေနိုင်တဲ့ သဘာဝနိယာမ the Law of Causal Relation ပဲ။ အကြောင်းအကျိုး ဆက်သွယ်မှု နိယာမပေါ့။

*lawkouttara* realms, the principles of the *lawkouttara* realm are the ultimate truths that characterize everything in the universe, from the workings of the gods to the fortunes of a political regime.<sup>114</sup>

Moreover, the appropriate course for effective action in the *lawki* realm is rooted in the moral path that the Buddha developed from his insight into the way the universe functions. And, as Ashin Thittila attests, “the practice of the moral life is the very core and essence of Buddhism; character is the product of daily, hourly actions, daily acts of kindness, charity, and unselfishness. By doing just actions we come to be just, and we judge strength by the power of action” (1987, 15). However, proper moral action is not only the path to spiritual purity and eventual liberation from *dukkha*, it can also result in tangible, material benefits such as wealth, social standing, and political power.

The notion that one’s individual and collective circumstances are unavoidably tied to moral practice is reinforced regularly in Burmese Buddhist discourse. The author of an article in a Buddhist journal in 1957 lamented the current state of politics in the country but had no doubt of either the cause or the solution. “What has been the result of the moral decay in the Union? The answer is obvious. If people continued to hold life sacred, followed the noble principles enunciated by the Buddha and lived their lives according to the way of their religion, then perhaps the Union would have been spared the blood baths of the past eight or nine years... Everywhere in the country we see manifestations of *lawba*, *dawtha*, and *mawha* (human greed, hatred and delusion). Life has become intolerable so much so that concerted efforts are needed to bring a change in the country” (Ba Kyaw 1957, 6).

While correct moral action takes place at the level of the individual, many Burmese Buddhists believe that its effects can be aggregated at the group level, with the collective deeds of a nation or a group of people influencing that nation or group’s development and progress. The effects of individual moral conduct can even extend to the condition of humanity as a whole, which provides a logical framework for Burmese Buddhist thinking about social and political change. U Zawtika sums up this logic very simply: “In this world, what causes evil and disrespect to increase? We could answer by saying that it is the increase of people who do bad things” (2006, 66).<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Buddhism is atheistic in that the Buddha taught that there is no creator god, only the endless chain of cause and effect in every direction in time. However, Buddhism has also merged effectively with other beliefs, incorporating gods and other powerful beings as life forms with abilities and life spans that far surpass humans, but still subject, eventually, to impermanence.

<sup>115</sup> Bur. လောကမှာ မကောင်းမှုတွေ မရှိသားမှုတွေ ပိုများလာတာ ဘာကြောင့်လဲ။ မကောင်းတာလုပ်တဲ့သူတွေ များလာလို့ လို့ ဖြေကြလိမ့်မယ်။

Chan Myay Sayadaw makes it clear that correct moral behavior begins where this chapter began, with faith and belief in the Three Gems. “Let us consider a person. This person has been bad his entire life. He does not show respect for...the Buddha, the *dhamma*, or the *sangha*. He does not give *dāna*. He does not build up his *thila*. He does not keep the precepts. He does not meditate. What kinds of things does he do? To get things he steals, fights, and brings misfortune. When he sells or buys goods he lies and deceives others. This is the way he makes a living” (2006, 43).<sup>116</sup> The chain of cause and effect extends back to the most basic beliefs and practices of Burmese Buddhism. If these are not correct, how can any right action follow? The Sayadaw’s explanation reinforces the importance of correct moral conduct as a basis for success in any endeavor, asserting the relevance of the Theravāda view of the moral universe for dealing with social and political concerns.

Finally, we can return to *kan*, *nyan* (wisdom), and *wiriya* (effort) to demonstrate the range of interpretations of concepts within this framework. All three are essential elements of the workings of cause and effect in the Theravāda moral universe. However, the ways in which Burmese Buddhists rank them in order of importance can indicate the way in which they understand change and the role of human agency in the world. A focus on *kan* as the central factor brings one’s attention to proper moral action according to the precepts, but it can also encourage a more fatalistic view, in which present circumstances are not only unavoidable, they are justified through reference to unknown past actions.<sup>117</sup> While fewer Buddhists in Myanmar focus on *nyan* as the primary factor of the trio, this element brings the focus to right view and seeing the world “as it really is,” that is, as characterized by *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. This focus would seem to be more oriented toward *lawkouttara* concerns rather than *lawki* matters.

An emphasis on *wiriya* tends to be more empowering, focusing on the role of present efforts and actions in changing the future, rather than past actions as having conditioned the present. Given this orientation, it is not surprising that this is the message of less traditional monks such as U Zawtika,

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<sup>116</sup> Bur. ဆိုကြပါစို့ လူတယောက်၊ အဲဒီလူတယောက်ဟာ သူ့ဘဝလုံးတော့ ဆိုးပေနေတာပဲ၊ ဘုရား၊ တရား၊ သံဃာ ရတနာသုံးပါးလဲ မကိုင်းရှိုင်းဘူး။ ဒါနလဲမပြုဘူး။ သီလလဲ မဆောက်တည်ဘူး။ ဥပုသ်လဲ မစောင့်ဘူး။ တရားလဲ အားမထုတ်ဘူး။ သူလုပ်တာ ဘာလုပ်သလဲ၊ ပစ္စည်းရမယ်ဆိုရင် ဘယ်လိုနည်းနဲ့မဆို ခိုးတယ်၊ တိုက်တယ်၊ ခိုက်တယ်။ ကုန်ရောင်းကုန်ဝယ်လုပ်ရင်လဲ လိမ်တယ်၊ ညှာတယ်၊ လှည့်တယ်၊ အမျိုးမျိုး ဒါတွေလုပ်တယ်။ ဒီလိုနဲ့ပဲ သူ့အသက်မွေးဝမ်းကျောင်း လုပ်လာတယ်။

<sup>117</sup> One young, HIV positive Buddhist activist acknowledged that he had contracted HIV because of his past actions (by “past actions” he was referring to the specific actions through which he had contracted the virus as well as the unknown “bad” actions further in the past that had generated the *kan* that resulted in his HIV positive status). However, while he recognized that this was unavoidable due to the logic of *kan*, he chose to focus on the ways in which his present actions, if conducted with proper intention and moral discipline, would lead to morally and materially productive situations in the future. (Group Interview #28 in Yangon; July 1, 2011)

who often mixes Western scholarship with Buddhist teachings and whose books occasionally read like self-help manuals. Even in this case, however, we should notice the inherent tension in adopting this perspective. An emphasis on *wiriya* encourages practitioners to take control of their circumstances, an admonishment that could appear to be in direct conflict with the common Burmese understanding of *anattā* as “no control.”

There is thus a fundamental paradox at the heart of the Theravāda Buddhist perspective on existence that creates space for the varying interpretations I have discussed in this chapter. On the one hand, as U Zawtika emphasizes, the actions of each individual have real effects in the world and, although conditioned by our past actions, we are free to make our own decisions, ideally rooted in right view, and with an eye toward proper moral conduct. On the other hand, the inevitability of the results of one’s actions (*kan*) and the understanding of *anattā* as “no control” suggest a world in which human agency is severely limited, at least in an immediate sense.<sup>118</sup> This perspective can limit action in the face of suffering or repression, with a justification that the punishment for evil is inevitable and impersonal and will “work itself out.” The Theravāda moral universe provides a conceptual framework that can accommodate political perspectives that are both optimistically liberating and fatalistically compliant. In the next chapter I turn to some of the basic conceptions of politics that Buddhists in Myanmar have articulated within this moral framework.

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<sup>118</sup> Although some have argued that the effects of any intentional action should be seen as “inevitable” according to the Buddha’s teachings, in practice different perspectives have arisen to deal with what Obeyesekere has called the “psychological indeterminacy” of *kamma* (1968, 21ff). Although Buddhists operate under the general principle that actions will generate effects that correspond to their degree of morality, they do not know the time frame, nature, or severity of those effects. To cope with this indeterminacy, many Buddhist cultures have developed practices of propitiating supernatural beings (to intervene and prevent the otherwise inevitable effects of past actions); counter-karma (the belief that meritorious actions can “cancel out” the effects of prior demeritorious acts); and sharing merit (to aid those who might not otherwise be able to generate their own merit). Obeyesekere also mentions that the salvation-granting properties of supernatural beings in the Theravāda tradition have become institutionalized in the Mahāyāna cult of the Boddhisattva as savior (ibid., 25).

## CHAPTER 2: BURMESE BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE NATURE OF POLITICS

Most studies of Buddhism and politics in Myanmar have focused on empirical matters such as the ways in which kings claimed legitimacy through Buddhist symbolism or the role of the *sangha* in influencing political decisions.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, these studies have only briefly considered a more basic question: what are the ways in which Burmese Buddhists have understood the nature of politics? The moral framework of the Theravāda universe provides Burmese Buddhists with a template for understanding how political authority came to be, why it is necessary and in what ways it may be limited. More importantly, one of the fundamental truths of Buddhism, the teachings of cause and effect, supplies the conceptual framework within which Buddhists in Myanmar have thought about political action and political change, as quintessentially *moral* practices.

I begin with a brief discussion of Burmese definitions of “politics.” The traditional Theravāda Buddhist model of kingly authority, that I explain in more detail below, presumed politics to be an elite activity. Beliefs regarding the moral or intellectual inability of certain groups of people to participate in politics persisted after independence in 1948. However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, individuals like the independence hero Aung San have also sought to expand the boundaries of inclusion in politics, not just with regard to participation, but to argue for an enlarged notion of what is “political.” In this chapter, I situate Burmese views on the nature of politics in relation to two texts from the Pāli *suttas*, the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti Sutta*.<sup>2</sup> The *Aggañña Sutta* presents a picture of humans

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Smith (1965), Myo Myint (1987) and Koenig (1990).

<sup>2</sup> The *Aggañña Sutta* is part of the *Digha Nikaya* (“Collection of Long Discourses”). In the Burmese tradition, in addition to being a part of the *suttas*, it has also been incorporated (with variations) into Burmese royal chronicles that indigenize the concept and localize it by connecting Burmese royal lineages to the first king of the *Aggañña Sutta*. While few apart from scholars and scholar-monks would know these texts, my interviews and other scholarship indicate that many Burmese are familiar with the basics of the story as a legendary account of the establishment of kingship and a warning of the consequences of moral decay. In particular, the nationalist writer Thakin Kodaw Hmaing used the story of *Mahasammata*, the first king of the *Aggañña Sutta*, in several of his widely-read works, as did Aung San and U Nu in their speeches. Because of this, I suggest that the text has actually been more influential in Burmese Buddhist political thought than in other Theravāda countries. The *Cakkavatti Sutta* (also part of the *Digha Nikaya*) is less commonly incorporated into Burmese texts (although its basic premise does figure prominently in a popular Thai text that I occasionally use for comparative purposes, the *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, “Three Worlds According to King Ruang”). The figure of the *cakkavatti* (the universal or “wheel-turning” king) is also less common in the Burmese royal imaginary, but by no means non-existent. The Burmese version of the *cakkavatti*, the *setkya min*, appears most often as an iconic figure leading millennialist revolts against royal or colonial authority in an attempt to reverse a perceived spiritual decline and usher in the age of the next Buddha. Many Burmese Buddhists would have been familiar with the general story of the *Cakkavatti Sutta* as a warning of

as fundamentally driven by desire and incapable of controlling their baser actions. From this perspective, political authority is a necessary bulwark against anarchy and violence. In exploring Burmese uses of the *Aggañña Sutta* in both justifying and (in some cases) limiting political authority, I also look at Burmese beliefs about human nature. Here I identify an ambivalence that fundamentally structures Burmese attitudes towards politics and political authority: are humans primarily defined by their desire-driven natures or by their capacity for liberation and enlightenment? The constitutive relationship between these two aspects of human nature forms a productive tension that Burmese political thinkers have sought to resolve in developing and defending their particular views on politics.

The *Cakkavatti Sutta* also relates a story of moral and material decline, but includes the example of an ideal king whose rule will set the stage for the coming of the next Buddha. Burmese Buddhists have regularly drawn on the lesson of the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, that the moral actions of both leaders and members of communities have tangible effects in the material world, in explaining the nature of politics and in developing political critiques. I also return to the tension between *lawki* and *lawkouttara*—worldly and ultimate perspectives on reality—to navigate the tension between the *Aggañña Sutta*'s justification of political authority and the focus on moral conduct in a context of cause and effect in the *Cakkavatti Sutta*. Finally, I use these ideas about the nature of politics to examine the concept of “unity” as it is understood and deployed in a Burmese Buddhist context.

### **Politics as “Affairs of the State” (The Traditional Model)**

Burmese Buddhists have developed a number of different interpretations of “politics.” The most common Burmese word for politics is *nain ngan ye*, or “affairs of the state.”<sup>3</sup> Prior to the colonial period, politics was an area of action reserved for kings, would-be kings, and their closest advisors. The majority of the population did not participate in politics nor, from the available evidence, was there generally a belief that it was desirable or even possible for any but a select few to engage in the affairs of the state. As Alexey Kirichenko notes, this effectively “[cut] down the spheres where politics was possible,” although, beginning in the late nineteenth century, political figures in Burma would begin to expand this space for political action (Kirichenko n.d., 3).

Although we commonly translate *nain ngan ye* as “affairs of the state,” “state” is not an accurate label for the system of political organization that existed prior to the colonial period in Burma. Political entities in pre-modern Southeast Asia did not have clearly defined boundaries, nor did political

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the consequences of immoral conduct and, as I demonstrate later, political figures also occasionally used this moral lesson in their speeches.

<sup>3</sup> Bur. နိုင်ငံရေး။ The Thai concept of *kanmuang* is similar, meaning “affairs of the polity.”

rulers exercise power in the radial fashion of contemporary nation-states. Instead, the power of a king was strongest in his capital city and weakened the further removed it was from there (Heine Geldern 1942). He could expand his authority by offering protection and developing tributary relations with lesser political figures at the end of his reach, but there was always a threat that these minor players could switch their loyalties to another encroaching power. The result was a series of expanding and contracting zones of influence, with blurry borders and zones of overlapping authority. O.W. Wolters designated this political system as a “mandala” and Stanley Tambiah labeled it the “galactic polity.”<sup>4</sup>

The operating principles of the Theravāda moral universe, particularly the doctrine of *kan*, supported the belief that politics was an elite practice. According to this doctrine, an individual’s present status, authority and abilities are all at least partially the result of his past actions. King Mindon, who ruled in the middle of the nineteenth century, claimed that he was a “righteous king who through the power of merit accumulated in many hundreds of births obtained the wealth of kingship” (Sarkisyanz 1965, 68). *Kan* can act in a legitimating, explanatory way, justifying an individual’s position with reference to presumed good deeds in the past. However, *kan* only justifies present conditions and has no predictive power since no one can know the details of the workings of *kan*. Once a king gained power, his position was justified through his *kan* (or *hpoun*, a similar term reserved for the highest stores of merit). Only after a given ruler lost his position could people explain that result as a loss of *hpoun* or as the expiration of his positive *kan*.

There is an irony of kingship that reinforces the Burmese Buddhist view of time and the universe as cyclical. An individual could ascend to the heights of economic or political power because of his past good actions. However, the actions necessary in the present to reach those exalted positions were almost invariably contrary to Buddhist moral teachings, generating *akutho* (demerit) for the future. Not only that, people expected that holders of high office would commit more immoral acts. The example of Aśoka, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century ruler in what is today India, is instructive. Although commonly praised as the exemplar of Buddhist kingship, Aśoka began his career expanding his empire through violent military conquest. Only after defeating his enemies and absorbing their territory did he commit himself to conquering others through the strength of *dhamma* rather than arms. In the Aśokan model, the ideal ruler could only rule through *dhamma* after committing numerous morally blameworthy acts in the process of bringing the territory under his control. Kingship afforded opportunities to make great merit

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<sup>4</sup> Wolters’ most detailed description of the mandala model is in the collection *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspective* (1982). Tambiah described the galactic polity model in *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (1976).

through donations and spreading the Buddha's teachings but it was an intrinsically worldly undertaking, one that inevitably generated negative *kan* as well.<sup>5</sup>

Having presented this pre-modern Theravāda Buddhist model of monarchical political legitimacy, I should add a few skeptical notes. First, a belief that an immeasurable number of good actions in the past justified a king's present authority does not necessarily imply a positive appraisal of that king's current behavior. Kings might have been richer and more powerful than their subjects because of their superior *hpoun*, but their future circumstance were in jeopardy because their absolute power allowed them to act in predatory and capricious ways. Burmese Buddhists were fully aware that their rulers rarely, if ever, lived up to the moral expectations with which they justified their rule. The *Lawkaniti*, a Burmese collection of folk wisdom lists kings as one of the "five enemies," along with water, fire, thieves and disease. Many Burmese Buddhists still pray for protection from these "enemies" as part of their daily practice.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the writings that praised a king's past deeds as justification for his authority were essentially royal propaganda.<sup>7</sup> While operating consistently within the conceptual boundaries of Theravāda Buddhist beliefs about *kan* and *hpoun*, the ministers and monks who developed elaborate genealogies and legitimating narratives of kings were acutely aware of the pragmatic need to buttress a ruler's standing against potential challengers. Michael Charney's excellent study of the political mythology of the Konbaung dynasty provides an example of the strategies employed by a small group of monks who developed an ideology that centralized and consolidated royal power through connecting the Konbaung lineage back to *Mahasammata*, the original king depicted in the *Aggañña Sutta* (2006).<sup>8</sup>

Third, elites (either monks or ministers) composed almost all of the written texts from the pre-colonial period in Burma. As a result, we have virtually no evidence of the views of the average Burmese Buddhist from this time. While this is a common challenge faced by historians of Southeast Asia, the lack

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<sup>5</sup> John Badgley explains, "The ethical codes assumed that political activity was an obligation upon rulers, but that it had no inherent virtue" (1965, 62). This view of politics, which not only sees political activity as morally unwholesome, but also as devoid of any inherently virtuous aspects, has presented a challenge for contemporary figures who argue for a participatory democratic system. Are there only instrumental justifications for democracy (the protection of human rights, for example) or is it possible to envision participation in politics as a morally productive activity in itself? I return to this question in Chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> In a study of the ambivalent relation of Khmer Buddhists to their kings, Ashley Thompson points out that the idea of kings as both protector and threat is a cultural universal, even quoting Freud's observation that kings "must both be guarded and guarded against" (quoted in Thompson 2004, 92).

<sup>7</sup> Yang Sam relates that in Cambodia, Buddhist novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries included episodes from princes' lives and the Buddha's life, presenting them as analogous and reinforcing the superior moral position of the royalty (1987, 11).

<sup>8</sup> The Konbaung kings ruled Burma from 1752-1885, when the British successfully deposed Thibaw, the last Burmese king and established colonial rule over the entire territory.

of evidence cautions skepticism toward attributing belief in these legitimating myths to a wide swath of the Buddhist population. In fact, the little that we do know of village life during the Konbaung period suggests that most of the population in Burma had no involvement in and experienced limited effects of the “affairs of the state” on a daily basis (Koenig 1990). The legitimating (or de-legitimizing) aspects of this traditional model of politics would have only become apparent or relevant in times of crisis and subjects’ interactions with political authority, if they occurred at all, would have been through distant intermediaries.

Finally, while Theravāda Buddhism provided legitimating symbolism and a framework for ideal ethical conduct on the part of the king, the Indian political tradition was likely a stronger influence on the practical business of statecraft. George Coedes noted that monarchies in mainland Southeast Asia incorporated elements of Indian legal codes and Brahmanic rituals from the Hindu tradition, often fusing them with indigenous practices (1966). While Aśoka provided a model as the ideal Buddhist monarch, ruling a territory solely through the power of *dharmma* was not an appealing option to Burmese kings. Indian legal traditions, such as those based on the *Arthashastra*<sup>9</sup>, provided techniques of disciplinary statecraft as well as the justification for using them.<sup>10</sup> Adherence to these Brahmanical practices was another elite element that distinguished the political practices of the courts from the daily lives of the king’s subjects.

In the pre-colonial Burmese polity there was a conceptual distinction between the affairs of the king (*nain ngan ye*) and the political practices that took place at a more local level. Sarkisyanz claims that “not from royal legislation but from unanimous custom were derived the regulations of the daily life of the people” (1965, 15). While he undoubtedly overstates the “unanimous” nature of these customs, he is right to suggest that royal actions probably had a minimal impact on people’s lives, amplified primarily during times of crisis. Even after independence in 1948 many Burmese continued to think of politics (*nain ngan ye*) as a practice reserved for elites. These elites were no longer kings or princes, but were elected officials and leaders of political parties. For rural Burmese (the majority of the population), the

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<sup>9</sup> The *Arthashastra* was an ancient Indian text on statecraft, military matters and economic management.

<sup>10</sup> Trevor Ling does point out, however, that Theravāda polities differed from their Indian counterparts (with which they shared many pragmatic codes of governance) in expecting a certain level of moral conduct from their kings. Thus, in the Theravāda tradition, the king’s “authority rests in his pragmatic achievement of power, *supported* by his loyal adherence to a universally accepted system of morality, namely Theravāda Buddhism,” whereas the Indian tradition expected rulers to act in immoral ways and focused on developing a framework for restraining their destructive actions (Ling 1979, 29-30).

actions of these national leaders were far removed from village life. Based on his research in the 1950s and 60s, John Badgley commented that villagers rarely used the phrase *nain ngan ye* to describe “politics” in their own communities (1965, 71). Instead, they referred to traditional practices of cooperative action, compromise and reconciliation as *ayu ahsa* (beliefs) or *atway ahkaw* (ideas).<sup>11</sup> Even by the early 1950s, national politics was sufficiently partisan and dysfunctional that villagers might choose to disassociate themselves from *nain ngan ye* and its increasingly negative connotations. This suggests the persistence of a clearly bounded and more exclusive understanding of what politics is and who can participate in it. However, other elements of the Burmese tradition show a more malleable and evolving understanding of politics, one that seems to still be in flux today.

### **An Expanded Definition of “Politics”**

Many Burmese commonly cite the independence hero Aung San’s conception of *nain ngan ye* today. In several speeches and writings in the 1930s and 40s, he pushed back against a conception of politics that pertained solely to government activities or elite maneuverings. He also challenged the idea that politics was dirty or polluting, insisting that politics was neither above nor below the average person. In broadening the definition of politics he said, “Politics means your everyday life...It is how you eat, sleep, work and live, with which politics is concerned” (Silverstein 1993, 95). Aung San recognized the need for the leaders of the Burmese independence struggle to involve the population in public life in a way that had been unthinkable prior to the colonial period. In an article entitled “Different Kinds of Politics” he made his reformulation of the term even more explicit: “Politics is all of the affairs of human society” (Mya Han 1998, 92).<sup>12</sup>

Aung San’s insistence on Burma’s existence as a “secular” state has led many scholars to label him as a “secularist.” However, part of my concern in this dissertation is to demonstrate that even those Burmese Buddhist political figures who have opposed the establishment of Buddhism as the national religion and advocated for separation of church and state (including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) still reason about politics from within a Theravādin worldview. This has less to do with overt displays of Buddhist piety (such as those that characterized U Nu’s public life) and more to do with having a particular conceptual view of the universe as governed by Buddhist principles. There is ample evidence that Aung San did in fact see the world this way or, at the very least, saw the necessity in describing politics in these terms.

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<sup>11</sup> Bur. အယူအဆ and အတွေးအခေါ်

<sup>12</sup> Bur. နိုင်ငံရေးသည် လူမှု၊ သူမှုကိစ္စအားလုံးပင် ဖြစ်၏။

In the article “Different Kinds of Politics,” he explained the “science” of the Buddhist doctrine of cause and effect.<sup>13</sup> This doctrine, he claimed, was actually the basis of what we understand as science. Furthermore, “in politics, only if one relies on [an understanding of] cause and effect...will one be successful” (Mya Han 1998, 91).<sup>14</sup> While Aung San may have insisted that an independent Burma be a secular *state*, it is clear that his explanations of politics—and furthermore, his view of how politics ought to be conducted—were rooted in the Buddha’s teachings of cause and effect, making politics an intrinsically moral undertaking. In a speech at the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL)<sup>15</sup> convention in January 1946, he reiterated the Buddhist conceptual framework of politics: “As a matter of fact, politics knows no end. It is *samsāra* in operation before our eyes, the *samsāra* of cause and effect, of past and present, of present and future which goes round and round and never ends” (Silverstein 1993, 97). *Samsāra* is the term for the perpetual round of rebirths to which humans are fated unless they can overcome desire and free themselves from the cycle, thereby reaching enlightenment.

By equating politics with *samsāra*, Aung San reinforced the validity of a Buddhist moral framework for understanding and participating in the world. Additionally, he reaffirmed the relevance of the Buddha’s teachings to everyday life. Although he criticized mixing religion and politics earlier in the speech, he also extolled Buddhism as “more than a religion” and capable of becoming “possibly the greatest philosophy in the world” (Silverstein 1993, 97). This view of Buddhism as more akin to philosophy was common among mostly urban Burmese Buddhists in the first half of the twentieth century as they sought to defend their beliefs in terms that more “objective” and “universalist” Westerners might appreciate. When Aung San claimed that politics was *samsāra* he was suggesting that the same (Buddhist) methods one should apply for the successful navigation of (and liberation from) *samsāra* should also be applied to political action. This was not an uncontroversial position, and it is one to which I will return later in this chapter when I revisit the *lawki-lawkouttara* divide. First, however, I will look at the most commonly cited Buddhist story of the origins of political authority, the *Aggañña Sutta*, and its Burmese interpretations.

<sup>13</sup> Here he used the Burmese term “လောကဓာတ်,” later giving a Burmese transliteration of the English word “science” (Mya Han 1998, 90).

<sup>14</sup> Bur. သို့နိုင်ငံရေးတွင်လည်း အကြောင်းအကျိုးနှစ်ပါးကို အမှီပြုမှ...အောင်ပေမည်။

<sup>15</sup> The AFPFL (initially founded in 1944 as the Anti-Fascist Organisation) was the party that dominated Burmese politics from several years before independence in 1948 through the parliamentary period until the military coup led by General Ne Win in 1962.

## The *Aggañña Sutta* and the Legitimation of Political Authority

The *Aggañña Sutta*, part of the *Dīgha Nikāya* set of Pāli texts, relates the fall of humankind from a blissful, non-material state to our current physically differentiated, desire-driven, and generally immoral condition.<sup>16</sup> Although it is sometimes referred to as the Buddhist “genesis” story, Steven Collins’ recent translation gives it the more appropriate title, “The Discourse on What is Primary” (Collins 2001). The treatise begins with the Buddha questioning two monks about the ridicule they endure as members of the Brahmin class who have renounced their social positions to join the *sangha* (#3).<sup>17</sup> In describing the genesis of social classes, the Buddha relates the story of humans’ decline from a previous, more celestial state.<sup>18</sup>

These celestial beings require no material nourishment, yet eventually one of them (who is said to be greedy by nature) takes a taste of an “earth-essence” which has spread out across the waters that cover everything (#12). Others follow suit, with the result that craving comes into being. Not only this, but as they consume the earth-essence, these beings lose their luminous nature and the material elements of the universe (sun, moon, stars, etc.) come into existence. Next, there is a sequence in which successive nourishing substances appear and the beings consume them as well (#13-15). The result is the hardening of physical features, the recognition of beauty and ugliness, and further discord.

Finally, a husk-less, ready-to-eat rice appears (#16). When the beings eat the rice this time, instead of developing aesthetic variation, they develop male and female sexual organs and more significantly, a craving for the opposite sex.<sup>19</sup> They have sex and the community immediately expels them for this sinful act. Then, in order to hide this apparently shameful behavior they build houses, beginning to create an alternative, more worldly community (#17).

Initially, the miracle of the rice is that, whatever the beings gather to eat at one time regenerates without cultivation by the time they are hungry again. Thus, it is not necessary for anyone to take more than they need for one meal or to store any of the grain. However, one greedy individual

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<sup>16</sup> Two of the more detailed accounts of the *sutta* in the Burmese tradition are contained in the royal chronicle *Hmanan Yazawingyi* and the *Manugye Dhammathat*, translated by Richardson as *The Laws of Menoo* (1847).

<sup>17</sup> In the following overview of the *Aggañña Sutta* I use the section markings indicated in Collins’ text.

<sup>18</sup> The *Aggañña Sutta* should not be taken as a “genesis” story in the Judeo-Christian sense, because the tale that the Buddha is recounting is merely one part of a cyclical, infinite process. “After a long time,” the Buddha says, “it comes to pass that the world contracts...Eventually, after a long time, monks, it comes to pass that the world evolves” (Collins 2001, 42). The Buddha is describing the “fall” of humans, but it is a fall that will repeat itself across eons.

<sup>19</sup> It is significant that each of these acts of craving and greed is first performed by one individual or couple, and then emulated by others. This is a mirror-image of the ideal moral arrangement that arises later in the text (and throughout Buddhist scriptures and commentaries) in which a righteous ruler provides not only political leadership but also a proper moral example for the rest of his subjects.

realizes that he can save time and effort by gathering enough rice in the morning for both his morning and evening meals. Others notice this and begin to imitate his practice. Eventually, the beings are gathering rice for several days at a time, which causes the regenerative properties of the rice to disappear, and the beings must learn the art of manual cultivation (#17).

The beings realize that evil things have arisen because of their craving and consumption and decide to set boundary lines around their own plots of rice to create an ordered system of ownership (#18). Again, a greedy being conspires to take more than his share and steals rice from someone else's plot. When they discover this crime, the other beings are incensed and severely punish the thief. Thus, "stealing, accusation, lying, and punishment become known" (Collins 2001, 46). Collins notes that the text presents not only stealing and lying but also accusation and punishment as "bad things" (2001, 72 fn. 19.1). Presumably, while the degenerate state of the world may necessitate these responses, they are still not ideal behaviors and are also products of uncontrolled desire.

At this point, the beings recognize the need for some type of political authority (#20-21). They choose the most handsome and charismatic among them, the one with the most natural authority, to act as judge and to dispense punishment, in return for a portion of their rice. He is called "*Mahasammata*," which means "appointed by the people" (Collins 2001, 46). This individual not only acts as an arbiter but is also expected to provide a moral example for the rest of the community to combat the immorality and degeneration that have arisen. Finally, the story concludes with the development of the other social classes. The Buddha then explains to his listeners that, after these classes have solidified, some members of each, having become dissatisfied with worldly life, establish a practice of leaving the community to pursue a nobler life of asceticism. Thus, the Buddha presents the lifestyle of the *bhikkhu* (monk) as the most noble of all. It appears that part of the Buddha's purpose in relating this story was to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of class and to insist that it was proper moral behavior (rather than birth into a particular class) that distinguished a good individual from a bad one (#32). The *Aggañña Sutta* seems to present two distinct solutions to the inherent human condition of being driven by desire: one that is explicitly political and another that transcends politics and worldly concerns. However, before I present those two solutions, I will briefly explain how Burmese Buddhists have understood the human condition.

### **Burmese Buddhist Views of Human Nature**

Soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha considered how he could best use his newly acquired insight. Encouraged by Mara, a demon of temptation, he initially rejected the idea to share his knowledge with others. He saw human beings as fundamentally interested in, even consumed by the

search for pleasure (Pāli *sukha*, Bur. *thukha*), rendering the vast majority of them incapable of comprehending or appreciating the truth of his *dhamma*. Eventually he decided that there were enough whose eyes were only partially clouded by ignorance that it would be worth the effort to attempt to teach others. The possibility of liberation for every being is therefore an important element of the Theravādin view of human nature.<sup>20</sup> Yet the description of humans as generally given over to pleasure also continues to inform the Burmese Buddhist concept of the *pu htu zin* (Pāli *puthujjana*), a Burmese word that is commonly translated as an “ordinary worldling, enslaved to desire.”<sup>21</sup>

As *pu htu zin* (the singular and plural are the same), human beings are fundamentally driven by desire and aversion. Our actions are determined by our need to acquire certain things and our need to avoid other things. Initially this picture of human nature appears similar to that developed by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, who also believed that desire and aversion were the motivating factors behind human action and claimed that “life itself is but motion, and can never be without desire” (Hobbes 1994 [1668], 34-5). However, whereas Hobbes denied the absolute existence of good or evil, stating that they were merely subjective judgments, we have already seen that Burmese Buddhists subscribe to the belief that there is an absolute “truth” contained within the Buddha’s teachings and that certain actions can be considered “wholesome” or “unwholesome.”

However, the *pu htu zin* sits in a difficult position with regard to this truth. Life as a human is actually one of the highest states of existence because of the human capacity for reason and the ability to discern good from evil (Thakin Ba Thaung 2000, 121-123). This is what sets humans apart from animals and makes enlightenment and liberation possible. But a *pu htu zin* acts in ignorance of the absolute truths of Buddhism: the characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and lack of control or self); the law of *kan*; and the principle of dependent origination. Of course, almost every Buddhist in Myanmar learns these truths and has them reinforced constantly through books, sermons and public rituals. However, what marks a *pu htu zin* is the fact that he continues to act as if the world were permanent, pleasurable, and subject to his control. He has not

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<sup>20</sup> I stress this claim because one of the common ways in which scholars and practitioners contrast the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions is to suggest that, with its focus on the *bodhisattva* practice, in which an individual vows to defer his or her own enlightenment in order to assist other beings in their liberation, Mahāyāna Buddhism represents a “higher teaching” than Theravāda, where the emphasis is on individual effort and attainment. In fact, the Theravāda tradition does include the belief, sometimes implicit, that all beings are capable of enlightenment. (One possible exception, which is less common in Theravāda discourse, is the position of the *ichantika*, a class of being which some scriptures say is incapable of liberation. However, there is a debate within the commentaries over whether or not the *ichantika* is a living being, and since it does not appear in Burmese discussions of the subject, I will not address it here.)

<sup>21</sup> Bur. ပုထုဇ္ဇင်

yet internalized the truths of the Buddha's teachings and is caught up in mundane concerns. Because of this, Burmese Buddhists describe the *pu htu zin* as ignorant, driven by worldly desires and aversions.

Burmese Buddhists have debated whether, being driven by desire, humans can be said to be fundamentally good or bad. The *Aggañña Sutta* reveals that it was desire that caused human degeneration from a higher spiritual existence, and unrestrained desire is the source of all unwholesome actions. The text claims that the being that initiates this descent is "greedy by nature," which Collins says indicates the Buddha's practice of distinguishing between people not by social class but by "moral" class (2001, 42 & 60: fn 12.10). However, since all of the beings eventually follow the descent into craving, we might conclude that this desire resides inherently in all beings. Thakin Ba Thaug, in his Burmese translation of an Indian text on Buddhism, wrote that "the nature of mind is always to pull towards evil thoughts. As a result, our natural tendency is to do evil deeds" (2000, 117-118).<sup>22</sup> In a 1952 speech, U Nu expressed a similar opinion: "All living creatures relish the evil more than the good. If a human being has no religion for moral guidance to deter him from the path of evil then he is no different from other creatures of the animal world" (U Nu 1953, 90-91).

Even though he claims that human beings will naturally gravitate toward evil actions, U Nu also suggests that proper moral conduct is possible, but only through the medium of spiritual discipline. Development on the moral path complicates the Burmese Buddhist picture of human nature, because those who progress on the path come to embody the potentiality of humans for enlightenment, while at the same time transcending those qualities that fundamentally make up a *pu htu zin*. Other scholars have noted the ambiguous societal position of the *arahant* (Bur. *yahan*), the Theravādin Buddhist saint, who paradoxically gains in status and acclaim the more he withdraws from the world (Rozenberg 2010; Kawanami 2009; Mendelson 1961).

One potential perspective that Theravāda Buddhists hold towards the condition of humanity retains the optimism of the possibility of enlightenment, while generally acknowledging that in practice very few will attain it. Overall, Theravāda Buddhists agree on the fundamental nature of humans as desire-driven creatures, but there are dissenting views as to the implications of this claim. This ambivalence has given political actors the space to emphasize different aspects of this malleable human nature in supporting their own views. When advocating for more government control over people's lives, some have invoked the base nature of humans and the need for a strong political authority (this

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<sup>22</sup> Bur. နာမ်ဓာတ်သည် မကောင်းသော ကြံစည်မှုများဘက်သို့ အမြဲဆွဲငင်တတ်သော သဘောရှိ၏။ ထို့ကြောင့် မကောင်းမှုကို လုပ်လိုခြင်းမှာ ကျွန်ုပ်တို့၏ ဓမ္မတာသဘောဖြစ်၏။ The text was C.P. Ranasinghe's 1957 *The Buddha's Explanation of the Universe*.

group includes Burmese kings and the various incarnations of the military government). In championing freedom and democracy, others insist on the ability of humans as free agents to strive for and achieve moral perfection and liberation (this group includes many of the leaders of the independence struggle and democratic activists like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi). Still others have traversed an area between the two poles, vacillating about the proper role of government given human beings' failings and potentialities, and responding differently based on empirical political situations (U Nu is the exemplar of this fluctuating position).

### **Two “Solutions” for Two Conceptions of Human Nature**

The *Aggañña Sutta* is an example of a Buddhist text in which those human failings and potentialities are on full display. On the one hand, it presents a picture of human nature as fundamentally malleable. From a near-perfect original state, desire drove human devolution to its current incarnation but proper moral behavior could lead an individual from any social class to enlightenment. On the other hand, humans appear to be fundamentally morally flawed, incapable of controlling their behavior and inevitably prone to harming themselves and those around them. Even those near-perfect beings must have had the seeds of craving within them, making their moral fall inevitable. The *Aggañña Sutta* actually presents two “solutions” to this dilemma and the hierarchy of these responses provides insight into Burmese Buddhist understandings of the nature of politics.

Initially in the *Aggañña Sutta* there is no political authority and the immaterial beings exist in a blissful state, although we must assume that these beings have desire but in a latent form, since there is no return from the complete extinction of desire (enlightenment). Even as craving and its effects begin to manifest in the world, the beings appear capable of living together in peaceful coexistence. Eventually, however, conflict between the beings (now devolved into human form) escalates and compels them to choose someone to mediate between them and to hand down punishments. The implication is clear: the nature of humans as desire-driven creatures results in conflict; this conflict necessitates some type of political authority. This is the way many Burmese texts have used the *Aggañña Sutta*: as a legitimation of political authority.

Burmese adaptations of the *Aggañña Sutta* consistently expanded the role of *Mahasammata* and the scope of his authority in important ways. While the Pāli *sutta* suggests a role for *Mahasammata* as judge and executive, the Burmese chronicle *Hmannan Mahayazawin* uses a word to describe his position that more closely corresponds to “ruler,” with a combination of the Burmese terms for king and

government (Hmannan Mahayazawingyi 1967, 32).<sup>23</sup> Burmese texts also add to the list of characteristics of *Mahasammata*, referring to his “integrity and knowledge of the Precepts” as proof of his qualifications for rule (ibid., 32). Indeed, not only do the Burmese texts take *Mahasammata* to be the name of the ruler rather than a title, they refer to his appearance on the political scene in terms reminiscent of the Buddha. The “great, noble, exalted, glorious one” was endowed with “the requisite mark of the Supreme Buddha” (ibid., 32-35). In her detailed study of the development of the *min gyint taya*, the Ten Duties of the King, Aurore Candier notes the ways in which, over time, chroniclers expanded both the moral expectations of the king and the scope of *raja-dhamma* (codes for kingly rule in accordance with *dhamma*, the teachings of the Buddha). In a pattern common to the chronicles, one author, U Kala, attributed the successful rule of *Mahasammata* to his decision to abandon the four *agati* (biases) and rule according to the Ten Duties of the King (Candier 2007, 13).<sup>24</sup>

The *Manugye Dhammathat*, a collection of legal texts and prescriptions that an unknown author compiled around 1782 for the Burmese king Bodawhpaya, also begins with a description of the origins of the world drawn from the *Aggañña Sutta* and arrives at the appointment of *Mahasammata*. In the Burmese text, however (and, as Collins points out, in most of the post-canonical appropriations of the story), *Mahasammata* is presented as the name of the first king, rather than a title.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the *Manugye Dhammathat* asserts that he was “the first among kings, [who] possessed the law, the world and exclusive royal authority” (Huxley and Okudaira 2001, 251). This is a definite expansion of the duties and authority of *Mahasammata* from the original text, but demonstrates the way in which later writers used this “first king” to legitimize royal authority; some kings even tried to trace their descent back to *Mahasammata*.

However, political authority, while apparently necessary, is only a worldly (and temporary) answer to the problem. Therefore, the Buddha offers a more lasting solution in describing the actions of those who leave their communities and take up the ascetic, contemplative life. Challenging the social hierarchy of *brahmin* dominance, the Buddha declares the monk to be, “an Arahant who has lived the

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<sup>23</sup> Bur. အစိုးရ ဟိန်းမင်း

<sup>24</sup> The four *agati* refer to feelings that induce partiality or bias, especially dangerous for kings who are dispensing justice. They are desire (*chanda*), anger (*dosa*), fear (*bhaya*) and ignorance (*moha*). The four rules of *sangaha* are *sassamedha* (implementation of a proper rate of taxation), *purisamedha* (the correct usage and distribution of this tax money within the kingdom), *sammapasa* (providing capital for merchants and farmers), and *vacapeyya* (the use of positive language so as to inspire love).

<sup>25</sup> The current Burmese word for president, *thamada*, is derived from the Pāli title of *Mahasammata*, indicating the democratic practice of electing the president, but also connecting this modern form of political authority with a model of rule that is both historically familiar in the Burmese chronicles and also legitimized through Buddhist scripture.

(holy) life...in whom the fetters of existence are destroyed, who is released by Right Wisdom” to be the best and highest in the community (Collins 2001, 49). In overcoming desire, the *arahant* has extinguished that human characteristic that is the source of *dukkha* and conflict. Collins also notes that the end of the *sutta* suggests a connection between the state of the fully enlightened monk and the spiritual beings from the beginning of the text, but in contrast to those beings, the monk is not in danger of lapsing into moral decay (2001, 80: fn 31.2). Burmese versions of the *Aggañña Sutta* seem to gloss over or completely ignore this latter implication, since the intent of the writers was to legitimize the political authority of the monarch. However, the sentiment that places the political authority of a king in a subordinate position to the moral authority of a monk is common within the Burmese tradition. The path of the king merely manages desire, whereas the path of the monk leads to the total transcendence of it. This contrast, between maintaining order in society despite human failings, and providing a path to complete liberation from craving, will provide the framework for Chapter 3, which examines the ends of politics.

These two “solutions” to the problem of inherent human craving (political control and spiritual liberation) also mirror the dual nature of human existence. If one sees human beings as inherently and unavoidably driven by craving to commit evil deeds, then political authority is a necessary response. If, on the other hand, one recognizes the capacity of humans to transcend their enslavement to desire, the path of the monk (or the moral path in general) is not only a possibility, its solution is more complete and lasting than the transitory order instituted by political rule.

### **The *Aggañña Sutta*, the Social Contract, and a Model for Democracy**

The *Aggañña Sutta* is important for what it says about Buddhist political ideals, but it is equally important to notice what is absent. Some have claimed that the first “election” of *Mahasammata* establishes an indigenous basis for democracy in Buddhist political thought, and that we should interpret the agreement between the people and *Mahasammata* as a Buddhist “social contract” (De 1955).<sup>26</sup> However, as Stephen Collins and Andrew Huxley have demonstrated, notions of contract in the period when the *Aggañña Sutta* was written were very different from those that underpin Western ideas of a social contract, as they were situated within highly personalized and particular relationships

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<sup>26</sup> De (and many other Buddhists who have attempted to present textual support for democracy) primarily relies on the institution of the *sangha* as a model for a participatory, egalitarian political system. While some Burmese monks have made similar arguments, the most prominent arguments on behalf of democracy from Burmese political figures (see the accounts from Aung San and Aung San Suu Kyi below) have been based on particular readings of the tale of *Mahasammata* in the *Aggañña Sutta*. It is for that reason that I use it as a framework for this chapter, even though knowledge of the actual *sutta* is not widespread in Myanmar.

(Collins 1996; Huxley 1996).<sup>27</sup> Collins does admit that the arrangement between *Mahasammata* and the people could qualify as “a bilateral contract between the people as a collectivity and their ruler” but contrasts this sharply with the prevailing model of the social contract as a convention established among and between individual citizens (in the tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau) (2001, 94).

Frank Reynolds has cautioned against equating the model in the *Aggañña Sutta* with elective forms of government (1972). He points out that, while the people did choose *Mahasammata*, it was primarily for his charismatic qualities, including his physical appearance. Additionally, at least in the *Aggañña Sutta*, there is no indication that the ruler’s authority is absolute or all encompassing. In fact, the people (not *Mahasammata*) initially established regulations to guide society.<sup>28</sup> They expelled those who committed unwholesome acts from their community and set up boundary lines to enclose personal property. They chose *Mahasammata* only when it became clear that an executive power was necessary to make decisions and enforce their regulations.<sup>29</sup>

It seems plausible that, as Collins and others suggest,<sup>30</sup> the *Aggañña Sutta* was intended as a sermon that was critical of a particular perspective on the inherent qualities of particular social classes rather than a political philosophy text. My interest, however, is in the ways later thinkers have used and interpreted the text. Collins claims that there is “little or no evidence that any historical agents have

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<sup>27</sup> Huxley (1996) acknowledges that there is a great variety among Western notions of the social contract as well and both he and Collins appear to be less concerned with refuting the characterization of the *Aggañña Sutta* as a “social contract” than with establishing the different questions with which Indian political thought was concerned regarding political authority and the ways in which the *Aggañña Sutta* shifted the focus of those questions. So, rather than asking how to restrain a given ruler, given his prominent authoritarian position in that system, the solution in the *Aggañña Sutta* is to focus on the selection process, choosing a morally upright individual who will be naturally inclined to restraint. Huxley argues that the “social contract” debate distracts from the meaning the *Aggañña Sutta* would have carried in its original political and social context. This does not mean, however, that the “social contract” question is irrelevant because, as I demonstrate below, Burmese political figures definitely interpreted the *Aggañña Sutta* as containing a model for a social contract and used it to justify particular political arrangements.

<sup>28</sup> In pressing the “social contract” parallel, this is a telling difference between the condition of the people in the *Aggañña Sutta* and the abilities of the citizens in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1968, esp. Book 2, Chapter 7). While Rousseau claims that the people would require a “Legislator” to create the structure that would allow them to develop a true social community in which every member was equally free, in the Buddhist story, the people already have those regulations. In fact, in several Burmese versions, *Mahasammata* adopts the codes of conduct that already existed as ideals within society. The challenge in this case (and the way in which *Mahasammata* still stands apart from the rest of the community in a similar way as Rousseau’s “Legislator,” is that, while people knew the laws, they were incapable of following them and enforcing them among themselves.

<sup>29</sup> We can see an interesting parallel here with Locke’s argument in the *Second Treatise* that the role of government ought to be limited to that of an “indifferent judge” (1980 [1690], 66). *Mahasammata*’s charge is to “criticize whoever should be criticized, accuse whoever should be accused, and banish whoever should be banished” (Collins 2001, 46). Because of *Mahasammata*’s presumed moral superiority, he will not be subject to the biases and prejudices of regular *pu htu zin*, making him an ideal candidate to adjudicate disputes.

<sup>30</sup> Gombrich has argued that the sermon was intended entirely as a satire to mock the beliefs and practices of the Brahmins and should not be read as Buddhist political philosophy (1992).

used [the *Aggañña Sutta*] and/or its contractual “theory” (2001, 94). He acknowledges evidence from Sarkisyanz (1965) that Burmese legal texts often began with a reference to *Mahasammata*, but believes that this was simply an “inherited textual motif” rather than advocacy of a contract-based political theory (2001, 95). An examination of the Burmese chronicles and pre-colonial legal texts seems to support Collins’ argument. However, from the end of the nineteenth century, Burmese thinkers have made use of the *Aggañña Sutta* to express a number of different views on the nature of politics beyond simply legitimizing kingly authority.

### **Burmese Uses of the *Aggañña Sutta***

The Burmese minister U Hpo Hlaing wrote the *Rajadhammasangaha* as a manual for King Thibaw, presenting it to the new king shortly after his ascension to the throne in 1878. In this text, U Hpo Hlaing refers to the *Mahasammata* story as “traditional Myanmar political ideas” (Maung Htin 2002, 165).<sup>31</sup> While his version emphasizes the fact that *Mahasammata* was chosen by the people (providing historical grounding for some form of electoral governance), he also greatly enhances the status of the first king by also declaring him to be a future Buddha, filled with the wisdom necessary to protect the country (ibid.). U Hpo Hlaing concludes that, just as *Mahasammata* acted as a model of ideal moral conduct, instilling those same values in his subjects, when subsequent kings have followed the same idea, their societies have reflected proper behavior, even to the point of not requiring locks or bolts on doors (ibid.).

U Hpo Hlaing also wrote a text called the *Mahasamataviniccaya*, which explores eleven legal decisions of *Mahasammata*. While this work appears to have been lost, U Htin Fatt, the editor of the *Rajadhammasangaha*, proposed a theory as to what it might have contained (Maung Htin 2002, 88ff). Some of the earlier Buddhist texts distinguished between an “ordinary king” and a “king by consecration.” Despite the fact that no record existed of the ritual of consecration, King Mindon expressed a desire to have his rule recognized in this way. U Htin Fatt believed (given the overall reformist character of the *Rajadhammasangaha*) that U Hpo Hlaing’s work on *Mahasammata* would have reinterpreted the appointment of the first “king” as a consent-based undertaking. In his introduction to the *Rajadhammasangaha*, U Htin Fatt stated, “I believe in my heart that when [U Hpo Hlaing] wrote his *Mahasamataviniccaya*, he had the purpose of returning to prominence the idea of a

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<sup>31</sup> Bur. မြန်မာ့ရိုးရာ နိုင်ငံရေးအတွေးအခေါ်။ In his otherwise very useful translation of the *Rajadhammasangaha* into English, Bagshawe gives it the somewhat misleading subtitle “The Formative Idea of the Burmese Kingdom” (2004, 101).

popular assembly as a guarantor” (Bagshawe 2004, 55).<sup>32</sup> Whether or not this was U Hpo Hlaing’s intention, U Htin Fatt (writing in 1960) clearly reconfigured the *Mahasammata* legend as providing the basis for a limited monarchy based on mutual consent.

Aung San occasionally referred to the story of the Aggañña Sutta in his speeches, including one to the AFPFL Party Convention in 1947. “Various economic classes come into being, bringing along clashes of interests between one class and another. It becomes necessary to mediate and moderate these clashing interests. The idea of the “State” had its genesis in this ostensible need to achieve the commonwealth. In other words, when first the “State” appeared on the scene, it did so as a result of the conflict of interests within society” (Silverstein 1993, 152). He also related a version in an article describing different types of politics. “Government came about because people were not able to observe proper moral conduct. If people were able to do this, then there would be no government” (Mya Han 1998, 94).<sup>33</sup> In Aung San’s telling, the agreement to elevate *Mahasammata* over the population was preceded by a general agreement among the people to “invent/create politics” and “set up government” (ibid., 94).<sup>34</sup> With this language, Aung San emphasized the contractual and consent-based nature of the original agreement, going beyond the language of the Pāli texts.<sup>35</sup> He also suggested that, because *Mahasammata* assumed his position at the request of the people, the legitimate role of the government is to be “the people’s representative” and to act “according to the people’s desires” (95).<sup>36</sup>

Decades later, his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, also sought to derive a Burmese heritage for the ideal of a social contract from the *Mahasammata* myth. She challenged the opinion that the story of *Mahasammata*’s election was “antithetical to the idea of the modern state because it promotes a personalized form of monarchy” (1991, 170). Instead, she countered, this example was a strong argument for “governments regulated by principles of accountability, respect for public opinion, and the

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<sup>32</sup> Bagshawe translates the Burmese phrase “*lu apwe asi badein nyin*” (လူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်း ပဋိညာဉ်) as “social contract.” “*lu apwe asi*” means “people’s assembly/organization” and “*badein nyin*” means promise/agreement/covenant.”

<sup>33</sup> Bur. အစိုးရဟု ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာစဉ်ကပင် လူတွေ တရားမစောင့်နိုင်၍ဖြစ်၏။ လူတွေသာတရားစောင့်နိုင်လျှင် အစိုးရရှိတော့မည် မဟုတ်။

<sup>34</sup> Bur. နိုင်ငံရေး ထွင် / အစိုးရထောင်

<sup>35</sup> Having been educated in the British colonial system, Aung San would have been exposed to at least some examples of Western political thought although whatever he encountered in the official curriculum would have been augmented by the increasing number of socialist and Marxist texts that began to circulate in Burma beginning in the 1930s.

<sup>36</sup> Bur. အစိုးရသည် ပြည်သူ၏ ကိုယ်စားလှယ် / ပြည်သူ၏ ဆန္ဒအရ

supremacy of just laws” (1991, 173).<sup>37</sup> While the modern interpreters may have embellished the Pāli account of *Mahasammata*, they performed the important task of presenting modern institutions and practices of democratic governance within cultural, historical and moral frameworks that were consistent with the beliefs and experience of most of the population.

One important message of the *Aggañña Sutta* that remains consistent through its many incarnations in Burmese political writings is the claim that kingship was established “as a necessary societal institution...because of imperfect human conditions” (Sarkisyanz 1965, 15). Therefore, we can see this *sutta* and Burmese uses of it as providing an explanation of the legitimacy of kingship and later, elected government.<sup>38</sup> However, another related perspective focuses more on proper moral conduct and the ability of individuals and communities to shape their society for better or worse through their own actions. Before I address this perspective, which I associate with another text, the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, I will revisit the *lawki/lawkouttara* divide. This tension frames much of what follows in the dissertation and serves as an effective bridge between these two *suttas* and their relevant political interpretations.

### ***Lawki and Lawkouttara***

Burmese Buddhists’ understandings the relationship or separation between *lawki* (the worldly realm) and *lawkouttara* (the realm of Buddhist ultimate truth) strongly condition their conceptions of politics and of the role of Buddhism in politics. In the previous chapter, I presented these two “realms” not as distinct places, but as perspectives on reality. *Lawki* includes the material world of daily human experience, but the *lawki* understanding of this world takes it to be tangible, real and lasting. The contrast with *lawkouttara* is subtle but important. *Lawkouttara* is not an after-life or other state of existence. It refers to a perspective on the world that adopts the Buddhist understanding of all existence as impermanent, dissatisfactory, and lacking abiding essence (*anicca, dukkha* and *anattā*). *Lawkouttara* does not simply mean acceptance of these Buddhist truths, it implies an experiential understanding of them such that false views of existence are completely eradicated.

Many Burmese Buddhists have insisted that the two perspectives are mutually exclusive, like the monk referred to in the previous chapter who explained that, without adopting a *lawki* perspective, the

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<sup>37</sup> By contrast, David Ambuel has argued that many contemporary Thai Buddhists have continued to value the *Mahasammata*-derived symbol of the “wise legislator” as the ultimate source of justice, rather than an impersonal set of laws or procedures (2006).

<sup>38</sup> Although, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 3, some Burmese leftists also reinterpreted the *Aggañña Sutta* through a Marxist ideology critique. While a few focused their criticism on private property and capitalist exploitation, retaining the aspect of the *sutta* that legitimizes the role of the political authority, others went further in their critique to question the legitimacy of a political authority designed to protect the illegitimate and harmful institution of private property.

moral precepts have no meaning because there is no “I,” “other,” or “person.” At certain points in the *Rajadhammasangaha* U Hpo Hlaing is explicit about the separation between *lawki* and *lawkouttara* and the methods appropriate to each. In one section he distinguishes mundane laws from the Buddha’s law of *dhamma*:

“The law is like a medicine. The drug that will send away a belly ache does not cure a fever and the one that cures a fever won’t fix a belly ache. In this way the rule of behaviour in this world holds good both for the present and for future lives, but it is not one to follow for the other world. If you follow a rule that is good for the other world, it will not help in this world. The Path, its Fruit and Nibbana, belong to the other world. The rules that do you good in this world and the rules that bring you to the Path, its Fruit and to Nibbana are in truth opposite. If you want to be well-set for the other world, you have to fix yourself in a tranquil spirit, take to the forest, live under a tree and practice in solitude. It is not a practice for two together.” (Bagshawe 2004, 104)<sup>39</sup>

He explained that monks and holy men “who work under the rule which holds good for the other world, cannot be masters of gold and silver, or of weaponry” because their methods lead to benefits beyond this world (Bagshawe 2004, 105).<sup>40</sup> Success in the material world requires adherence to principles that are probably not true in an ultimate (*lawkouttara*) sense. But U Hpo Hlaing also insisted this was not a concern, because they are “rules for doing well in this world and, if we follow them, we can be confident that they will hold good in this world, whether, in an absolute sense, they are false or true” (ibid.). John Badgley has noted that Burmese tradition associates living in accordance with the *nitis* (collections of aphorisms that dealt with daily conduct) with *lawki* benefits, whereas *lawkouttara* benefits come only from following the *dhamma* and turning away from worldly matters (1965). In a

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<sup>39</sup> Although not as prominent an aspect of political discourse, the question of the proper relationship of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* practices was present in the work of other Theravāda Buddhists. Anne Hansen (2007) shows how the Khmer monk Ukna Suttantaprija Ind’s work *Gatilok (Ways of the World)* acts as an “ethics manual directed at the problem of living as a moral Buddhist in the modern world” (2004, 55). He contrasts *gatiloka* (“ways of the world”) with *gatidhamma* (“ways of *dhamma*”), indicating to Cambodian Buddhists the way to embody the actions of morally perfected beings while also acting in the world. The contemporary Thai monk Buddhadasa interpreted *lawki* and *lawkouttara* perspectives as “two kinds of language” that would allow multiple levels of understanding the Buddhist scriptures (Buddhadasa 1999). “Everyday language” was the *lawki* perspective of people who did not understand the *dhamma* but “*dhamma* language” accessed the ultimate truth of *lawkouttara*.

<sup>40</sup> U Hpo Hlaing also used this conceptual separation to advocate for particular political practices. He argued that, while achievement in *lawkouttara* matters (progress on the path to enlightenment) could only occur as a result of individual action, the prospects for success in the *lawki* realm were enhanced by having many people work together (Bagshawe 2004, 91ff). For U Hpo Hlaing, who wanted to expand the role of advisors in governing the kingdom, the Burmese Buddhist separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* provided justification for increased ministerial participation in political decision-making, a subject I examine in more detail in Chapter 4.

1965 work, he suggested that education and socialization processes ensured that this binary distinction was still valid for many Burmese. Although thorough contemporary data is not available, anecdotal evidence from my research and others' indicates that many people in Myanmar still subscribe to this separation.

In 1961, Thakin Tha Khin, the leader of the opposition in Parliament, cautioned U Nu and his allies against adopting Buddhism as the state religion and giving preference to Buddhists in government positions. Presenting it as a case of the inappropriate usage of *lawkouttara* methods in a *lawki* setting, he compared it to the episode when Crown Prince Kanaung told King Mindon to build munitions factories but the king rejected the advice since the *sangha* told him that it was against Buddhist morals. As a result, Burma was not prepared to defend itself and the British took control, ultimately resulting in the decline of the *sāsana* (Maung Maung 1963, 120). Thakin Tha Khin's ultimate concern here is still the protection of the Buddhist community, but he regards political methods and "religious" methods as appropriate to their respective spheres. U Nu himself sometimes adopted this strict separation between the two. Von der Mehden notes that "U Nu once explained that the killing of rebels was a political necessity, not a religious question," a distinction between *lawki* and *lawkouttara* that allowed the religiously devout Prime Minister to carry out policies that he might have otherwise found to be in contradiction to the *dhamma* (1961, 175).<sup>41</sup>

One conclusion that some Buddhists draw from the separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* is that, while Buddhist ideals are important for individual moral practice and may have a limited restraining effect on political authority, Buddhist methods intended for the realization of *lawkouttara* truths are ineffective in the material world. One example is the *Vessantara Jataka*, the story of the Buddha's final past life before being born as Siddhartha. The final ten "birth stories" of the Buddha each correspond to one of the ten *pāramīs* (perfections), qualities that the Buddha needed to develop before he was prepared for liberation. In the *Vessantara Jataka*, the Buddha was a prince who, through his practice of absolute *dāna* (generosity), gave away his kingdom's white elephant, a symbol of prosperity, which led the kingdom into decline. While the perfection of *dāna* was a necessary step on the Buddha's path of moral development, his actions as a Buddha-to-be constituted an example of poor political decision-making. As Maung Htin Aung relates in his collection of Burmese Law Tales, a king "must also be able to look to this world as different from the next," a distinction that Vessantara was apparently incapable of

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<sup>41</sup> U Nu's reasoning here was surprisingly similar to the view of the controversial Thai monk Phra Kittiwuttho who claimed in the 1970s that killing a communist was not a sin.

making (1962, 84).<sup>42</sup> Aung San seemed to indicate a similar conviction in one of his speeches, saying “Religion is a matter of individual conscience while politics is a social science...If we mix religion with politics, this is against the spirit of religion itself, for religion takes care of our hereafter and usually has not to do with mundane affairs which are the sphere of politics. Politics is frankly a secular science” (Silverstein 1993, 96).

The separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* methods has led to the development of a set of practices designed to influence the material world. These include the worship and propitiation of various types of spirits and deities, the practice of alchemy and magic, and the practice of *yedaya*, following the advice of an astrologer in order to ward off evil and misfortune. The religious scholar Heinz Bechert explained that “relations of *sangha* and state were regulated by the principle that the Buddhist *sāsana* is in its conception directed towards detachment from worldly affairs, i.e., it is “supra-mundane” [*lawkouttara*], whereas the cult of the gods, on the other hand, serves worldly purposes” (Bechert 1970, 775). Mendelson also cites a common Burmese saying “Buddhism for the next life, the spirits for this life” (1963, 107). It is not completely correct to label these practices as separate or distinct from Buddhism. In fact, many incorporate elements of Buddhist ritual or symbolism and the logic of all of these “magic” methods is consistent with the Buddhist view of the universe as operating according to the principles of *kan* and cause and effect. There are many examples of Burmese using these “extra-Buddhist” methods to achieve success in the political world, and I discuss a few here as illustrative.

Saya San, a former monk who led an anti-British rebellion from 1930-32, apparently created magical amulets and tattoos for his followers to protect them from bullets (Cady 1958, 311). While he also presented himself as a potential Buddhist king, these magical practices were to provide immediate, tangible security to his followers during the rebellion, something Buddhist moral practices could not do. Burmese lore is filled with stories of *weikzas*, magicians and alchemists who, through practices of moral purification very similar to the Buddha’s, develop stunning powers, such as flying, turning metals into gold, and prolonging life (Rozenberg 2010; Ferguson and Mendelson 1981; Mendelson 1961). The Buddhist *suttas* acknowledge that developing these powers was a potential by-product of the path to enlightenment, but the Buddha himself discouraged his followers from focusing on or publicly displaying

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<sup>42</sup> The question of the role of morality in statecraft is common to the political thought of most traditions. For example, Machiavelli argued that “It must be understood that a prince...cannot observe all those things which are considered good in men, being often obliged, in order to maintain the state, to act against faith, against charity, against humanity, and against religion” (1950, 65). However, Buddhist questions about morality and politics appear to have different implications because *lawkouttara*-oriented action is ultimately the only route to salvation and liberation. Thus, its position vis-à-vis the political (material) world necessarily constitutes a fundamental question in Burmese Buddhist political thought.

them. Indeed, many alleged *weikzas* and their followers justify their magical practices by claiming that their goal is to learn how to prolong their lives in order to ensure that they will be alive at the time of the future Buddha, Mettaya. Finally, contemporary accounts of Burmese politics often contain rumors about the *yedaya* practices of the Burmese dictators Generals Ne Win and Than Shwe.<sup>43</sup> Many of their alleged efforts were designed to counter the rising power of Aung San Suu Kyi and involved wearing women's clothing (Wai Moe 2011). Christina Fink also relates the claim that Ne Win's abrupt order to have cars drive on the right side of the street instead of the left side was motivated by *yedaya* that would protect him against a political attack from the right (2009, 37).

However, political leaders also acknowledged the importance of *lawkouttara* concerns to *lawki* matters. Ashin Thittila, a prominent Buddhist monk famous for his teaching, wrote an essay in the 1980s in which he quoted from a resolution passed by Parliament on October 1, 1951 as part of his justification for the importance of Buddhist moral practice as guidance for political decision-making:

“That not being satisfied with the measures usually undertaken hitherto by the peoples and governments of the world for the solution of the problems confronting mankind, by promoting the material well-being of man in his present existence in the form of ameliorating his living conditions and standard of life, and also being fully aware of the fact that such measures would result only in a partial solution of the problems, this Parliament declares its firm belief that it is necessary to devise and undertake such measures for the spiritual and moral well-being of man as would remove these problems and help man to overcome Greed, Hatred and Delusion which are at the root of all the violence, destruction and conflagration consuming the world.” (Ashin Thittila 1987, 210)

Here we see the government of Burma acknowledging its own political and economic solutions to be merely temporary fixes to the underlying problem of desire; moral solutions were necessary to fully address the situation.

In a 1958 speech, Burmese Supreme Court Justice U Chan Htoon insisted on the need for *lawkouttara* solutions to *lawki* concerns: “The urgent problems that confront the world today can only be solved by applying...moral and spiritual laws” (1958, 11). According to his analysis, social problems were the result of human beings neglecting to live in accordance with the “self-evident” causal laws of the universe (*ibid.*). In another speech that year, he directly challenged the common Burmese belief that Buddhist practice was not the route to success in the world, claiming that “mastery of the external world

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<sup>43</sup> Ne Win became head of state in 1962 after he led a military coup and eventually resigned as Chairman of the ruling Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in 1988 in response to popular protests. Than Shwe became head of state in 1992 and ruled until the transfer of power to a quasi-democratically elected government in 2011.

is not in the external world but in ourselves” (1958, 31). With this provocative statement, he attempted to redirect Burmese Buddhist efforts at social change back to individual moral practice as taught by the Buddha. At the same time, his explanation reveals another aspect of the Burmese understanding of *anattā* (usually translated as “no-self”) as “no control.” Humans can try to exert their influence on the world around them, but ultimately any control they obtain is temporary. However, by focusing on controlling and overcoming desire (that is, individual, internally directed practice), one can achieve a degree of mastery. This “mastery,” though, manifests itself not as actual control over the external world, but as a triumph over the wrong view that leads humans to want to control the world.<sup>44</sup>

U Hpo Hlaing and Aung San also developed positions on the *lawki-lawkouttara* relationship that were more nuanced than some of their above quotes would suggest. U Hpo Hlaing ended the *Rajadhammasangaha* with this wish: “May all those who come to rule by way of the Law come to realise through study of the Law that they can by degrees achieve the happiness of Nibbana [*neikban*] and the Land of the Spirits, of which the Lord spoke. May they come to it by careful observance of the Middle Way” (Bagshawe 2004, 179). This suggests that he viewed political action, when undertaken correctly, as a way of making progress on the spiritual path to liberation. While acknowledging that political action itself was not sufficient to reach *neikban*, Aung San nevertheless insisted that the two were interdependent. “Only if you have *lawki* [success] can you have *lawkouttara* [success]. And only if you have *lawkouttara* [success] can you have *lawki* [success]” (Mya Han 1998, 99).<sup>45</sup> U Nu also “referenced politics as working to the attainment of [*lawkouttara*], namely to overcome the material distinctions in this world and to attain *nibbana* [*neikban*]” (Houtman 1999, 33).<sup>46</sup> With these statements in mind, I turn to another text, the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, as the source of Burmese Buddhist political perspectives that acknowledge a closer relationship between *lawki* and *lawkouttara*.

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<sup>44</sup> Isaiah Berlin attributes to “stoics or Buddhist sages” the belief that “I must liberate myself from desires that I know I cannot realize” (1969, 135). Berlin, however, while recognizing the importance of this view in shaping political attitudes, concludes that it cannot represent an “enlargement of liberty” (140). In subsequent chapters, I return briefly to this topic to present Buddhist arguments that relate this type of spiritual liberation to political freedom in sometimes contradictory ways. Some Burmese Buddhists, however, would strongly dispute Berlin’s position, arguing that freedom from mental defilements (and most centrally, desire) represents the most essential enlargement of the sphere of liberty, albeit envisioned differently than Berlin sees it.

<sup>45</sup> Bur. လောကီရှိမှလည်း လောကုတ်ရှိနိုင်၏။ လောကုတ်ရှိမှလည်း လောကီတည်နိုင်၏။

<sup>46</sup> There is a similarity here to the ways in which Gandhi connected political and moral concerns. Farah Godrej presents Gandhi as a thinker for whom the political was “irrevocably tied to the authority of moral and spiritual imperatives” (Godrej 2006, 243). “The ‘political’ for Gandhi was not to be seen as an autonomous sphere of human life, guided by its own set of assumptions and principles” (ibid., 245). It was a realm that was structured by the same set of principles (for Gandhi this was truth-seeking and divine reunification) that structure every other aspect of human existence.

## The *Cakkavatti Sutta*: Moral Conduct and its Effects

Just as the *Aggañña Sutta* provided one basis of legitimacy for political authority from the Buddhist scriptures, the *Cakkavatti Sutta* conveys a message about politics that is rooted firmly in the Buddha's teachings of cause and effect. Burmese texts incorporate this *sutta* less often and the figure of the *cakkavatti* (universal monarch, Bur. *setkya min*) is a less frequent model in the Burmese political imaginary (Leider 2008, 410).<sup>47</sup> However, the lesson of the *sutta*, the way in which the moral conduct of a ruler affects the prosperity of his realm and subjects, is one that Burmese writers have examined in detail. After the fall of the monarchy in 1886, Burmese Buddhists expanded this perspective on the effects of moral behavior, claiming that it was not merely the king's actions, but the conduct of society as a whole that contributed to its own prosperity or downfall; we can also find roots for this broader perspective within the *sutta*.<sup>48</sup>

The *Cakkavatti Sutta* begins with the Buddha reminding his monks not to rely on others in their practice, but to adhere to the *dhamma* (#1).<sup>49</sup> He then relates the tale of a righteous, "wheel-turning monarch" named Dalhanemi. The "wheel" of this *sutta* was a supernatural phenomenon that appeared in the sky as a result of the king's great store of merit from past lives. As such, it was also an indicator of the moral standing of both the king and the society over which he ruled.<sup>50</sup> As the end of his reign drew near, he designated his son to rule and retired to the life of a monk (#3). After the pious king had stepped down, the son was shocked and saddened to hear that the wheel had disappeared. A royal advisor explained to him that he could not inherit the wheel as he inherited the crown. It would only reappear as a result of the new king's own righteous leadership. The sage advises him to take the *dhamma* as his guide and also listen to the advice of sages in the kingdom. By doing this, the wheel reappears and a succession of kings carries out their duties according to the *dhamma* (#5-8).

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<sup>47</sup> *Setkya Min* is not a common point of reference in Burmese political works, although, as a prophetic figure who will come to revive the *sāsana* (Buddhist community), bring material prosperity and usher in the era of the future Buddha Mettaya, he has been a popular figure in times of crisis and transition. Many of the anti-British rebellions during the colonial period coalesced around individuals who styled themselves as *Setkya Min* and popular opinion in the 1940s even recognized Aung San as the promised universal monarch (see, for example Prager 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Sarkisyanz suggests that, after the fall of the monarchy and the erosion of the traditional cosmology, Burmese Buddhists were free to re-interpret *kan* in a more liberating and empowering way, as the ability of each individual to create the circumstances of his or her own future (1965, 107).

<sup>49</sup> Here I also use the section numbers from Collins' translation, Appendix 3 in Collins (1998).

<sup>50</sup> The metaphor of the wheel was common in Buddhist *suttas* as a representation of the *dhamma*. Thus, the Buddha put in motion the wheel of *dhamma* through his enlightenment and subsequent teaching. The wheel associated with the *cakkavatti* was a similar construct in that it implied that the king was acting as propagator and supporter of the *sāsana*, although generally the wheel of the *cakkavatti* was understood to be a lesser manifestation of the Buddha's wheel of *dhamma* (Reynolds 1972).

Eventually, however, one new king, upon assuming the throne, neglects to seek the advice of his advisors and the wheel does not reappear. Once he does ask their advice, he only implements part of it, forgetting the admonishment to provide property to those who are in need. Because of this, poverty appears in the kingdom and soon after, theft (#10). In response to the first few incidents of theft, the king gives the offender some property, but this soon sets a precedent, which only serves to increase theft in the kingdom. The king then decides to brutally punish the next offender to set an example, which compels his subjects to begin arming themselves, leading to a proliferation of violence in the kingdom. Gradually other evil deeds appear as part of this causal chain, including lying and adultery (#14-18). The life span of human beings also decreases as they sink into anarchy, from 80,000 years to a span of only ten years. At this point, the people will have lost any notion of moral conduct and they proceed to slaughter each other mercilessly.

At the nadir of the tale, a few people reflect on their actions and realize that their situation has degenerated because of their evil deeds. They resolve to engage in wholesome actions and gradually their lives improve. Slowly, they “rediscover” the moral laws, reasoning backwards by observing the behaviors that bring negative results and attempt to carry out the opposite (#21-22). Eventually they become prosperous again, and at a certain point another righteous monarch appears. (It is unclear in this *sutta* how the people restored the institution of kingship or when it disappeared.) Along with this wheel-turning king named *Sankha*, the next Buddha, *Maitreya* (Burmese *Mettaya*), appears to re-teach the *dhamma* to the world (#24-25). The Buddha concludes the lesson reminding the monks once again to rely on their own efforts in their practice, using *dhamma* as a guide.

Immediately we can see similarities between this *sutta* and the *Aggañña Sutta*. Although the beings at the beginning of the *Cakkavatti Sutta* appear to be human rather than spiritual, their moral practice degenerates and, as a result, the prosperity of their society and the conditions of their existence also decline. The causal chain is also similar. The *Aggañña Sutta* begins more explicitly with craving as the source of conflict; jealousy leads to theft, punishment, lying, and other sinful behaviors. But, whereas the *Aggañña Sutta* seemed to be directed to the general population as a moral lesson and was used by later commentators to legitimize monarchical rule, the admonishment of the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, although told to monks, was directed at kings. Desire remains the root source of conflict and degeneracy but in the latter *sutta* the conduct of the king creates the circumstances under which people feel compelled to steal. Similarly, while the king’s moral negligence initiates the decline of society, the people re-discover the moral principles at the lowest point of degeneracy, suggesting that subjects retain some degree of moral agency and initiative.

Burmese writers did not use this *sutta* in their own chronicles as much as the *Aggañña Sutta* but they did develop several important points that emerge from the *Cakkavatti Sutta*. First, the king has a duty to organize and manage life in his realm according to the *dhamma*.<sup>51</sup> Failure to do so will result in the decline of the kingdom. More broadly, the moral conduct of the king sets an example for his subjects but also has tangible effects on the prosperity of the society. Similarly, according to the doctrine of cause and effect, the actions of those subjects, whether moral or immoral, will bear similar fruits in the society as a whole. I will return to the first point in Chapter 3 when I discuss the concept of “order” as a goal of politics. In the following section, I examine Burmese Buddhist perspectives on the material effects that the actions of a political leader and a political community have on the welfare of that community, a political manifestation of the doctrine of cause and effect.

### **Moral Conduct of Leaders and its Effects**

U Hpo Hlaing’s advice to the king in the *Rajadhammasangaha* usually points to historical examples or contemporary European examples in describing the benefits of ideal conduct, but looks at the contemporary Burmese situation for advice on how not to succeed in the realm of politics. His political recommendations come primarily from two sets of guidelines, and while he draws mostly on Pāli texts or examples from the chronicles, he interprets these through the lens of contemporary political practices. The first set of guidelines is the four rules of *sangaha* (friendliness or good relations).<sup>52</sup> U Hpo Hlaing describes European practices of governance, presenting practices such as consultations among elected officials and limiting barriers to trade as modern embodiments of the rules of *sangaha*. He concludes that, “Because they thus in their actions give the greatest importance to the four rules of *sangaha* and to their promotion, among all the nations the peoples of the West stand out for their prosperity. As the great kingdoms of the Middle Land were in the past, so now the west is preeminent in power -- economic, military and industrial” (Bagshawe 2004, 104).

U Hpo Hlaing connects other examples of good governing techniques to a different list, the seven rules of *aparihaniya*, which come from advice that the Buddha gave to the Licchavi princes as

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<sup>51</sup> The Thai *Traiphum Phra Ruang* (*Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, written in the fourteenth century) also valorizes the moral model of kingship in the *Cakkavatti Sutta* (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982). Contemporary Thai scholars have noted that the *Traiphum* specifies “the close relationship between being a person who knows the *dhamma* and being a [political] administrator in the traditional Thai political order” (Sombat Jantharawong and Chai-anan Samudavanija 1980, quoted in Jackson 2002, 163).

<sup>52</sup> These are *sassamedha* (implementation of a proper rate of taxation), *purisamedha* (the correct usage and distribution of this tax money within the kingdom), *sammapasa* (providing capital for merchants and farmers), and *vacapeyya* (the use of positive language to inspire love).

rulers of the Vajjian people.<sup>53</sup> Again, he looks to governments in the West for examples, noting the practices of electing members of Parliament, using the media to collect and disseminate information and opinions, and most importantly, making political decisions only with the participation of a large number of people (Bagshawe 2004, 103-4). For U Hpo Hlaing, the first rule of *aparihaniya* (meeting together to make decisions) is critical because it provides a check on the naturally self-interested inclinations and biases of any individual, even (or maybe especially) a king.

Adherence to the rules of *aparihaniya* is also the best way to ensure that a ruler does not fall prey to any of the four *agatis*, variously translated as “biases,” “corruptions,” or “partialities. The four *agatis* are desire (*chanda*), anger (*dosa*), fear (*bhaya*) and ignorance (*moha*). U Hpo Hlaing acknowledges the challenges of living up to these standards, admitting, “for the average person in government service there is no way of avoiding these four wrong ways in his work” (Bagshawe 2004, 174). However, returning to a theme he emphasizes throughout the *Rajadhammasangaha*, he claims that regular meetings will help people to avoid making decisions based on these factors:

...if a number of people get together for any sort of action, there can be no question of following the *agati* way. In such assemblies what one man does not know another will; when one man has feelings of hate, another will not; when one is angry, another will be calm. When people have agreed in a meeting and preserve their solidarity, there will be no need for fear. For these reasons, we must affirm that if a number of people conduct their business in an assembly there is no way in which the four wrong ways can be followed. (ibid.)

A critical aspect of U Hpo Hlaing’s political advice is the way he sees mental states (and from a Buddhist perspective, unwholesome states) as influencing political decisions. While, in other parts of the text he does prescribe what we might call “religious” methods (such as meditation), here he makes it clear that the specific political practice of consulting with advisors can have multiple beneficial effects. First, it can prevent a ruler from making decisions influenced by the four *agatis*. Not only does this guard against uninformed, biased, or rash decisions, it also guides the ruler and all who participate away from self-interested action and from the negative mental states that generate ignorance and suffering. U Hpo

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<sup>53</sup> The Buddha gave this advice in the *Sarananda Sutta*, part of the *Sattaniyata* in the *Anguttara Nikaya*. The Buddha repeated these principles in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* when a minister of the king of Magadha asked how to defeat the Vajjians. The word *aparihaniya* means “stabilizing” or “not causing decay” and the seven principles are: 1) meeting together as needed and for however long is needed, 2) always ending meetings in agreement, 3) not making a law for which the people have not given their consent, 4) acting with respect and love toward elders, 5) not abducting the wives or daughters of the people, 6) honoring the guardian spirits of the people, and 7) providing for enlightened sages in the territory (Bagshawe 2004, 88-91).

Hlaing also assumes that the decisions that emerge from consultation will be better for the country as a whole. Even though he previously characterized the spiritual path as one that only the individual can pursue, here U Hpo Hlaing skillfully demonstrates that a *lawki* political practice such as collective decision-making can have a beneficial effect on the *lawkouttara* development of both individuals and communities.

Just as policy decisions were important in fostering an ideal moral community, the king's own moral conduct could bear positive political results. Mindon, the penultimate king of Burma, found his territory diminished throughout the nineteenth century through defeat at the hands of the British.<sup>54</sup> Because his kingdom was also weakened economically, he had few options to pursue in casting himself as a "universal monarch" in the *cakkavatti* tradition. Additionally, his foreign policy seemed designed primarily to avoid antagonizing the British in an attempt to stave off the total collapse of his rule. John Ferguson suggests that, given these restrictions, Mindon chose to turn inward, practicing meditation and reading religious works in an attempt to "reform" himself (1975, 236-7). Mindon would have believed that, as king, his own moral purity not only was a model for his subjects, but also had tangible effects on the prosperity of the realm.

Contemporary political figures also saw a tangible connection between the moral conduct of leaders and political progress. U Nu told government leaders that they were responsible for purifying their own moral conduct so that they would be able to "lead the people towards the right deed, the right speech, and the right thought" (U Nu 1955, 73). In his landmark study of Burmese Buddhism in the "crisis" politics of the 1980s and 90s, Gustaaf Houtman presented a picture of the leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD, the main opposition party) as responding to military restrictions placed on their party with an increased emphasis on *vipassana* (insight) meditation practice.<sup>55</sup> They believed that their *lawkouttara* actions would improve their own personal moral conduct, which would effectively counter military attempts to control the *lawki* world (Houtman 1999, 338).

In addition to providing examples of ideal moral rule, many Jatakas (stories of the Buddha's past lives) also tell of kings who brought ruin to their lands through their evil deeds. The effects of rulers'

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<sup>54</sup> Presumably, Thai kings were more morally upright than the Burmese, as a 1987 publication from the office of the Thai king claimed that Thailand had avoided direct colonization because of the talents of "good" kings (quoted in Hewison 1997, 60).

<sup>55</sup> The "crisis" period began with a series of popular demonstrations in 1988 that responded to demonetization and other economically ruinous government policies. The ruling socialist party fell in September 1988, but was replaced by a different military junta that restored order through a violent crackdown on civilians. The government did hold multi-party elections in 1990, but continued to harass and arrest opposition figures and changed the purpose of the elections to the selection of a constitutional drafting committee (many people believed they were voting for a Parliament),

immoral acts could range from fruits becoming bitter and dry to natural disasters such as droughts.<sup>56</sup> Thus, “immorality led not only to the ruin of the country, but also to the dislocation of natural functions in the cosmos” (Koenig 1990, 69). The Jatakas also relate the simple remedy to these societal ills: once the king begins to act in accordance with *dhamma*, following the precepts and supporting the *sangha*, the fortunes of the kingdom begin to turn (Sarkisyanz 1965, 49). U Htin Fatt, who edited U Hpo Hlaing’s *Rajadhammasangaha* in 1960, challenged the monarchical model even more than U Hpo Hlaing was willing to, equating immoral rule with the accumulation of absolute power. He notes the “civilizing influence” of Buddhism in Burma, yet claims that “if it is looked at against the times when the people of the country made no advance, the kings who ruled forgot the principle[s of good Buddhist rule] and habitually identified government only with power as they drew in sustenance from the people of the land” (Bagshawe 2004, 55).

U Hpo Hlaing himself turns to Burmese society for examples of poor leadership. He identifies three “courses that end societies.”<sup>57</sup> He then proceeds to point out ways in which the Burmese and their rulers have followed these paths, resulting in the current decline of Burmese society. The significance of this piece of advice is that U Hpo Hlaing does not necessarily draw explicit connections between specific practices of governance and the downfall of a political community. Instead, he sees immoral practices and lack of attention to social duties as the ultimate source of political decline. For the king, those social duties included implementing policies to assist his subjects in correct moral practice. U Hpo Hlaing followed the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, claiming, “In this world there is no one who will not act appropriately in any situation if an authority [completes] its function of charity to the extent that it should. If indeed government power is used in oppression, if revolution is possible, revolution will occur; if it should not be possible, people will escape from the jurisdiction” (Bagshawe 2004, 117).

In his speeches, U Nu frequently stressed the Buddhist belief that the failure of a political authority to prevent moral decay would result in the downfall of a nation. In a lecture on the “Five Pillars of Strength,” he focuses on the pillar of moral strength, warning that decadence of character will bring about the destruction of the Union (U Nu 1953). He even suggests that Burma can look to its neighbors to see evidence of the result of moral decline (presumably referring to the rise of communist influence in Vietnam and to Thailand’s multiple coups in the late 1940s). In another speech in 1951, he introduced

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<sup>56</sup> These examples are from the *Rajavada Jataka* and the *Kurudhamma Jataka*, respectively.

<sup>57</sup> These are 1) wrongful desires (specifically lust for one’s kin or married women), 2) unfair profit (that which is gained either through dishonesty or oppressive force), and 3) failure to follow the sets of reciprocal duties found in the *Singalovada Sutta* (Bagshawe 2004, 108). The *Singalovada Sutta* generally constitutes the layperson’s ethic in Buddhism and includes reciprocal duties between masters and servants, teachers and pupils, and husbands and wives.

the Bureau of Special Investigations (BSI), a body that many of his opponents were worried would be used for political purposes.<sup>58</sup> Not so, countered U Nu, this was a necessary step to stem the tide of degeneracy in the country. And he issued another warning, reminding listeners that “King Thibaw came to be captured as easily as a little fowl for one thing because he failed to arrest the moral decay of his country” (1953, 8). He reiterated this theme in a speech marking the creation of the BSI, explaining “how moral deterioration brought about the downfall of kingdoms and regimes” (1953, 25).

### **Moral Conduct of the People and its Effects**

Before the destruction of the Burmese monarchy in 1885, it was thought that the proper moral conduct of the king determined the prosperity of the realm. The king acted as an agent of *dhamma*, responsible for creating laws that enforced correct behavior and for supporting the monks that would propagate the *dhamma* among the population. Although, as I noted, the *Cakkavatti Sutta* implies that individuals were capable of taking control of their moral conduct to arrest the process of decline, the Burmese chronicles often present a picture in which the *sangha*, lesser political figures and the general population merely follow the behavior of the king, whether good or evil. In this traditional conception, ordinary citizens had little to no agency in their own moral actions and would be swept along with the circumstances, contributing to spiritual progress or moral decay. However, with the fall of the monarchy, religious and political commentators began to look to the behavior of the entire population as an indicator of the strength of the political community, arguing that everyone now needed to take responsibility for the effects of his or her own moral conduct.<sup>59</sup>

U Nye Ya, a famous monk who combined Buddhist symbolism and politics in his sermons in the first half of the twentieth century, suggested that only once the Buddha’s teachings were correctly implemented and all Buddhists were following the moral law, would the individual appear who would open the gates to a more perfect, peaceful future (Sarkisyanz 1965, 178). U Nye Ya’s explanation about this *cakkavatti* (universal monarch) figure is noteworthy because it suggests that the people themselves are responsible for creating the conditions of a perfect moral society and the appearance of the ideal king would merely be an indicator that this had occurred. In his 1951 convocation speech at the

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<sup>58</sup> U Nu ostensibly created the BSI to act as an internal policing body that would combat corruption in the bureaucracy and gave it wide-reaching powers in investigating political activities. Richard Butwell, one of U Nu’s biographers, called it “Burma’s FBI” (1969, 83).

<sup>59</sup> Although the Thai monarchy persisted through the colonial period, the contemporary Thai monk Phra Phaisaan Wisaalai has suggested that the traditional model of relying on moral leadership is “no longer valued in modern Thai society where power is dispersed among diverse groups of politicians, bureaucrats, technicians, and businessmen” (Jackson 1989, 124). He suggests that the focus should be on “the morality and social responsibility of the individual members of society” (ibid.).

University of Rangoon, U Nu claimed that the reason why certain countries were able to resist imperialism was that they had put all of their efforts into the “character-building of their people” (U Nu 1953, 32). We can hear echoes of U Hpo Hlaing in this speech as well, because U Nu also cites moral character as the contributing factor to British supremacy.<sup>60</sup>

The famous monk Ledi Sayadaw provided a specific solution to moral decline in his *Nwa Myitta Sa* (“Cow Letter”) of 1885 (Ledi Sayadaw 1987). He told Burmese Buddhists that they should not blame the British for the circumstances in which they found themselves; their political downfall had come about because of their lack of attention to moral conduct. However, they could begin to remedy this situation by abstaining from eating beef. Ledi reasoned that, as Europeans, the British would undoubtedly consume significantly more beef than the Burmese had and by taking it out of their diets, the Burmese would be able to counteract this increased consumption, saving countless (bovine) lives. More importantly, this collective attention to proper moral conduct would arrest Burmese political decline, laying the foundation for a stronger community that would eventually be able to throw off the yoke of British colonialism. For Ledi Sayadaw, as for U Hpo Hlaing and U Chan Htoon, the correct response to political problems was reorienting citizens to correct moral conduct (Braun 2008, 75-78).

Thakin Kodaw Hmaing (1876-1964), a writer, poet, and political icon of the independence movement in the 1930s and 40s, was the intellectual father of the *Dobama Asiayone*, the Burmese nationalist organization that also included U Nu and Aung San. Like Ledi Sayadaw, he linked the current period of decline that the Burmese were experiencing to the people’s own actions. However, even though Thakin Kodaw Hmaing apparently longed for the revitalization of the monarchy, he espoused a more “democratized” notion of the collective effects of correct moral action on the community. In a view that was likely also influenced by some of the Marxist ideas that were beginning to enter Burma in the 1920s and 30s, he told people that, while the condition of the current era was the result of human action, each world age was like clay that people could mold to what they desired through their conduct (Thakin Kodaw Hmaing 1967).

Much of the nationalist activity in the 1930s focused initially on revitalizing the Burmese community through a renewed attention to Buddhist moral practice. The *wunthanu athins*, a loosely connected network of local nationalist groups, emerged from “a popular desire to see Burmese life purged of the corruption, drunkenness, and crime into which it had fallen during the period of British rule, and restored to good order, with a reformed *Sangha* able to take the lead in promoting moral and

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<sup>60</sup> Presumably, since he castigated the British earlier in the speech, he was referring to the moral superiority that allowed them to become militarily and politically dominant, and not suggesting that the practice of imperialism itself was an example of good moral conduct!

social welfare” (Ling 1979, 84). The decision by these groups to put their efforts into campaigns that addressed moral social issues was at least partly strategic; at that time the British would not allow the Burmese to form explicitly political organizations. However, this course of action was also consistent with Burmese beliefs about cause and effect and the tangible results of good moral conduct. Proper moral conduct would not only correct the collective past failures of society, it would also reverse the political fortunes of the country.

U Nu followed a similar logic in his convocation speech at the University of Rangoon in 1951. Had Burmese morality been stronger, he claimed, the British would not have been able to take control over the country, and of course, once they gained control, they did everything in their power to ensure that the Burmese remained in a low moral state, including neglecting the *sangha*. U Nu also quoted one observer who put the blame for the fall of the Burmese monarchy squarely on the shoulders of the Burmese themselves: “Burmese sovereignty is gone because of the Burmese people’s depraved morality. We embrace [any] new ‘ism’ provided it is upside down. I think we are a dirty, lapsing lot” (U Nu 1953, 33). Lest anyone be unclear as to the source of his reasoning, he concluded, “In the circumstances it is not at all surprising why we have been facing a series of unrest and disturbances everywhere. The law of Cause and Effect works with precision” (35).<sup>61</sup>

### **Moral Conduct as a Marker of Legitimacy**

While traditional ethical guides such as the Ten Duties of the King provided a framework for proper royal conduct, we should not overstate their power to restrain rulers in practice. The chronicles depict even the most pious kings as capable of grave moral transgressions and the only appeal was to the impersonal force of *kan* and to negative effects that would appear in a vague future. Political legitimacy in pre-colonial Burma was also a complex calculation, relying not just on *kan* but also on the king’s proper ritual conduct. Because of this, a ruler’s immoral actions might not have been critically damaging to his legitimacy. Additionally, explanations that connected a king’s immoral conduct and the decline of his kingdom only served to legitimate the *fall* of a monarch after the fact; they were never effectively deployed to legitimize rebellion.

The calculation of legitimacy is different, however, in a democratizing Myanmar. While the legitimating power of *kan* and *hpoun* can still carry weight, the absolute power of a monarch has been replaced by mechanisms of electoral accountability. In this context, the moral conduct of leaders and

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<sup>61</sup> Because Thailand was never colonized, its leaders did not develop a discourse on political liberation similar to the Burmese one that I examine in Chapter 3. However, the Thai king Vajiravudh (who ruled from 1910-1925) echoed a common sentiment in claiming that “Thailand’s enjoyment of freedom was due to the people’s continued adherence to the Dhamma” (Ishii 1986, 163).

governments might gain weight as a measure of legitimacy, in both positive and negative senses. In the first parliamentary period from 1948-1958, U Nu appeared to possess overwhelming legitimacy because of his well-publicized moral conduct, despite a relatively weak record of policy successes. In the contemporary period, it remains unclear in what ways citizens and politicians will use moral conduct as a criterion for legitimacy (if at all). Despite the lack of public discussion of Buddhism and politics since the 2010 elections, Aung San Suu Kyi has previously cited and re-imagined the Ten Duties of a King as a set of criteria for judging a (non-monarchical) government (1991, 170ff). One of these duties is “morality” and she claims that “the ruler must bear a high moral character to win the respect and trust of the people, to ensure their happiness and prosperity and to provide a proper example...The root of a nation’s misfortunes has to be sought in the moral failings of the government” (171). We can see that this moral framework continues to exist in Burmese Buddhist understandings of politics, even within the current “secular” political discourse.<sup>62</sup> Moral conduct is also a critical part of the Burmese Buddhist understanding of “unity” and I turn to a brief analysis of that concept as an example that brings together many of the elements in this chapter.

### **Unity as a Moral Concept**

Unity has been a consistent theme among Burmese political figures. During the colonial period, the leaders of successive waves of nationalism called for unity among the population in order to secure independence. After independence in 1948, the push for unity was a matter of national survival, with the government beset by ethnic, religious, and ideological rebellions on all sides. When the military took power permanently in 1962, they maintained the appeal for unity, although they employed increasingly brutal methods to enforce it among the population. The movements for democracy as well as ethnic and religious resistance movements have all employed the rhetoric of unity, urging the people of Myanmar to join in opposing a violent and repressive military regime.

Of course, many of these calls for unity have been for strategic or psychological reasons. U Ba Swe, one of the leaders of the AFPFL gave a speech to trade union leaders in December 1951. He urged members of the party to come together and discuss issues and concerns in order to achieve “coordination of ideology” (U Ba Swe 1952, 11).<sup>63</sup> Ideological conflicts were rampant among socialist movements and parties worldwide and plagued leftists in Burma in the 1940s and 50s. U Ba Swe

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<sup>62</sup> Jackson has noted that in Thailand, Buddhists of various political persuasions continue to view morality as the only practice “capable of transforming the social, political, and economic domains,” and that Thai political figures are especially concerned with preserving (and monitoring) the moral purity of the *sangha* (1997, 81).

<sup>63</sup> Bur. သဘောတရားရေးဝါဒကို ညှိနှိုင်း

laments the lack of unity and exhorts workers to deepen their level of closeness and intimacy with each other as a way to give the idea of “working together” a deeper meaning (12). Later, in January 1958, the AFPFL held its annual conference amidst rumors of a divide in its leadership. These rumors were true, although U Ba Swe vehemently denied them at the meeting. The media was skeptical of the leaders’ denials of a split, but one editorial in the *New Times of Burma* argued forcefully that “without unity the AFPFL is doomed” (January 30, 1958, 2).

What sets the Burmese Buddhist conception of unity apart from conceptions that focus on the strategic or psychological importance of unity and solidarity is that it is also an indicator of correct moral practice. The Burmese word for “unity” is *nyi nyut ye* (or, in another variation, *nyi nyut chin*).<sup>64</sup> Houtman traces the concept to the code of conduct for the *sangha*, where the word implied that “the majority decision should be respected” (1999, 60). The *vinaya* (rules for monks) considered causing a split in the *sangha* to be one of the most egregious offenses a monk could commit and monks were expected to gather together to make consensus decisions on matters of importance to the community. In fact, the word *sangha* has a general meaning of “coming together” and the Buddha insisted that the monks who followed his teachings maintain themselves as a united body (Bagshawe 2004 138). Aung San reinforced the historical connection of a moral conception of unity to the *sangha* in the closing of a 1947 speech to the AFPFL Party Convention. Speaking in Pāli and appropriating the Buddha’s dying words to his monks, Aung San told listeners: “Unity is the foundation. Let this fact be engraved in your memory, ye who hearken to me, and go ye to your appointed tasks with diligence” (Silverstein 1993, 161).

As a moral concept, unity represents devotion to a common purpose and loyalty to a group or community; it requires subsuming one’s own interests for the benefit of the whole, something that encapsulates the Buddhist practice of rejecting *atta* (ego). In citing the Buddha’s famous advice to the Licchavi princes on how to maintain unity among the Vajjians that they rule, U Hpo Hlaing clearly states the moral dimension of unity. He claims that, in an effort to achieve unanimity on an important matter, the discussion must leave out individual preferences (Bagshawe 2004, 88). Correct moral practice on the Buddhist path begins with the recognition that *dukkha* (dissatisfactoriness) originates from ignorance of the fundamental characteristic of *anattā* (no control/no self) and develops into desire focused on fulfilling one’s own misguided cravings. Disunity is the result of a group of individuals committed only to their own benefit; it is a result of moral failure. As Gustaaf Houtman has suggested, “Burmese ideas of

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<sup>64</sup> Bur. ညီညွတ်ရေး / ညီညွတ်ခြင်း

national unity are based on the Buddhist concept of harmony as a product of [moral practice]" (1999, 64).<sup>65</sup>

U Hpo Hlaing proposed an assembly in which the king would hold discussions with his officials in order to arrive at the best decision for the country, but he also had specific expectations for how this assembly would conduct its business, based on the rule of *sannipata* (unity). In his opinion, the most important criterion was that the members of the assembly reach agreement in accordance with the rule of *samagga* (harmony) (Maun Htin 2002, 151). If a country organizes its politics according to the rules of unity and harmony, "the people as a whole will be one in wealth with the king and ministers and will partake in the general prosperity. Each one therefore will desire the success of each other, and the whole country, including the poor, will be at one in prosperity, forming a single consensus in *sannipata* (union) through *samagga* (harmony), and the law of *aparihaniya* will be reinforced. This will ensure a very strong country which no foreign ruler will be able to shake" (Bagshawe 2004, 153-4). Clearly not having been exposed to some of the vitriol of British Parliamentary proceedings, U Hpo Hlaing claims that Western countries enjoy a dominant position in the world because of their political institutions that promote unity and harmony (Maung Htin 2002, 154-6).

Later in the *Rajadhammasangaha* he warns his reader about the four *agatis* (biases), negative states that, according to the Buddha's teachings, arise fundamentally from wrong views about the nature of existence. The failure of a political body to act in a unified way would indicate that some or all of its members are under the influence of these factors and, as a result, acting according to their own narrow interests. A unified assembly, on the other hand, has overcome divisions precisely because its members had developed their moral practice to overcome the *agatis* and act according to the principle of *anattā* (no-self).

Houtman notes that U Nu presented Aung San's ability to unify the country as a result of his goodwill (*cetanā*, Bur. *sedana*) and concentration (Pāli *samādhi*, Bur. *thamadi*), both qualities that a Buddhist would develop on the path to liberation (1999, 62). While *cetanā* is commonly defined as "goodwill," Houtman says that it also means "a union or accordance of mind with an object or purpose" which would presume that "for a government to work, all people must share the same deep intentions, and the same object and purpose" (1999, 162). Similarly, U Hpo Hlaing suggested that not just kings, but their ministers and advisors as well should follow the rules of unity and harmony. He compared them to the limbs of a body, noting that, if each limb functions only according to its own interest, the body will

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<sup>65</sup> Houtman actually uses the phrase "mental culture," intended to signify a collection of moral practices such as following the precepts, but also including meditation practice. As I indicated in the Introduction, I find the phrase "mental culture" to be cumbersome and confusing, thus I use "moral practice" here.

suffer, just as the country will suffer if its leaders do not act selflessly (Bagshawe 2004, 150). Unity depends on individual moral development and the ability to move beyond self-interest in making political decisions.

Contemporary uses of the idea of unity also stress its nature as a moral concept. In an article in an underground journal circulated in Myanmar in the months prior to the 2007 “Saffron Revolution,” the author connects unity to correct moral practice and control of one’s actions (Shin Nan Gaung 2007). “In a united people we can see that the conduct of their body and mind is honest, their moral conduct (*ko gyint thila taya*) is good, and the strength of their mental qualities is great” (16).<sup>66</sup> He goes on to state that, “unity needs control/restraint (*htein chouk*) through proper moral conduct and an even mind,” reminding readers that, like everything else in the world, unity in politics begins with correct understanding and practice of the Buddha’s teachings (16).<sup>67</sup> In a recent sermon to a group of political parties, Sitagu Sayadaw denounced the lack of unity in Myanmar and claimed that it had led to the deterioration of the country and its reputation. He also told the audience that pollution of the Irrawaddy River was the result of a lack of unity and harmony in the country (*The Voice* June 27, 2011).

Finally, a discussion of unity as a moral concept cannot ignore the ways in which groups across the political spectrum have used the rhetoric of unity to quash dissent within their own organizations. In this way, the unity discourse has functioned as a disciplining tool, deployed in order to win an internal argument or move a group past a contentious disagreement. For example, U Ba Swe emphasized the importance of unity in the same speech in which he denounced anyone who had an ideological opposition to the AFPFL as reactionaries, enemies, stooges, and fifth columnists (1952, 33-35). U Nu’s 1951 Convocation Speech at the University of Rangoon also included a sort of *kammic* threat to those people he saw as trying to break up the Union. He claimed that the agitators were “far from realizing that power wrested by force is impermanent and that such evil action will entail a lengthy period of sufferance in their next existence” (U Nu 1953, 35). Alexey Kirichenko has also suggested that Burmese have used the concept of unity, both in politics and in the *sangha*, to repress dissenting or minority views (n.d., 3). Mendelson saw “moralized” concepts like unity as ways for the Burmese government and religious elites to impose their will on the community, by questioning the moral conduct of those who disagreed with their policies (1963). In this way, unity as a moral concept has been a powerful tool that leaders have used to presume agreement and discount opposing viewpoints.

<sup>66</sup> Bur. ညီညွတ်သူတို့မှာ ကိုယ်၊ စိတ်အမှုအရာတို့ ရိုးဖြောင့်မှုရှိခြင်း၊ ကိုယ်ကျင့်သီလတရားကောင်းခြင်း၊ ပညာဂုဏ်ကြီးမားခြင်းတို့ ပြည့်စုံနေသည်ကို တွေ့ရမည်ဖြစ်သည်။

<sup>67</sup> Bur. ညီညွတ်ခြင်းသည် မျှတသော အသိဉာဏ်၊ ကိုယ်ကျင့်တရားတို့ဖြင့် ထိန်းချုပ်ခြင်းတို့ လိုအပ်မည်။

This brief examination of unity as a moral notion demonstrates the ways in which political concepts acquire additional dimensions of significance when interpreted within a Burmese Buddhist framework. Unity not only has strategic and psychological importance, it is also an indicator of correct moral practice, of the ability of individuals in a group to overcome the natural human inclination towards the interest of the self and act in ways that demonstrate Buddhist Right View. This analysis also shows how seemingly “secular” political concepts actually carry multiple meanings and implications that would be clear to audiences also situated within the same Buddhist conceptual context.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated some of the ways in which the moral framework of the Theravāda universe conditions Burmese Buddhist understandings of the nature of politics and political action. While the realm of “politics” was initially only open to kings and their advisors, Aung San and others effectively expanded the borders of politics to include all types of human interactions. In doing so, they explicitly marked politics as a *lawki* practice of the material world, oriented towards worldly success. Some commentators expanded the notion even further, connecting the *lawki* and *lawkouttara* perspectives by suggesting that politics, properly conducted, could bring beneficial results on the moral path to enlightenment. I will continue to explore this perspective in the next chapter when I look at Burmese re-imaginings of the goal of liberation (*neikban*) as both dependent on and supported by political liberation.

The *Aggañña Sutta* provided a justification for political authority that later political figures generally accepted but modified in order to limit absolute political power and append electoral institutions. The *Cakkavatti Sutta* told a similar story of political decline but emphasized the relationship between moral conduct and socio-political circumstances. Together, these two *suttas* also point to dual perceptions of human nature in their portrayal of humans as inherently flawed yet capable of achieving ultimate liberation. The themes of human weakness and potentiality also inform the structure of the next chapter, where I look at the twin goals of Burmese Buddhist politics as “order” and “liberation.” Along with the perpetual tension of the *lawki-lawkouttara* relationship, this multi-dimensional view of human nature creates space for multiple perspectives on politics, all situated within the Burmese Buddhist view of the world as functioning according to inherently moral principles.

### CHAPTER 3: BURMESE BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE ENDS OF POLITICS

In the previous chapter, I presented the Theravāda Buddhist conception of human nature, arguing that it actually contained two distinct perspectives on the conditions of human existence. On the one hand, being intrinsically driven by desire and craving, humans are destined for lives filled with conflict, injuring each other and engendering a perpetual cycle of violence. From another perspective, however, humans are capable of controlling and even overcoming our enslavement to desire, living morally worthy lives and (for a select few) stepping completely out of the cycle of suffering and continued existence. While it is analytically useful to separate these two perspectives, they are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the Buddhist conception of human nature and the moral universe necessarily encompasses both points of view. However, when looking at Burmese Buddhist arguments regarding the end goals of politics, these twin aspects of human nature inform ideas that fall into two broad categories.

Taking human beings to be fundamentally fallible and unable to control their desires (except through the discipline of Buddhist moral practice), the purpose of politics is to create an authority that has power over human actors, managing their conflicts, punishing them when appropriate, and constraining them to act in accordance with both moral and mundane laws. This is what I call the argument for order; it is most apparent in the tale of human decline in the *Aggañña Sutta*. Order not only implies political control over subjects, it also refers to the proper arrangement of society according to the laws of nature, which results in balance and harmony. The other end of politics is liberation, based on the possibility of and the human potential to realize the overcoming of desire.<sup>1</sup> This argument claims that the purpose of a political system is to organize society in such a way that it not only encourages correct moral practice among citizens, but also supports those who seek liberation from the conditions of existence. While liberation from desire may be the ultimate understanding of liberation,

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<sup>1</sup> The most commonly used Burmese term for “liberation” or “freedom” is *lut lat ye* (Bur. လွတ်လပ်ရေး). While this term is consistently used in the mundane sense (political or economic liberation), it can also be used in a spiritual sense or to indicate the points of overlap between the mundane and the spiritual (as in Sayadaw U Zawtika’s book *Lut Lat Thaw Seit (A Free Mind)*). The Pāli-derived Buddhist term for liberation from desire (enlightenment) is *wimoukti* (Bur. ဝိမုတ္တိ), a word usually reserved for formal treatises. I look at various Burmese understandings of “liberation” in more detail below.

Buddhists in Myanmar have also developed related and overlapping conceptions of liberation as freedom from political and economic conditions not conducive to moral development.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I analyze the philosophies of particular leaders and groups according to their place on the order-liberation spectrum in several periods in Burmese political history. Additionally, I demonstrate how different political leaders navigated and combined these two goals of politics (at times complementary and at other times conflicting), indicating different interpretations of the role of Buddhism in political understanding. Under Burmese kings, order was a primary concern. However, kings and their ministers did not merely understand this as keeping control of the population; they strengthened their political authority through the maintenance of proper hierarchical balance that mirrored the Theravāda cosmological view of the universe. Depending on their level of devotion (and the degree to which their advisors were able to incorporate Buddhist symbolism into the mechanisms of royal legitimation), Burmese kings were also concerned with liberation. A king's subjects expected him to provide conditions conducive to correct Buddhist practice, facilitating, at the very least, beneficial rebirths for his subjects. This meant supporting monks in their practice for the ultimate liberation, affording opportunities for lay people to make merit through donations, and providing sufficient political, social, and economic stability (through the maintenance of "order") so that Buddhism could flourish.

Order was still a primary concern in the years after the British consolidated their hold on the country in 1886. Flurries of rebellions, particularly in Upper Burma, were directed against the British colonial authorities. The purpose of these initial insurrections was the restoration of the Burmese monarchy as an essential element of the proper order in society. In this context, liberation began to mean freedom from foreign control, specifically, non-Buddhist rule. Gradually, nationalists began to conceive of their struggle for political liberation as connected to efforts for spiritual liberation. Some posited political independence as a necessary condition for proper moral conduct in society, while others reversed the causal connection, focusing instead on moral uplift as the route to political self-rule.

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<sup>2</sup> William Koenig used a similar classification system in his excellent study of politics during the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885) (1990). He suggests that the basic purpose of kingship was "regulation," while the higher purpose was "reform." He also roughly connects these two with the story of *Mahasammata* in the *Aggañña Sutta*, and the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, respectively (although he eventually associates the figure of the *cakkavatti* with the regulatory function and suggests that the *bodhisattva* model was the idealization of the reform function). I prefer the term "order" to "regulation" because I think it encompasses not only the need for political regulation, but also the idea of a cosmological and moral harmony in political and social arrangements. Similarly, I believe that "liberation" not only more closely conforms to the terms and ideas that Burmese actors used themselves, it also recognizes the intrinsic connections between, on the one hand, political and economic reforms that sought to liberate individuals from colonial rule and capitalist exploitation and, on the other, policies that were formulated for the purpose of supporting individuals in their moral practice of liberation from defilements and ultimately, from existence itself.

The introduction of Marxist texts to Burma in the 1930s brought a concern with liberation from conditions of economic exploitation, dependency and mundane, rather than existential suffering. Burmese leftists envisioned their economic and political reforms as leading to a perfect society in which people could follow the moral precepts effortlessly because their basic needs were fulfilled. They called this *lawka neikban*, the “worldly nirvana.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to debating the policies that would usher in the perfect society, leftists of various ideological orientations also differed in their views on the compatibility of Buddhism and various aspects of Marxism. Alongside these continuing arguments regarding liberation was a return to calls for the reinstatement of order in the country, now that political liberation had been achieved. Post-independence government and military leaders used this framework to delegitimize the “liberation” movements of communist, ethnic and religious insurgencies. Several new interpretations of liberation emerged from the democracy movement that began in earnest in 1988, creatively combining calls for freedom from repressive authoritarian rule with a renewed focus on spiritual liberation.

Throughout these fluctuations in conceptions of liberation, one interpretation, while not always dominant, has remained consistent. Liberation in the ultimate sense meant liberation from desire. While most Burmese Buddhists considered this *summum bonum* to be practically out of reach, some monks and political figures privileged freedom from moral defilements (*kilesa*) as the most important program of liberation. This view, which some Burmese (particularly monks) continue to hold, remains skeptical of the freedom that comes with democracy or liberalism. Perceiving this as merely an unhelpful freedom to act in morally inappropriate ways, these voices represent an important and critical (although not necessarily anti-democratic) stream of Burmese Buddhist political thought.

Finally, I look at political authorities’ practices of “purification,” which I argue represent a blend of both arguments regarding the ends of politics. Efforts by kings and governments to cleanse the *sangha* (community of monks) of heresy, instill proper moral practice among the population and uproot corruption within the government itself all represent ways in which political leaders have used Buddhist arguments about the purpose of political authority in order to control the population. At the same time, they have presented their “order”-oriented policies as assisting the ultimate goal of liberation, conceived on multiple levels. I also suggest that we can see echoes of these policies in the recently elected quasi-civilian government’s calls for “clean government”; their actions, while not expressed in religious language, are consistent with the purification campaigns of previous political authorities and reflect current political leaders’ positioning within the Theravāda moral worldview.

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<sup>3</sup> Bur. လောကနိဗ္ဗာန်

## The Maintenance of Order, both Social and Cosmological

One of the most compelling arguments for order as the goal of politics comes from the *Aggañña Sutta*. Because of the inherent flaw of being subject to desire, human beings devolved from a previously immaterial and almost perfect existence. Craving was the source of all the evils present in society, from sexual immorality to theft. It was also the basis of human society itself, as people were compelled to come together to fulfill their desires, either through cooperation or through conflict. One of the lessons in the *sutta* is that human desire, if not controlled and managed, leads to conflict and suffering. The charge given to *Mahasammata*, alternately presented as the first king or first elected leader, was to punish and reward people appropriately, thus establishing a degree of order within human society. Buddhist kings in Burma generally justified their political authority in three interconnected ways, consistent with patterns in other Theravāda countries.<sup>4</sup> First, the maintenance of order guarded against anarchy and conflict. Second, the social order preserved a hierarchy that reflected the proper arrangement of the entire universe. Third, situating the goal of order as subordinate to, but necessary for liberation, a well-ordered society enabled and supported religious practice of both monks and lay people. In the following section, I examine each of these topics in turn.

### The Perils of Anarchy

If a political ruler could not enforce the law in his own realm, the scriptures were very clear about the results. In the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, human beings quickly devolved without someone to enforce discipline and punish those who violated rules and harmed others. The Burmese royal chronicles follow the *suttas* in exhibiting an intense fear of anarchy and in assuming that most people require assistance in restraining themselves from acting immorally.<sup>5</sup> The writers of the chronicles, as monks or ministers, selectively emphasized particular historical incidents in order to strengthen their position with regard to religious controversies, political dynasties, and conceptions of proper political organization.<sup>6</sup> One of the primary themes is the dangers of disorder and the necessity of order for a thriving polity.<sup>7</sup> They tell of good kings under whose rule morality increased, the *sangha*

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<sup>4</sup> This would include the countries now known as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, as well as numerous pre-colonial kingdoms whose territory often overlapped contemporary nation-state borders.

<sup>5</sup> We can see the Burmese preoccupation with unity (that I examine in Chapters 2 and 5) as a corollary to this concern regarding anarchy.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the works that include critical appraisals of various Burmese histories include Aung-Thwin (1998, 2005), Carbine (2011), Charney (2006), and Lieberman (1976).

<sup>7</sup> This thematic connection is common to political thinking in Theravāda countries. For example, the contemporary Thai monk Buddhadasa, in a piece defending “dictatorial dhammic socialism,” equated morality with normalcy or balance (Buddhadasa 1989, 182). By contrast, confusion and chaos would indicate a population lacking in morality, similar to Burmese arguments about disunity as moral deficiency.

proliferated, and the *sāsana* (Buddhist community) flourished. They also tell of bad kings who set poor moral examples for their subject, whose lax rule allowed monastic discipline to lapse, and whose failure to strengthen the kingdom led to either civil conflict or foreign invasion. The chroniclers consistently justified royal authority with reference to the need for order so that the *sāsana* remains healthy.

In practice, polities in Theravāda Buddhist Southeast Asia developed a socio-political structure in which there were two forces that acted as constraints on human action: the political authority of the king and the moral authority of the *dhamma*, embodied and propagated by the *sangha*.<sup>8</sup> Although these were ideally complementary, the demands of each institution sometimes came into conflict as they developed.<sup>9</sup> These two institutions guarded against the threat of anarchy and the promise of moral and material catastrophe that it posed because of inherent human weakness. Furthermore, while the king acted as the supreme authority on worldly matters, the fact that the *dhamma* contained a moral code of practice designed to guide daily conduct drew these two institutions closer together (although there were no mechanisms to enforce this moral code, apart from the assumed effects of *kan*). After the British toppled the Burmese monarchy in 1886, Burmese discussions of political authority increasingly revolved around the appropriate relationship between government (taking the place of the king) and the *sangha* as guardians of society's moral conduct.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Maintenance of Hierarchy**

“Order” was not simply a lack of conflict and violence within society. It was also necessary that the king produce social harmony by maintaining the proper hierarchies and rituals that guided and constrained social interaction. The presence of the king in the highest position of authority reflected the natural order of the universe. For Burmese kings, the goal of political rule was not the creation of something new, but the restoration of past perfection, specifically, the recreation of Jambudipa, the

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Reynolds (1972) has classified these as the “two wheels of *dhamma*.”

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Michael Aung-Thwin's claim that royal programs of “purification” were in fact a practical response to an inherent socio-economic characteristic of Buddhist society (1979). Any land donated by kings or laypeople to the monastic order was tax exempt. Over time monastic accumulation of land resulted in a severe decrease in funds available to the throne, prompting a response. While kings usually couched their efforts in the rhetoric of purification of the *sangha*, the result was royal re-appropriation of land. Lieberman (1980) disputed Aung Thwin's claim that the accumulation of *sangha* land was the primary factor in various periods of decline during the Burmese monarchy, but the example still attests to the fact that royal and monastic interests sometimes came into conflict.

<sup>10</sup> In other Theravāda countries, however, monarchs that colonial powers did not depose or who re-emerged to lead post-colonial states, continued to be powerful unifying symbols, particularly in times of crisis. Hewison (1997, 61) notes the Thai discourse on the monarchy was critical to political stability and Harris (2005, 144) mentions that the 1947 Cambodian constitution referred to Sihanouk as a “great righteous king” (although public opinion of him was decidedly more mixed). Both of these kings were important figureheads but had their powers significantly proscribed by constitutional monarchical frameworks.

legendary island paradise (Aung-Thwin 1981). In Theravādin cosmology, the world's center was a sacred mountain called Mount Meru. Above Mount Meru lived the gods in various ethereal realms and the mountain was surrounded by four islands. Jambudipa was the southern island, the abode of humans (Heine-Geldern 1942). For Burmese Buddhists, Jambudipa represented a perfect moral community, governed by a king who ruled according to *dhamma*, and a land of plenty where people flourished both spiritually and materially.

Rulers' various attempts to create a social order that would parallel this ideal arrangement sometimes mixed different elements of the cosmology. Heine-Geldern relates how the palace of the monarch symbolically took the place of Mount Meru, marking it as the center of the king's realm (1942). This equation also allowed the king to present himself not only as the ruler of the kingdom, but symbolically as a universal monarch (*cakkavatti*), with the composition of his own territory mirroring the broader cosmological structure. Mirroring of this type even extended to the layout of the palace itself, with the throne as Mount Meru and different chief queens ruling over the surrounding "island" buildings (ibid.). Aung Thwin notes that, at the same time, many Burmese kings actually referred to their own territory as Jambudipa (1981, 51). In doing so, they were attempting to situate themselves and their rule within the Buddhist tradition of just kings, while at the same time encouraging their subjects to equate the perfection of Jambudipa with their own realm.

Because of the presumed need for some sort of overarching political authority, Koenig tells us that in pre-colonial Burma, "the institution [of kingship] was never called into question in theory or actuality, but was simply accepted as a necessary part of life" (1990, 84). Of course, actual kings could be (and were) questioned and challenged, with their rise and fall being attributed to the unavoidable law of impermanence, but as Aung Thwin explains, people "did not expect the relationships between top and bottom, the principles of that relationship itself, nor the traditional forms of articulating that relationship to change" (1985a, 254). He goes on to note how this idea of a proper hierarchy determined the ways in which Burmese kings incorporated conquered groups into their realm: "Indigenous pacification, then, implied a process that involved more than merely breaking the back of resistance and establishing security for the movement of one's military forces and the collection of revenue. It implied the integration of defeated forces into an already familiar cultural scheme that preserved tradition and affirmed a whole set of other norms" (ibid.).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The challenge for political authorities was that other kings could also issue competing claims to be *cakkavatin*, leading to a fundamental condition of political instability in pre-modern Theravādin Southeast Asia.

Burmese legal practice also reflected an understanding of order as the maintenance of hierarchy. The hierarchy was explained and justified with reference to *kan* as the factor that determined one's status in the present. Because that *kan* resulted from good deeds and proper moral conduct in the past, the present effects of those actions—one's social status—also indicated a higher moral standing. Burmese legal practice recognized this principle, creating a system in which justice meant judging individuals unequally, according to the belief that they *were* (morally) unequal (Aung Thwin 1981, 47).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Andrew Huxley describes the pre-colonial Burmese “village structure as a legalistic and highly status-conscious patron-client system” (1997, 4). The presumption of inequality based on *kan* resulted in a particular social order, one that the king was expected to maintain and one that was presumed to be in accordance with natural law.

The enforcement of regular and acknowledged tributary relationships with peripheral authorities was another indication of a king's worthiness to rule. These interactions reinforced the central ruler's position atop the hierarchy while also providing tangible evidence of a common Buddhist justification of political power. Stanley Tambiah (1976) notes that the figure of the *cakkavatti* was always considered a “king of kings.” Thus, it was necessary for a conquering ruler to allow defeated rivals to retain their nominal positions in order to establish his own Buddhist monarchical credentials. Although, as Jacques Leider (2008, 410) has noted, the figure of the *cakkavatti* was not as common in the self-imagining of Burmese kings as it was in other Theravādin polities, they still followed the dominant regional pattern of forming tributary relations with lesser neighboring rulers. Michael Aung-Thwin asserts that these tributary relationships were also an indicator that the king was maintaining a proper cosmological balance: “Symbols of status as much as submission of tribute on the one hand and the recognition of position on the other, established an unequivocal relationship between the central power and the peripheral ones. The use and preservation of these rituals and practices implied order, while their lapse, disorder” (1985a, 249).

Protecting the natural hierarchy also meant preserving Buddhist teachings as the basis of the entire moral system. This was an important point of continuity once the British deposed the Burmese king and that element of the hierarchy could not be restored. The British colonial financial commissioner D.M. Smeaton believed that the downfall of the monarchy would inevitably result in the disappearance of Buddhism as well. In an 1887 book about the Karen ethnic group he claimed that “The Burman cannot conceive of a religion without a Defender of the Faith...The extinction of the monarchy left the nation, according to the people's notions, without a religion” (quoted in Smith 1965, 45). His assessment was

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<sup>12</sup> For example, one's social status determined one's credibility as a witness (Aung Thwin 1981, 47).

not entirely correct, as over the next several decades Burma would experience a transformation in the participatory role of lay people in the maintenance of the *sāsana* (Turner 2009). Groups like the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA, founded in 1906) institutionalized lay support not only for the *sangha* but also for the perpetuation of Buddhist morality as a guiding force in society (Maung Maung 1980). In the decades after the fall of the monarchy, monks like the Ledi Sayadaw traveled across the country organizing study and discussion groups of laypeople in order to ensure the continuation of the Buddha's teachings (Braun 2008). Gradually, one aspect of the maintenance of order came to be government (rather than royal) support for Buddhism and the protection of its prominent role in Burmese society. As an example of this transformation, when the independence era politician Dr. Ba Maw assumed the position of Prime Minister under the Japanese regime, he took an oath of office—administered by the nationalist hero Thakin Kodaw Hmaing—that recalled the vows of previous kings to use his power and position to defend Buddhism (Cady 1958, 464).

Michael Aung Thwin (1985a) has provocatively argued that, while the colonial period was undoubtedly a time of moral and cosmological disorder for Burmese Buddhists, the parliamentary period was not a restoration of order. First, near-continuous rebellions by various groups of political and ethnic insurgents meant that many parts of the country were effectively in a state of anarchy. Additionally, the idea of a democratic system of governance ran contrary to the (cosmologically mandated) hierarchy that reflected the proper order of society. Aung Thwin believed that U Nu tried to fill this conceptual void by acting like a *dhammaraja*, a righteous king, but that the proper social and political (and thus, moral) order was restored only with the centralizing and stabilizing takeover of the military in 1962. This was a controversial claim in that it appeared to legitimize the military government and question the possibility of justifying democracy from within the Burmese Buddhist tradition, rejecting attempts by other Burmese Buddhists to demonstrate the compatibility of Buddhism and democracy. Aung Thwin's thesis, however, prompts a more critical examination of the intersection of Buddhism and democracy, particularly in the light of history and the changing interpretation of key Buddhist concepts. It also alerts us to the challenges faced by contemporary political figures who seek to present and legitimize democracy in Buddhist terms to the Burmese citizenry.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Democrats in other Theravāda Buddhist countries face similar challenges. The recent political conflict in Thailand between the (roughly monarchist) Yellow Shirts and the Red Shirts (who have more parliamentary allies) demonstrates that democratic legitimacy is still strongly debated and contested in Buddhist cultural terms.

### Order as the Basis for Religious Practice

The maintenance of order also required royal attention to institutions in society that supported both lay and monastic religious practice.<sup>14</sup> The third century Indian king Aśoka was the model for this type of behavior, leaving a detailed record of his religious activities (Reynolds 1972, 26). For Burmese kings, required Buddhist religious activities included “the construction of religious edifices, mainly pagodas, the feeding of monks, and the cycle of state ceremonies and festivals” (Koenig 1990, 81). Aung Thwin explains that “in the context of a living, ordered, harmonious community, salvation was the business of the elite,” suggesting that Buddhists in Burma expected that not only would the king create conditions amenable to religious practice and regular donations among his subjects, he himself would be the largest and most consistent donor, reflecting and amplifying his merit and authority (1981, 49).<sup>15</sup> Keyes notes that this also reflected expectations that the king’s great store of merit could be shared by his subjects (1973).

This benefit of order, supporting religious practice, is closely connected to the first, preventing anarchy and violence. Not only do people need a certain level of material prosperity in order to be able to give *dana* (donations) to the monks, there is a traditional belief among Burmese Buddhists that when one’s basic needs are not met, one is more susceptible to craving and more likely to commit moral infractions. The most common expression of this belief is the frequently cited proverb “Only when your stomach is full can you keep the precepts.”<sup>16</sup> The *Cakkavatti Sutta* related how immorality and disorder in society arose from need among the population and the king’s negligence in not giving to those in need.

When the Burman king Bodawpaya conquered Arakan in 1785, he said that his intention was to “put an end to the country’s anarchy and to re-establish the purity of the *sāsana*, the Buddhist religion” (Leider 2008, 413). The resolution of an anarchic situation was a primary justification but was directly

<sup>14</sup> In Thailand, after Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat seized power in a military coup in 1957, he looked to the king to legitimize his position by refocusing attention on the king as the defender of Buddhism and presenting his own regime as maintaining that traditional social order (Ishii 1986, 165).

<sup>15</sup> While in countries where the monarchy fell, Buddhists subsequently developed theories that transferred the responsibility for the maintenance of order and the *sāsana* to a strong central government, some Buddhists have been critical of this model. The progressive Khmer monk Venerable Khiev Chum argued that, since the Buddha never indicated that he relied on any king’s support, the health of the *sāsana* depended on the entire community of practitioners rather than royal patronage (Yang Sam 1987, 9-10). Khiev Chum expressed these opinions in writings published between 1970 and 1975, after the fall of the monarchy in Cambodia but before the Khmer Rouge took power.

<sup>16</sup> Bur. အူမတောင့်မှ သီလစောင့်နိုင်၏။ This is the version Aung San used in an article about different kinds of politics (Mya Han 1998, 99). U Ba Swe gave a slightly softened version (အူမတောင့်လို့ သီလစောင့်နိုင်ပြီ), which translates as “Because your belly is full, you can keep the precepts” (1952, 29).

connected to the king's desire to spread and support Buddhism. The latter would not be possible without the former. While Leider acknowledges that this justification could be viewed cynically as the manipulation of religious beliefs for the purpose of political legitimation, he rightly insists that we see Bodawpaya himself as holding a Burmese Buddhist worldview (414). That is, these are precisely the terms in which he himself understands political authority and his military triumph in Arakan merely reinforced the legitimacy of his rule.

### **Liberation Through Order**

Burmese conceptions of order are inextricably tied to the complementary goal of liberation. When understood as enlightenment, liberation cannot be directly achieved through political means, although some modern Burmese reconfigurations of the two ideas suggest otherwise, as I explore below. Central to my argument, however, is that both of these twin goals of order and liberation acquire meaning through a particular view of the world as a place governed by moral laws. As Aung Thwin explains, "It is the dhammaraja's duty to ensure the morality, and ultimately, the salvation of his subjects. But Jambudipa was not an end in itself, it was a means to another end, namely nibbana [*neikban*]. Order was found in a centralized polity, hierarchical society, a stable, self sufficient economy, and a thriving religion" (1985a, 256).

From the standpoint of religious practice, the most important type of liberation for a Buddhist is, at its most basic level, liberation from desire or craving. In Burmese, this ultimate goal, synonymous with enlightenment is called *wimoukti* (Pāli *wimutti*). Burmese Buddhists also talk about freedom from the three hindrances, greed (Pāli *lobha*, Bur. *lawba*), anger (Pāli *dosa*, Bur. *dawtha*), and ignorance (Pāli *moha*, Bur. *mawha*). In another, more detailed configuration, Burmese Buddhists seek liberation from a list of ten defilements (Pāli *kilesa*, Bur. *kiletha*) through correct moral practice.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of politics, then, is the arrangement of the social world in such a way as to encourage correct practice and in so doing, help liberate individuals from the chains of desire. The *Aggañña Sutta*, while providing a model for political authority, also presented a higher path of renunciation for a monk.<sup>18</sup> Initially, the monk was

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<sup>17</sup> These ten defilements are greed, anger, ignorance, pride, wrong belief, doubt, sloth, restlessness of mind, not being ashamed of doing wrong, and not being afraid of doing wrong.

<sup>18</sup> This higher path would have also been available to female renunciates, called *bhikkhuni*. However, contemporary Theravāda tradition holds that the *bhikkhuni* order allowed its lineage to die out centuries ago. The ordination process requires a minimal number of ordained members and, the story goes, the population of the *bhikkhuni* order decreased until there were not enough left to ordain new members. The (male) *sangha* hierarchy has strenuously resisted attempts to re-incorporate the *bhikkhuni* order in contemporary Theravāda countries and public opinion thus far has supported their resistance. In Myanmar nuns are frequently treated as having lower social standing than beggars, despite their vows and dedication to moral conduct. For one of the few studies of nuns in Myanmar, see Kawanami (1991).

to free himself from worldly society and its concerns and attachments, in the hope that this initial liberating act would enable more sustained practice towards the goal of ultimate liberation.

The justification for the rule of a Buddhist king went beyond the need for order; the prospect of liberation (even though it was a distant, almost non-existent goal for most) required the creation of a certain type of society. All of this was necessary for the growth of the *sāsana*, the teachings of the Buddha along with the entire community of practitioners. At the far end of this spectrum, practically out of reach for most Buddhists, but important as an indicator of the health of the *sāsana*, was the prospect of enlightenment. Many Burmese Buddhists believe that the truths that the Buddha taught are so sublime and difficult to grasp that, without the guidance of his words, along with the explanatory commentary developed over many years by learned monks, most ordinary humans would have no chance of making progress on the path to enlightenment. Thus, a thriving *sāsana* was a necessary element in the mere possibility of enlightenment. Since just Buddhist rule was necessary for the continuation of the *sāsana*, it was also a necessary component in the prospect for enlightenment.

King Kyansittha, who ruled from 1084-1112, left inscriptions that attest to his self-stylization as a ruler whose benevolent actions towards his people were necessary for their progress on the spiritual path. He boasted of his “pious” gifts, such as monasteries, water tanks, and peaceful grove, which he gave to support moral practice among the population, “only that all beings might escape out of *samsāra* [the cycle of continued rebirth]” (Sarkisyanz 1965, 61). However, Kyansittha’s magnanimity extended well beyond the fulfillment of his subjects’ material needs. He also saw himself as a “King of the Law” (*dhammaraja*). In this capacity, he preached *dhamma* to the people, advising them to keep the precepts and carry out their own meritorious deeds. In this way “all might obtain happiness in this world and the worlds beyond” (ibid., 60). Kyansittha certainly did not neglect the order side of the equation; he was a military general under his father Anawrahta, and his name means “strong soldier.” However, his inscriptions present his actions as carried out for the greater goal of liberation for both himself and his subjects. Similarly, King Alaungsitthu, Kyansittha’s successor, appeared to reject the material delights of kingship in one of his inscriptions. Instead of the “splendors of a monarch” he hoped that his merit would help him to become a bodhisattva and thus “build a causeway sheer athwart the river of *samsāra*, and all folks would speed across until they reach the Blessed City [a common image of nirvana]” (ibid., 62).

Ideally then, mundane political authority exists as a means to the ultimate soteriological end of liberation. In practice, however, the maintenance of order frequently became an end unto itself, a subject that I return to at the end of this chapter. The chronicles contain more examples of poorly

behaved, oppressive rulers than they do paragons of saintliness and justice, supporting the thesis that, while kings and their advisors often used Buddhist imagery and doctrine to strategically enhance their standing and legitimacy in the eyes of their population, Buddhist ethical teachings did not usually constrain their actions.

### **From Spiritual to Political Liberation**

In a monarchical context liberation was a religious goal, connected to progress on the path to enlightenment. The king facilitated the enlightenment-oriented actions of his subjects but the concept of liberation was devoid of any mundane political content related to independence or nationhood. It did include an indirect economic element, however, as conditions of acute need would inhibit moral conduct as well as the ability to make merit through donations. After the British deposed Thibaw, the last Burmese king, in 1885 and imposed colonial rule, Burmese Buddhists began to develop an understanding of liberation that explicitly viewed political independence as a necessary condition for moral development and spiritual liberation.<sup>19</sup> Before he was deposed, King Thibaw issued a proclamation to his subjects: “Those heretics, the English...have most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the injury of our Religion...To uphold the Religion, to uphold the national honor, to uphold the country’s interest...will gain for us the notable result of placing us on the path to the celestial regions and to Nibban [*neikban*]” (Scott and Hardiman 1983 [1900], 110). In Thibaw’s view, the end goal of liberation was the most compelling reason for the Burmese to resist the non-Buddhist British. Not only that, he suggested that these political actions on behalf of the country and the religion (*lawki* activities) would bring rewards on the path to enlightenment (*lawkouttara* benefits).

Variants of modern Theravāda Buddhist re-interpretations of liberation emerged across the Theravāda world during the nineteenth century, rooted in Buddhist reform movements in several countries. The Thai King Mongkut, who had spent twenty-seven years as a monk before ascending the throne, instituted reforms in the mid-nineteenth century that sought to emphasize what he saw as the core teachings of Buddhism, even establishing a new order of monks, the Dhammayut (Keyes 2007, 150). Another variant found its genesis in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the work of Anagarika Dharmapala and other early members of the Maha-Bodhi Society. The ethos of what some scholars have called the “Buddhist Protestant Revival” challenged the *lawki-lawkouttara* divide “by projecting the traditional quest for deliverance from *cosmic* suffering through impermanence into the direction of a quest for

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<sup>19</sup> The second half of the nineteenth century was an extended period of crisis for the Burmese monarchy. The British annexed Arakan, Manipur, and Assam in the West and Tenasserim in the East in 1826, followed by all of lower Burma (including Rangoon and the Irrawaddy Delta) in 1852.

deliverance from *social* suffering through injustice” (Sarkisyanz 1965, 116).<sup>20</sup> In Burma, King Mindon initiated a number of monastic reforms in the later nineteenth century designed to strengthen the institution against the threat of Western dominance (Mendelson 1965, Chapter 2). Ideas about politics continued to change through the beginning of the twentieth century along with what Juliane Schober has called the “laicization” of Burmese Buddhism (2011). Not only were monks like Ledi Sayadaw teaching laypeople advanced practices that had formerly been restricted to senior monks (Braun 2008), people were also starting to conceive of a society in which they could participate in political decisions that would shape the circumstances of their lives. According to Josef Silverstein, this reflected a new conception of freedom: “Set in a legal and constitutional framework, it theoretically applied to all: individual and group; ruler and ruled; indigenous and alien” (1996, 216).

The politically active Burmese monk U Ottama, who was educated in India and strongly influenced by the independence struggle in that country, saw political freedom as a prerequisite to enlightenment. In a 1921 speech, he contrasted the conditions of colonialism in Burma with the conditions during the Buddha’s life, saying that the Buddha could preach about *neikban* to his audiences because they were free people, but Burmese Buddhists could not even hope for *neikban* because they were still bound in earthly slavery to the British.<sup>21</sup> According to U Ottama, living under the yoke of non-Buddhist colonial rule had actually eroded the ability of Burmese Buddhists to reach enlightenment: “When Lord Buddha was alive, man had a predilection for Nirvana. There is nothing left now. The reason why it is so is because the government is English” (cited in Smith 1965, 96). In making this claim, U Ottama established a specific argument regarding liberation that later political figures would continue to use. While spiritual liberation might be the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice and Buddhist politics, adverse political circumstances could negatively affect one’s ability to practice on the spiritual path, even temporarily taking away the possibility of enlightenment. In these dire circumstances, Buddhists had to temporarily subsume their eventual goal of spiritual liberation to the more pressing task of gaining political freedom.

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<sup>20</sup> Gananath Obeyesekere (1970) was the first to label late nineteenth century changes in Sinhalese Buddhism as “Protestant Buddhism.” Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988, esp. Chapter 6) described the phenomenon in more detail, referring to a process of rationalization and laicization that removed the *sangha* as an intermediary for lay people to achieve enlightenment, and also positioning the transformation as a response to Protestant missionizing. Some scholars have been critical of this characterization, arguing that it is based on a limited understanding of the diversity of Protestantism (see, for example, Prothero 1995 and Swearer 1996).

<sup>21</sup> This seems to be a stretch on U Ottama’s part. The Buddha preached to people from a wide array of social, economic and political classes and his audiences would have had to include people in positions of servitude. In fact, one of the most radical elements of the Buddha’s teachings was its egalitarianism and his claim that enlightenment was open to all people, regardless of social status.

Similarly, for at least some of the factions struggling against British rule, “liberation” had a very specific meaning, one that was connected to a more limited understanding of “self-rule.” The oath that Saya San’s followers took as participants in the anti-colonial rebellion he led from 1930-31 included the words: “grant to us liberty and to the Galon King [Saya San] dominion over this land” (cited in Cady 1958, 312). For these rebels, liberation from British rule was a necessity, but they apparently did not see obedience to a new (Burmese Buddhist) king as an imposition on their liberty. In fact, from what we know about the expectations of an ideal Buddhist ruler, they would have probably believed that installing Saya San as king would have restored order (both politically and cosmologically), creating peace and prosperity and generating the ideal conditions to strive for ultimate liberation.<sup>22</sup> All of this would have been impossible under the “heathen” rule of the British, yet reinstating the dominion of a Burmese Buddhist king would have paradoxically restored their “liberty.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite his calls for popular political participation, U Ottama seemed to share this more limited view of “freedom” under previous Burmese monarchs. His denunciations of the British contrasted present conditions in Burma with (what must be acknowledged as somewhat fabricated) pictures of more idyllic times under Burmese Buddhist monarchical rule (Thakin Lwin n.d.). This may have merely been a rhetorical device, designed to focus the blame for current hardships on the foreign, non-Buddhist colonial invaders. However, it also points to an ambiguity in the concept of freedom/liberation that has allowed subsequent political figures to interpret and apply it in different ways according to the circumstances. I will demonstrate that for many of the leaders of the independence struggle, liberation *from foreign domination* was the primary, or even only concern. They assumed that self-government was synonymous with freedom and that this state would support individual moral practice for the ultimate liberation of enlightenment.<sup>24</sup> As I show later in this chapter, U Nu and other government

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<sup>22</sup> Similar “millenarian” revolts against French and Siamese rule occurred in Cambodia in the late nineteenth century. Anne Hansen has noted how, in addition to the political aims of these movements, they also “expressed a moral crisis, a way of responding to social unrest that conveyed a longing for the restoration of remembered, idealized conceptions of meaning and order” (2004, 49). It seems that the Saya San rebellion in Burma shared this orientation, but other groups in the emerging nationalist struggle sought to reconceptualize their ideas of order in a modern, democratic state. Both sets of nationalists, however, operated within a framework that saw political conditions as connected to moral conduct.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Mabbett notes a similar idea of freedom in other Theravāda Buddhist traditions (1998).

<sup>24</sup> Like many groups that challenged colonial narratives of their unfitness to rule, most English-speaking Burmese used the term “self-government” to mean independence and national sovereignty. However, we should note the overlap between their usage of the term and the way it has more commonly been deployed in the Western political tradition to mean self-government of an autonomous individual. For the Burmese fighting for independence, their ability to govern themselves collectively was connected to each individual’s ability to control his or her own actions according to the moral precepts. I revisit this notion in Chapter 4 when I discuss Burmese perspectives on the capacity of individuals to participate in (political) self-governance.

leaders used this framing to delegitimize the post-independence “liberation” struggles of other groups, whether communist, religious, or non-Burman ethnic groups.

The monk U Thilasara saw colonial rule as negatively affecting the mental state of colonial subjects, contrasting it with the spiritual and moral benefits that would come from self-government. “Without being free from bondage,” he wrote in a 1923 article, “which stems from the fact that one nation is subject to the rule of another, one can hardly find peace in one’s heart or in one’s environment, the environment in which the Buddhist way of life may be practiced or the compassionate love of a true Buddhist disseminated to humanity at large” (cited in Sarkisyanz 1965, 125). In his formulation, British colonial rule actively inhibited the ability of its subjects to engage in the ideal moral practices of Buddhism, most importantly, loving-kindness (Pāli *mettā*, Bur. *myitta*). U Thilasara was equally explicit in his expectations of Buddhists in Burma: “The realization must be driven into the minds of the people that while they strive for the ultimate deliverance in the form of Nirvana, it is the duty of everyone to see that Saupadisesa Nirvana *is attainable* in reasonable good measure here in one’s present existence” (ibid., 126).<sup>25</sup> He departs slightly from U Ottama’s insistence that political liberation must be the primary goal but does see it as complementary to and even necessary for Buddhist moral practice. This is clear in his endorsement of self-government for Burmese so that “through the attainment of political and personal freedom, they may be more favorably and firmly placed on the road to Nirvana” (ibid., 125).

U Ottama presented the “self-abnegation of the independence struggle” and the general self-sacrifice required for political action as similar to the actions of the *Bodhisattva* (future Buddha) (Sarkisyanz 1965, 132). Kirichenko also points to a common belief during the colonial period that living under British rule was comparable to the types of ascetic practices that Bodhisattvas would undertake as part of their efforts at spiritual purification (n.d.). Both of these examples suggest that some Buddhists in Burma understood participation in the independence struggle to be a purifying, *lawkouttara*-oriented practice itself. Sarkisyanz claims that a prominent anti-colonial monk, Sayadaw U Nye Ya, made this connection explicit (1965, 126). The purpose of the independence struggle was not simply for political freedom, nor was it merely to create a future polity under which spiritual practices of liberation could thrive. U Nye Ya told his readers that people could actually reach the ultimate (*lawkouttara*) liberation of *neikban* through the (*lawki*) struggle for political freedom. The implications of

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<sup>25</sup> Here U Thilasara used the Pāli term “Saupadisesa” nirvana, which refers to the realization of enlightenment while still physically embodied. The Burmese monk Ven. Rewata Dhamma described this in technical Buddhist terms as “*nibbana* with the aggregates remaining” (1997, 65). “Saupadisesa” nirvana contrasts with “anupadisesa” nirvana, which is the “final” liberation beyond material existence.

these views in the light of my previous explanation of unity suggest that this type of moral and spiritual justification of political liberation activities not only provided a Buddhist grounding for the independence struggle. It also categorized anti-colonial agitation as proper moral conduct for a Buddhist, questioning both the patriotism *and* the moral capacity of those who did not support political freedom and Burmese self-rule.

Burmese nationalists and the political leaders of the 1940s and 50s often expressed their goal of political liberation in Pāli-derived terms that were grounded in the natural law of the Buddha's teachings. For example, many writers used the word *kan kyama* to mean "destiny," as in U Ba Swe's "The people who will create our destiny are not the Japanese, the English, nor the Americans; it is us" (1952, 8).<sup>26</sup> The word *kan kyama* has as its root word *kan*, the Burmese version of the Pāli *kamma*. Although U Ba Swe and others may not have intended to "secularize" *kan kyama* by using it to mean something like "destiny," the phrase retains its Buddhist implications regarding cause and effect. While the published English translation of this speech uses the more idiomatic phrase "determine our destiny," U Ba Swe actually uses a Burmese phrase whose meaning in this context is closer to "create." This emphasizes the active, productive nature of the term, implying an understanding of *kan* that places the emphasis on the role of present human actions in shaping the future. Creating one's own destiny meant having the freedom to act according to one's own intentions, thus creating the *kan* that would condition one's own future. Political dependence or servitude was a state of being that inhibited this free action; therefore it went against the Buddhist law of nature.<sup>27</sup>

U Ba Swe supported Aung San's prior policy of "Independence within a year," declaring that those who expected and depended on foreign assistance would lead the country to ruin (Ba Swe 1952, 9). Although U Ba Swe does not explicitly make the connection, this is an evocative political application of the Buddhist teaching that one can only find liberation through one's own actions. U Nu made a similar claim in a speech in 1953, arguing that sovereignty was a necessary step in creating a perfect society and thus a perfect society could never have occurred under a British government (1955). In the *suttas* the Buddha claimed that liberation from desire could only come from the free efforts of each individual. The statements of U Ba Swe and U Nu demonstrate that Burmese nationalists were thinking

<sup>26</sup> Bur. ငါတို့ရဲ့ကံကြမ္မာကို ဖန်တီးနိုင်တဲ့လူတွေဟာ ဂျပန်လဲမဟုတ်၊ အင်္ဂလိပ်လဲမဟုတ်၊ အမေရိကန်လဲမဟုတ်၊ ငါတို့သာဖြစ်တယ်ဆိုတာ တွေ့ရတယ်။

<sup>27</sup> Some scholars have noted a similar concept in the Khmer Rouge worldview, where "Cambodians could build their collective future" but within a conception of time as cyclical (Salter 2000, 284). Harris (2005) and Marston (1994) also note that the Khmer Rouge used the word *kasang* ("to build") in the phrase "building up socialism," but could also imply "to break down," again emphasizing a cyclical framework.

about political liberation in similar ways, with an understanding of the necessity of political freedom in order to create one's own *kan kyama* (destiny).<sup>28</sup>

### **Economic Conditions and Moral Practice**

A critical component of the possibility of liberation from desire and suffering was a set of economic conditions that were conducive to practice in that they allowed laypeople to make regular donations and removed the need to commit immoral acts in order to provide for one's basic needs. In his advice to King Thibaw in the *Rajadhammasangaha*, U Hpo Hlaing suggested that material prosperity, supported by wise administrative decisions from the king, could help people along the moral path to enlightenment. He urged the king to accept deposits of citizens' valuables into the royal treasury and insure them. By reinvesting this wealth in the country, the king would create a mutually beneficial system. "Since their well-being increases from one day to another," he concluded, "the government and people, in their concern for their valuable possessions, increase their *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathy) and *brahmacarya* (morality)" (Bagshawe 2004, 154). This is another example from U Hpo Hlaing of how properly motivated *lawki* actions can have positive *lawkouttara*-oriented results.

Even before explicitly leftist ideology came to Burma, some Buddhists had added another layer to their conceptions of liberation by discussing the negative moral impact of persistent economic need. In a 1923 article the monk U Thilasara wrote about the need for certain ideal conditions of Buddhist practice. In criticizing what he saw as an increase in Burmese poverty under British colonial rule, he suggested that Burmese people should be taught "not only the Precepts but also how to achieve...a favorable milieu for the practices of Dana [generosity/donation], Sila [morality] and Bhavana [meditation]...To be able to give alms one must first make provisions for one's well-being before parting with what one has to give to another" (cited in Sarkisyanz 1965, 125). Economic need not only generated suffering in the present, it adversely affected one's ability to carry out the basic expectations of Buddhist moral practice, potentially imperiling one's future rebirths.

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<sup>28</sup> Some Sri Lankan monks developed an additional notion of liberation that was not present in the other Theravāda countries. In 1946 the Sinhalese monk Walpola Rahula energized a growing movement to allow monastic participation in politics with the book *Bhiksuvage Urumaya* (translated into English in 1974 as *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (monk)). He argued for the liberation of Buddhist monks from the constraints of an imposed Western Christian model of monasticism that prohibited the social and political activities that had formerly been a part of the monastic life (1974). While monks in other Theravāda countries often defended their own political activities, there has not been a sustained or popularly supported movement for increased monastic political participation as there was in Sri Lanka.

Burmese politicians in the post-colonial period followed a similar logic in advocating for increased policy attention to poverty, usually through more socialistic government programs. For example, in a 1952 speech entitled “Towards a Welfare State,” U Nu blamed immoral conduct in society directly on widespread poverty, which, in his view, was itself the result of British imperialism. Insisting that economic conditions and moral conduct were inter-related, he told the audience that “moral character decays only in the presence of grinding poverty” and “if a nation cannot have a decent standard of living, it cannot uphold moral principles” (1953, 67).

### **Political Programs for Moral Reform and Liberation from Defilements**

Because many Burmese believed that foreign British rule inhibited Buddhist practice, political liberation was also necessary to install a government that would attend to its citizens’ moral conduct. The relationship between a just Buddhist monarch and morally upright subjects was transferred to a government and its citizens. U Nu frequently justified his policies by claiming that they would assist people in correct practice and reorient them towards a proper moral perspective. Even the military government that took power in 1962 saw the need for political attention to the conduct of its citizens. The *System of Correlation of Man and His Environment*, the guiding ideological statement of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), stated, “Our philosophy and programmes should seek to extinguish the bad and cultivate the good traits in man’s moral character...only thus can we achieve our goals” (Burma 1964, 4).

Some individuals also expressed concern that the political freedom they were fighting for would, if unchecked, actually adversely affect individual moral conduct. U Chan Htoon, a Supreme Court Justice during the parliamentary period and one of the architects of Burma’s 1947 Constitution, gave a speech in 1958 in which he insisted on the importance of people living in accordance with the moral principles that govern the universe. While classifying Buddhism as “democratic” he also pointed to the need for limitations on freedom, arguing for the “greatest amount of freedom consistent with a disciplined society” (Chan Htoon 1958, 10). While the “greatest amount of freedom” for the individual sounds consistent with the liberal views of John Stuart Mill, Mill also decidedly rejected the idea of society “disciplining” the individual in *On Liberty* (1975). Commentators like U Chan Htoon, however, were concerned that people would interpret their newfound political freedom as a license to act in immoral ways and believed that moral guidelines ought to limit freedom.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This concern is by no means unique to the Burmese case. Contemporary debates over abortion rights, drug legalization, and gay marriage also turn on questions of whether particular moral codes can limit basic rights or freedoms.

The Burmese monk Ashin Thittila highlighted the potential contradiction between the *lawki* account of political liberation and the *lawkouttara* understanding of ultimate spiritual liberation. While discussing the freedom of enlightenment, he stated that: “[Nirvana] is freedom, but not freedom from circumstances, but from the bonds with which we have bound ourselves to those conditions...Freedom does not mean that one can do everything that one can imagine...Some people may say that freedom of the will would mean that they could do anything they wish, but they forget that those very wishes restrict their freedom. Freedom means that one cannot be made a slave to anyone or anything...because [one] is free from personal desire, and free from resentment, anger, pride, fear, and impatience which arise through selfish desire” (Ashin Thittila 1987, 77). This perspective on freedom highlights the ways in which liberation in one sphere can actually put limitations on or hinder the achievement of liberation in another sphere.

### **Marxism in Burmese Politics**

Even before the introduction of Marxism, leftist thought developed in Burma based largely on Buddhist principles and influenced by some writers affiliated with the international Maha Bodhi Society, who saw in Buddhism a socialistic ethos.<sup>30</sup> Marxist ideas initially came to the country through British writers<sup>31</sup>, gradually gaining prominence and a wider circulation through the translation and publication efforts of the *Nagani* (Red Dragon) Book Club, founded in 1937 by U Tun Aye and Thakin Nu.<sup>32</sup> Leftist thought influenced to some degree almost every prominent political group that led the drive to Burmese independence, including the *Dobama Asiyone* (“Our Burma” or “We the Burmese” Association), the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL, the party that controlled the government for the first decade of independence), and the *Hsinyetha* Party (alternately translated as “Poor Man’s Party” and “Working Man’s Party”).

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<sup>30</sup> The Sri Lankan renunciate (but not full monk) Anagarika Dharmapala founded the Maha Bodhi Society in 1891. Initially it directed its efforts towards the restoration of Buddhism and Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India, but its influence soon spread out to Theravāda countries and to fledgling Buddhist communities in the West. For a detailed examination of the influence of the Maha Bodhi Society on Burmese Buddhism, see Turner (2009).

<sup>31</sup> Taylor mentions John Strachey, a widely read British Marxist-Leninist author and R. Palme Dutt, one of the leading theoreticians of the Communist Party of Great Britain (1984, 3).

<sup>32</sup> For more information on the *Nagani* Book Club, see the Myanmar Literature Project’s Working Paper No. 10:1 (2006). The Myanmar Literature Project has also published a number of working papers translating and analyzing the publications of the *Nagani* Book Club. Members of the nationalist *Dobama Asiyone* (“We, the Burmese Association) adopted the title “Thakin” (meaning “Master”) in the 1930s. Initiated by Thakin Ba Thaug (and apparently initially met with ridicule from his colleagues), the intention was to claim the right to rule their own country and to demand equal standing with the British who had previously reserved that title for themselves (Sarkisyanz 1965, 167).

More Burmese political activists began to incorporate socialist and Marxist ideas into their philosophies as this literature gradually became available in Burma in the late 1930s and 1940s.<sup>33</sup> Even then, they continued to draw ideas from a wide range of sources; John Thompson characterized the intellectual openness of the Thakins in the *Dobama Asiayone*: “They read voraciously and adopted freely” (1959, 21). A small number read Marxist writings in English, but that readership only truly expanded after 1937 when the *Nagani* Book Club began printing Burmese translations of Marxist texts as well as pieces written by its own members (Taylor 1984, 3). Sarkisyanz claims that Dr. Ba Maw was the first to explicitly bring Marxist ideal into Burmese electoral politics (1965, 166). A veteran politician who would later be President under the Japanese, Ba Maw founded the *Hsinyetha* Party (alternately translated as “Working People’s Party” or “Poor People’s Party”), however, the extent of his use of Marxism seems to have been a class-conscious critique of capitalism.

Many scholars have suggested that Burmese independence activists initially adopted Marxism because it provided a ready-made critique not only of the ways in which capitalism was impoverishing most of the population of the country, but also of the entire system of British imperialism.<sup>34</sup> Because most Burmese encountered leftist ideas through translations and secondary or tertiary sources, there were a range of different understandings (many partial or incomplete) of socialism, Marxism, and communism. Many Burmese used the terms interchangeably in the 1930s and early 1940s and continued to debate the most suitable Burmese terminology.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, as some Burmese developed more sophisticated understandings of the various types of leftist thought, people identified more explicitly as “communist” or “socialist.”<sup>36</sup> However, as the socialists of the Anti-

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<sup>33</sup> The Marxist-inspired anti-colonialists of the 1940s drew more than just inspiration from the Saya San Rebellion of 1930-32, a widespread rural uprising against the British, led by a former monk and mystic, Saya San. The British colonial government executed Saya San and his collaborators in November 1931 but one of his followers used the profits from sales of his writings to establish a library in Burma whose collection included several of Karl Marx’s works and various other leftist texts (Tun Pe 1949, 34).

<sup>34</sup> See, for example Sarkisyanz (1965, 167) and Thompson (1959, 19). Trevor Ling has argued that, since Thailand was never colonized, Marxism held less appeal in Thailand as an anti-imperialist doctrine (1966, 99).

<sup>35</sup> The debate over terminology is reflected in Thakin Than Tun’s Foreword to Thakin Soe’s 1938 book *Socialit Wada* (*Socialism*) (Zöllner 2006a, 18-21). Than Tun notes that the book had been advertised with the title *Sinyetha Wada* (which he translates as “Proletarianism” but that the term *sinyetha* (which was alternately translated as “poor person” or “worker”) had been appropriated by so many politicians and parties that were not practicing genuine socialism that the term was no longer useful. He considers several other terms, including *boun wada* (“common ownership,” which eventually became popular among many leftists) but decided that, until a suitable Burmese term was found, they would use the loanword “*socialit wada*” (*wada* is a Burmese term roughly conforming to “-ism”). He then invited readers to give their own suggestions.

<sup>36</sup> As Robert Taylor points out, there was significant ideological and strategic divergence among leftists in Burma from the 1930s-50s (1984, 7-8). While personal conflicts played a part (and Taylor believes writers have overemphasized this aspect), more divisive topics were whether Burma should cooperate with Great Britain in

Fascist People's Freedom Party (AFPFL) came to dominate national politics, they also began to use the label "communist" (and, later in the 1950s, "Marxist") as pejorative terms not directly linked to a defined communist or Marxist ideology. We will see that some of the criticisms of "Marxism" did not actually engage directly with Marx's ideas, but rather with a vague notion of "materialism" or "anti-religiosity." The influence of Marxism, and of leftist thought more generally, resulted in another prominent re-visioning of the political goal of liberation that shaped the Burmese independence movement as well as the political ideologies of the subsequent parliamentary government and the socialist military regime that followed it.

One challenge Burmese leftists faced was presenting Marxism to their colleagues and to the general population in a way that would make this foreign doctrine both recognizable and appealing. For this purpose, many of them drew on lessons from popular Buddhist texts and concepts from the Pāli scriptures. There were several reasons Burmese leftists used Pāli Buddhist terminology to explain Marxist philosophy. First, by connecting unfamiliar Marxist ideas to commonly accepted Buddhist ones, they were able to blunt the foreignness of the new concepts, while also appealing to a Buddhist community that already accepted the Buddhist uses of the Pāli terms. Second, Pāli was the language of the Buddhist scriptures and most of the commentaries and philosophical texts, so for practical reasons it was the only vehicle for importing foreign political and philosophical concepts without relying entirely on loan words.<sup>37</sup> Even if the Buddhist philosophical concepts themselves were unknown to most Burmese (and Spiro 1982 suggests that they were), familiarity with the Pāli words themselves was widespread thanks to monastic educational techniques of rote memorization. So, for example, Thakin Soe described the qualities of an ideal revolutionary leader in terms of the *paramis* (perfections) cultivated by an enlightened being (Sarkisyanz 1965, 168).<sup>38</sup> One of the most influential appropriations

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securing its independence and what relationship Communists in Burma should have with the Comintern (ibid). The following section represents an initial attempt to briefly assess leftist political thought in Burma particularly as it related to Buddhism, but the broader subject of leftist thought in the country remains a topic for future research.<sup>37</sup> So, for example, "dialectic" or "dialectical method" could be translated into Burmese as *a-nya ma-nya lay la ni* ("study of correlation/mutuality"; Bur. အညမညလေ့လာနည်း), *dunta ni* ("system of pairs"; Bur. ဒွန္တနည်း), or, for those who equated it wholly with the Buddha's teachings, *mizzima padi-pada* ("middle path"; Bur. မဇ္ဈိမဝင်္ဂါ), a general term for the Buddha's teachings. Harris notes that the Khmer Rouge translated "dialectical materialism" directly into the Pāli term *pañca-samuppāda*, the Buddhist term for "dependent origination" or the unending process of cause and effect (2005, 185).

<sup>38</sup> This was apparently a common tactic among Communists in Theravāda countries; however, some also used the equivalence as part of a criticism of Buddhist institutions. Yang Sam relates how at a public meeting in 1975, a Khmer Rouge cadre insisted that Communist Party members observed more than the ten precepts of monks and that they were even more noble because they supported themselves and did not rely on handouts from others as did the monks (1987, 70).

was the term *lawka neikban* (“worldly nirvana”) a seemingly paradoxical concept that Burmese socialists used to refer to the system of political equality and economic prosperity they planned to create. I return to *lawka neikban* in more detail below.

In this section on the interaction between Marxism and Buddhism in the political thought of Burmese Buddhists, I first look at the ways in which Burmese leftists incorporated the goal of economic liberation into the wider Buddhist goal of liberation. Their stated goal was the creation of *lawka neikban*, a “worldly nirvana” which they understood as a perfect socialist state and which they envisioned as a welfare state, drawing on inspiration and examples from both Buddhist texts and the contemporary socialist and communist world.<sup>39</sup> One of the most persistent questions within Burmese leftist thought was the proper relationship between Buddhism and Marxism. By looking at these discussions, we can see the ways in which the socialist leaders of the 1940s and 1950s increasingly marked off boundaries between different types of leftists, based in many cases on the compatibility of their Marxist-inspired ideologies with Buddhist doctrine. Throughout the 1950s, this led to an often confusing combination of the simultaneous appropriation and rejection of various elements of Marxism, embodied most prominently in the speeches and writings of U Nu. At the same time, criticism of communism was growing, both from socialists in the government—still fighting communist insurgencies—and from Buddhists threatened by communist atheism.

### **From Political Liberation from Colonialism to Economic Liberation from Capitalism**

The members of the *Dobama Asiyone*, one of the leading organizations fighting for Burmese independence, explicitly asserted their intention to procure a variety of interconnected types of liberation in their manifesto of 1940. Their goal was the “emancipation of all toiling masses in Burma and the world at large from all kinds of political, economic, and social bondage” (*The Guardian* VI:1, January 1959, 21ff). Members of the *Dobama Asiyone* formed the core of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) that led the drive for independence. After independence in 1948, the leaders of the AFPFL government could shift their focus from political emancipation to the alleviation of economic dependence and suffering. U Ba Swe justified the government’s economic policies as a response to the suffering and anxiety that humans experienced with regard to their daily needs. In a style reminiscent of monastic preaching he asked an audience: “Currently, as human beings, what are the daily worldly concerns that make us anxious? ...food ...clothing ...a home ...health ...and education”

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<sup>39</sup> Burmese nationalists commonly cited Soviet Russia as a model for *lawka neikban* in the 1940s.

(1952, 28).<sup>40</sup> He lamented that, overwhelmed by these material concerns, people weren't even able to keep the Buddhist precepts on designated days or contemplate the fundamental philosophical tenets of the Buddha's teachings (29).<sup>41</sup>

His concerns were similar to those expressed by kings in pre-colonial times and even the Buddha himself: if people's material needs are not filled, they will not be able to focus their time, energy, or resources on pursuing spiritual liberation. U Ba Swe expressed this pithily with the common Burmese saying: "One can keep the precepts because one is well fed" (1952, 29).<sup>42</sup> More importantly, he presented Marxism (and, by extension, the socialist policies of the AFPFL government) as the antidote to these conditions of material suffering, declaring that it would bring freedom from these five anxieties.<sup>43</sup> After the government had fulfilled the material desires of Burmese citizens in these five areas, U Ba Swe affirmed that they would be able to search for complete mental freedom and ultimately, liberation from worldly life. The country would have arrived at *lawka neikban*, the Burmese socialist notion of a perfect society (1952, 29).

One aspect of capitalism that troubled U Nu was that it required Buddhists to concern themselves with acquiring property and increasing their material wealth. These worldly pursuits prevented them from spending time in spiritual pursuits such as meditation that would lead to a more lasting achievement of enlightenment (Becka 1991). The accumulation of capital by individuals was a direct effect of the three hindrances of greed, hatred and ignorance. A socialist economic system would reduce attachment to material possessions and liberate citizens from a false sense of self. The reduction of class inequality would also reduce these three hindrances, leading individuals to a more moral state of coexistence (Maung Nu 1967). He also claimed, in a speech supporting the Land Nationalization Act of 1948, that a socialist economic system would impart the "right view" of property as impermanent and the accumulation of property as a lesser activity than striving for ultimate spiritual liberation (Burma

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<sup>40</sup> Bur. အခု ကျွန်တော်တို့ လူတွေလိုဖြစ်ရတာ နေ့စဉ်နှင့်အမျှ ဘာတွေကြောင့်ကြနေကြရသလဲ၊ စားရေး...ဝတ်ရေး...နေရေး...ကျန်းမာရေး...ပညာရေးအတွက် ကြောင့်ကြနေရတယ်။

<sup>41</sup> The contemporary Thai monk Buddhadasa also made a similar argument in his defense of "dictatorial dhammic socialism," claiming that a legitimate government was responsible for the "provision of social circumstances which enable people to strive for *nibbana* [*neikban*]" (Jackson 1988, 274).

<sup>42</sup> Bur. အူမတောင့်လို့ သီလစောင့်နိုင်ပြီ

<sup>43</sup> The English translation of his speech gives this section the subtitle "Freedom from Fear," echoing Roosevelt's famous speech, but also presaging one of the fundamental tenets of Aung San Suu Kyi's political philosophy. Her 1991 piece entitled "Freedom from Fear" discussed the psychological effects of living under authoritarianism but also the ways in which a certain type of fear motivated the repressive actions of the military government.

1948, 27).<sup>44</sup> A socialist economic system would also provide sufficient material prosperity to allow people to support the *sangha*, ensuring the perpetuation of the *sāsana* (Buddhist community) (Maung Nu 1967). The only correct use of property, U Nu argued, was to use it for the purposes of ultimate salvation, either by making donations or by creating a more just society (Burma 1948, 27-8).

Although Burmese Buddhists less commonly used the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, U Nu invoked it during a speech to Parliament in 1948 in support of the Land Nationalization Act (Burma 1948). In the *sutta*, the deterioration of public morality originated with one king's failure to provide land to those who had none and a series of increasingly destructive moral vices proliferated from there. U Nu saw the Land Nationalization Act as fulfilling one of the duties of an ideal king (now understood as government). He drew directly from the *sutta* to paint a stark picture of the inevitable consequences of unrestrained capitalism and offered the legislation as the only way to avoid a catastrophic decline. This part of his speech is noteworthy both because of its urgency and because of the creative use of Buddhist scriptures to justify a government policy:

I have been obliged to speak at such length because I am very anxious lest the world should deteriorate to such a condition as when men regarding one another as game deer would commit widespread murder and bloodshed through failure to secure a right view and perspective of the intrinsic value of property. (Burma 1948, 30-1)

Here U Nu also used Buddhist rhetoric to paint opponents of the bill as not only greedy, acquisitive individuals with “wrong view” of property, but bent on a course of action that would lead human society into a downward moral spiral of almost unimaginable depravity. The moral framing of political actions has been a powerful tool of discipline and delegitimization.

Buddhist-influenced concerns about the role of the economic system in degrading public morality persisted even after a military coup in 1962 ended Burma's brief parliamentary period. *The Burmese Way to Socialism* was the guiding ideology of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) that Ne Win created to institutionalize his military government. This document, also published in 1962,

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<sup>44</sup> In Sri Lanka, some younger monks of the left-leaning Ceylon Union of Bhikkhus (LEBM) criticized older monks who controlled wealthy temples, arguing that they were also complicit in economic exploitation (Tambiah 1992, 20). In that country, certain rich temples and monasteries were closely connected to wealthy families who supplied members to become stewards, maintaining a near-monopoly over these areas. Because there was no similar system in the Southeast Asian Theravāda countries, this criticism never developed and disputes among monks were usually over ideological or interpersonal issues (see, for example, Mendelson 1975, 139-143). Communists in Laos and Cambodia did, however, criticize the *sangha* system generally as a feudal remnant (Evans 1998, 59) and monks who opposed communism as imperialists (Harris 2005, 176). The Burmese communist Thein Pe Myint also criticized the *sangha* in his controversial 1937 book *Tet Pongyi (The Modern Monk)*, although his criticism was directed more at the decline of monastic morality and the institutionalized *sangha* hierarchy (see Mendelson's extended description of this work in 1975, 214-220).

began with a claim that “The Revolutionary Council of the Union of Burma does not believe that man will be set free from social evils as long as pernicious economic systems exist in which man exploits man and lives on the fat of such appropriation” (Revolutionary Council 1962, 1). They justified their socialist platform with a variation on the same Burmese saying that other political figures had used: “an empty stomach is not conducive to wholesome morality” (ibid., 1). After 1971, BSPP publications began with a brief section entitled “Our Belief” that espoused a similar view that it linked more explicitly to Buddhist practices of ultimate liberation (Houtman 1999). It claimed that socialism would permit “citizens to collectively, through human effort, achieve a new society in which people enjoy themselves, and in which the *Byama-so ta-yà* (Pāli *Brahmavihāras*)<sup>45</sup> can flourish, permitting people to liberate themselves from suffering” (quoted in Houtman 1999, 310).

The independence hero Aung San presented yet another conception of liberation connected to the economic system. In his article entitled “Different Types of Politics,” he recounted the traditional story of *Mahasammata* from the *Aggañña Sutta*. Aung San drew the same lesson from this *sutta* as previous Burmese commentators: politics and political authority came about because of conflict between people and the increasing complexity of society. However, he also incorporated a critique of private property into his re-telling of the story. Building on the claim that people found themselves unable to control their baser desires because of greed, he reflected on the cause of this greed. Stealing, lying and punishment came into being because of private property, something Aung San classified as “wrong belief.” While U Nu’s critique of private property focused on people’s misunderstanding of it as permanent and lasting, Aung San rooted this wrong view in ignorance of the characteristic of *anattā* (no self/no control) and the mistaken view that there is such thing as “my” home or “my” garden. It is also encouraged by greed, which blinds people to the harmful effects of private property on others.

Aung San looked back to the original agreement with *Mahasammata* in a way that recalls Rousseau’s critique of private property in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1992).<sup>46</sup> The people who had property and would benefit from devising a system of protection agreed that they should “invent/create politics” and “set up a government” to preside over them and prevent them from killing

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<sup>45</sup> The *Byama-so-taya* are the four incomparable virtues, made up of *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *mudita* (empathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity). Buddhists of many traditions cite them as the greatest qualities that human beings can cultivate through moral practice.

<sup>46</sup> It is unclear whether or not Aung San actually read Rousseau’s *Discourse*. In another essay he writes of the French Revolution and claims that the idea of rights originated with someone named “*Ru-su*” (Mya Han 1998, 80). Although he may not have actually read the *Discourse*, it is likely that Aung San would have been familiar with the general idea through the works of other writers.

and harming each other (Mya Han 1998, 94).<sup>47</sup> Aung San claimed that in creating this system, they were manipulating and deceiving those without property, since the system would disproportionately benefit property owners and institutionalize unequal economic relations. While those with property may not have intentionally or knowingly deceived those without, the result was the transfer of what had originally been commonly held property to that which was privately held, without any understanding of its negative effects. Furthermore, capitalist dominance meant that “the nature of government as representative of the people and as an institution that would act according to the people’s desires disappeared gradually over time” (ibid., 95).<sup>48</sup> People began to see government as partial and viewed it as a contest of power in which the “winner” would only provide for the well-being of his own family and friends.

Aung San also inserted a subtle critique of the “fatalistic” view of *kan* into this piece. “The people who were benefitting [from the government-supported system of private property], began to say ‘It’s because of our *kutho* [merit].’ Those who weren’t getting any benefit didn’t know that the correct response would be ‘It’s not because of your *kutho*. It’s because you have organized this immoral [*a-dhamma*] system.’ Instead, they started to think, ‘[We’re poor] because of our *kan*” (Mya Han 1998, 96).<sup>49</sup> Thus, while private property came about because of greed, a state that protects private property and reinforces inequality is perpetuated both by those who are benefitting from it and by its victims, who mistakenly believe that the state is good because of ignorance.<sup>50</sup> Aung San was not repudiating the Buddhist doctrine of *kan*; he was merely challenging the ease with which many Burmese (both rich and poor) justified conditions of inequality with reference to beliefs about cause and effect.<sup>51</sup> Instead, he wanted Buddhists to see those conditions as the result of greed and ignorance and respond accordingly, adjusting both their perspective on the situation and their response to it in line with Buddhist moral

<sup>47</sup> Bur. နိုင်ငံရေး ထွင် / အစိုးရထောင်

<sup>48</sup> Bur. အစိုးရသည် ပြည်သူ၏ ကိုယ်စားလှယ်၊ ပြည်သူ၏ဆန္ဒအရ ဖြစ်သည်ဆိုသော သဘောမှာ “ကြာလေပျောက်လေ” ဖြစ်လာ၏။

<sup>49</sup> Bur. အကျိုးမခံစားရသည့်မင်း၊ သူဌေး၊ သူကြွယ်တို့မှာလည်း “တို့ကုသိုလ်ကြောင့်”ဟု ပြောလာ၏။ အကျိုးမခံစားရသည့်သူများကလည်း “ခင်ဗျားတို့ ကုသိုလ်ကြောင့် မဟုတ်ဘဲ၊ ခင်ဗျားတို့က စီမံလာတဲ့ အဓမ္မစနစ်ကြောင့်” ဟု မသိဘဲ၊ ငါတို့ကံကြောင့်ဟု ထင်လာ၏။

<sup>50</sup> Communists in Laos and Cambodia also mounted criticisms of ideas about *kan*. In Laos, the Pathet Lao even enlisted monks in denouncing karma (*kan*) as leading to fatalism and pacifism (Stuart-Fox 1996, 79).

<sup>51</sup> This empowering interpretation of *kan* is also a feature of what some scholars have called “reformist” Buddhism in contemporary Thailand. The Thai activist Sulak Sivaraksa made a similar argument in *A Socially Engaged Buddhism* (1988) and the Thai monk Phra Thepwethi preached that “Buddhism does not emphasize the enslaving aspect of action but rather the liberating potential of understanding the relations between cause and effect mediated by intentional action” (Jackson 2002, 178).

teachings. In this way they would not only be liberated from conditions of material suffering, they would also be liberated from “wrong view.”

### ***Lawka Neikban: The Ideal “Welfare State” and its Antecedents***

As we have seen, many Burmese Buddhists saw acute material need as one of the primary inhibitors of correct moral practice on the path to liberation. In the *suttas* the Buddha himself insisted that a starving man who came to listen to his sermon eat before hearing the *dhamma*, otherwise his mind would be distracted. Early Buddhist polities needed to develop and institutionalize a support system for monks as they separated themselves from lay responsibilities to engage in more sustained practice. Concurring with a number of other scholars, Sarkisyanz suggests that what developed was a “welfare state, at least to the extent of guaranteeing the economic basis of leisure for meditation to everybody who wanted to withdraw from materially productive activities” (1965, 56). Leftist Buddhists in Burma conceptualized their ideal welfare state as *lakwa neikban*, the “worldly nirvana.”<sup>52</sup>

*Lawka neikban* apparently originated as a religious term, meant to signify the possibility of reaching a state of enlightenment in the present life, rather than the practically unreachable goal that it represented for almost all Burmese Buddhists. Apart from its eventual political connotations, this idea is still very common among Buddhists in Myanmar, and is a core teaching of the famous Burmese monk Sayadaw U Pandita (1992). A Burmese film of the same name that was the second feature film produced with sound was popular in the 1930s (Filmbirth n.d.). Burmese leftists of the 1930s and 40s reinterpreted the concept through a Marxist lens to refer to the egalitarian perfect society that they would build through socialism. A variation on *lawka neikban* carried Marxist echoes and emphasized the peasant roots of Burmese economic production was *hsinyetha neikban*, the nirvana of the poor. U Ba Khaing saw the nirvana of the poor as a perfect society in which those with power were no longer able to exploit the powerless (U Ba Khaing n.d., 28ff). The use of the term was not limited to Marxists, however, as the decidedly anti-socialist monk U Nye Ya also used it to describe a perfect society in which people were liberated completely from greed, hatred, and ignorance, and guided by *myitta* (non-discriminating loving-kindness, Pāli *mettā*) (Sarkisyanz 1965, 170).

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<sup>52</sup> In future research I plan to conduct a more detailed comparison of Burmese views of *lawka neikban* and the Thai monk Buddhadasa’s philosophy of “dhammic socialism.” Swearer has noted that Buddhadasa’s work differs from the Buddhist-Marxist philosophy of the 1950s and 60s in that he had “evolved a theory of Buddhist socialism specifically out of Buddhist categories rather than a somewhat superficial amalgam of Western political philosophy and Buddhism” (Buddhadasa and Swearer 1986, 21).

In addition to scriptural and traditional references, Burmese leftists commonly used Soviet Russia as the embodiment of *lawka neikban*, at least through the early 1950s.<sup>53</sup> U Ba Swe wrote an article entitled “Stalin, the Man who is Building *Lawka Neikban*” in which he extolled the many virtues of economic and social life in Soviet Russia and the ways in which they accorded with the Burmese vision of plenty in a socialist paradise (1967, 113-122). Kirichenko mentions Pi Monin, a nationalist Burmese writer who also held out Russia as a model, mirroring the language used by U Ba Swe in a speech regarding the alleviation of “anxiety” over providing for daily needs (n.d.). Some of the works that the *Nagani* Book Club translated also extolled the virtues of the communist system in the Soviet Union (Zöllner 2009). However, as the socialists of the ruling AFPFL party increasingly sought to distance themselves ideologically from the communists who remained in rebellion throughout the 1950s and as Burma and the rest of the world gained a clearer picture of the abuses, terror, and mismanagement that characterized Stalin’s rule, references to the Soviet Union became much more critical.<sup>54</sup>

The AFPFL government channeled its efforts to create *lawka neikban* through a set of policies collectively called the *Pyidawtha* (alternately translated as “pleasant country” or “happy land”) Plan.<sup>55</sup> In August 1952, U Nu convened a *Pyidawtha* conference to reveal a series of planned reforms. Ironically, given his concern that the drive for material acquisition was counter to Buddhist beliefs and would lead to the downfall of society, U Nu had promised in a speech earlier that year that government policies would create a prosperous country in which “every family in Burma would possess a house, an automobile, and an income of \$175 to \$200 a month” (Butwell 1969, 112). Many members of the AFPFL government used Buddhist imagery to describe the wonders of the future socialist paradise to the citizens of Burma. One minister invoked the *padetha* tree (a legendary Buddhist “wish tree” that I describe in more detail below) in a 1953 speech but acknowledged that it was merely a legend. However, he maintained, the principle of sufficient production to meet everyone’s needs was sound and would be the conditions of the new *pyidawtha* Burma, accomplished through socialist economic policies (Thein Han 1958, 63-5).

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<sup>53</sup> Sarkisyanz also notes that during the Japanese occupation of Burma from 1942-45, the *Bama-Khit* newspaper used the term to describe the perfect society that the Japanese would help create in Burma (1965, 184).

<sup>54</sup> As an indication of how far out of favor the communist Soviet Union had fallen in the eyes of formerly supportive Burmese leftists, not only did Thakin Ba Thaug translate Soviet defector Igor Gouzenko’s novel *The Fall of a Titan* (which was sharply critical of Stalin’s regime) into Burmese in 1956, he also ironically gave it the title *Lawka Neikban*, to emphasize his disillusionment with the Soviet model (and possibly also his disillusionment with the lack of economic and political progress in Burma at the time or the concept of *lawka neikban* itself) (Thakin Ba Thaug 2009).

<sup>55</sup> Bur. ပြည်ထောင်စာ

Apart from the components designed to speed overall economic development, one of the central elements of the plan was agrarian reform, including the nationalization of any land not owned by cultivators themselves. Many groups criticized U Nu and his government after the passage of the first Land Nationalization Act in 1948 and a subsequent Land Nationalization Act in 1952 as part of the *Pyidawtha* plan. Some Buddhists suggested that the policy amounted to theft, a violation of one of the five precepts. U Nu responded to this accusation in a 1952 speech, explaining that, as it had been in the times of Burmese kings, the land ultimately belonged to the political authority (in this case, the elected government) (U Nu 1953, 112). He also countered criticism of land nationalization policies with explicitly Buddhist reasoning, claiming that “property has only a functional place, as means for the attainment of Nirvana...and that the class struggle has arisen out of the illusion about the inherent value of property, so that the overcoming of this illusion would open the road to Nirvana through a perfect society” (cited in Sarkisyanz 1965, 213).

In building their *lawka neikban*, Burmese Buddhists looked to both the past and the future for models of a perfect society. In an adaptation of the story told in the *Anagatavamsa* of the realm of a future Buddha, Burmese sources tell of a utopian island situated north of Mount Meru, called Uttarakuru.<sup>56</sup> The residents of this island do not have to work because everything they need or desire is provided by a magical *padetha* tree, sometimes translated as “wishing tree.”<sup>57</sup> The tree gives the people food, clothing, furniture, ornaments, and many other things. As a result, no one goes hungry, homeless, or unclothed and there is no theft since the tree provides anything anyone desires (Thein Han 1958, 63). Various commentators have interpreted the story of the *padetha* tree in different ways, making it a fruitful vehicle for political and religious metaphor.

U Nu emphasized the fact that, with all of their wants fulfilled, the people who benefitted from the *padetha* tree had no desire or clinging. However, eventually, as in the *Aggañña Sutta*, some human beings began to experience craving and took more than what they needed, initiating a descent into theft and violence, and culminating in the disappearance of the tree (Becka 1991). The loss of the *padetha* tree required human beings to labor in order to create materials for their own consumption (Sarkisyanz 1965, 211-12). U Nu also framed the story as a direct criticism of capitalism in a 1948 speech: “The classes which practiced exploitation and caused the disappearance of the magic tree have been leading

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<sup>56</sup> In the traditional Buddhist cosmology, Mount Meru is the center of the world and it is surrounded by four islands; the southern island is the island of humans. However, Buddhist kings also creatively altered the cosmology to equate their capital cities and royal residences with Mount Meru, thus reinforcing their place at the center of configurations of power (Heine-Geldern 1942).

<sup>57</sup> Bur. ပဒေသာပင်

the world astray from the time that they arose" (U Nu 1949, 78). He and other Burmese leftists saw this as consistent with Marx's claim that the means of production and the relationships that follow fundamentally shape the consciousness of human beings. However, the Burmese re-telling of this history of production reaches further back than Marx to a pre-human spiritual state and also looks forward to a deeper experience of liberation, from the material conditions of existence. Eventually, it was the Buddha's teachings that would, after the establishment of *lawka neikban*, lead human society back to the perfect state where every need was filled, either by the *padetha* tree or, in more modern interpretations, by a society organized for the equal and just distribution of labor and resources.

The nationalist writer and poet Thakin Kodaw Hmaing also looked back in history for examples of *lawka neikban*.<sup>58</sup> In his famous *Thakin Tika* he referred to an earlier age in which each person was his or her own master (thus, the nationalist usage of the title *thakin* ("master") was simply the restoration of a natural and original condition) (Thakin Kodaw Hmaing 1938, 163). He recounted the story of decline from the *Aggañña Sutta* in which greed caused people to quarrel amongst themselves, necessitating the appointment of a king, *Mahasammata*, who Thakin Kodaw Hmaing described as a *hpaya laung*, or "future Buddha." In his presentation of the story, even under the leadership of *Mahasammata*, the people remained masters of themselves and their own community. For Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, the people's voluntary election of *Mahasammata* proved that government was meant to be the servant of the people (ibid., 164-5). As evidence of this claim, he pointed to the fact that the British refer to government workers as "public servants." Thakin Kodaw Hmaing's understanding of *lawka neikban* had less to do with particular economic arrangements and more to do with the reinstatement of self-rule, which he claimed was the initial natural condition of human beings.<sup>59</sup>

Burmese political figures differed in their understandings of both the nature of *lawka neikban* and the proper methods and policies to create this perfect state. U Ba Swe saw socialist economic reforms and the creation of *lawka neikban* as the solution to economic suffering and inequality. These policies would provide the material prerequisites that would allow individuals to focus on developing their spiritual practice, a distinction between the *lawki* elements of political and economic reform and

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<sup>58</sup> In the *Thakin Tika*, written to explain and justify the use by nationalists in the *Dobama Asiayone* of the inflammatory title *thakin* ("master"), Thakin Kodaw Hmaing actually used the term *lawki neikban*, which means the same thing as *lawka* and *lawki* are synonyms.

<sup>59</sup> Again we can see a similarity with Rousseau's thesis in the *Discourse* that human beings originally enjoyed a state of natural freedom. However, while Rousseau distinguished between natural freedom, the illusory present state of political freedom and the superior type of freedom found under an ideally instituted sovereign, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing does not appear to make any distinction between the quality of freedom enjoyed by individuals in *lawka neikban* and that enjoyed by the *thakins* in an independent Burma.

the *lawkouttara* benefits of Buddhist practice. U Nu, on the other hand, came to espouse a conception of politics that saw individual moral practice as a prerequisite to successful political and economic changes in society. This discrepancy was partially the result of their different views on the correct relationship between Buddhism and Marxism, and partially an effect of their changing views on Marxism and communism throughout the 1950s. I look briefly at these areas in the following sections.

### **The Place of Marxism With Regard to Buddhism**

One of the most pressing ideological questions for many Buddhists in Burma during the 1940s and 50s was whether or not Buddhism and Marxism were compatible and if so, in what ways. I have already mentioned how U Ba Swe referred to Marxist philosophy as Marxist “*abhidhamma*.” His use of the term was undoubtedly provocative, but was meant to emphasize the compatibility of Marxism with Buddhism, or as he says, the fact that these two philosophical systems “share the same nature” (1952, 17).<sup>60</sup> On first reading it appears that U Ba Swe adhered to the common separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* in claiming that Marxist *abhidhamma* applies to the *lawki* realm of fulfilling material desires, whereas the Buddha’s *abhidhamma* is used to deal with spiritual matters, specifically liberation from the world of *samsāra* (1952, 17). At the same time, he asserted a closer connection between the two, claiming that his study of Marxism and the truths it revealed about the material world had reinforced his belief in the Buddha’s teachings, deepening his understanding of the Buddha’s *dhamma*.<sup>61</sup> By claiming this, he assuaged Buddhists’ concerns by acknowledging that the truths and methods of Marxism apply only to a lower plane (*lawki*, the material realm) and that Marxists did not seek to supersede the place of Buddhism in Burma. However, his assertion that it operates similarly to Buddhism in a conceptual way would raise its standing in the eyes of Burmese Buddhist listeners. If, for example, Marxist dialectical method functioned according to the same logic as the Buddha’s teachings, then it would be an appropriate political ideology for dealing with *lawki* issues in a way consistent with the Buddha’s teachings about *lawkouttara* matters. In this way, U Ba Swe made his previous separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* slightly more nuanced, pointing out an underlying consistency in the appropriate methods for achieving success in each.

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<sup>60</sup> Bur. တနုတည်းသဘောရှိတယ်။ The English translation alongside U Ba Swe’s speech reads, “the same in concept.”

<sup>61</sup> U Ba Swe contrasts his new, deeper understanding of the Buddha’s teachings with his previous position as a *miyopala* (traditional) Buddhist (1952, 17). This term often has negative connotations and modern Buddhists have frequently used it to distance their own, presumably more scientific and rational perspective on Buddhism with the unquestioning ritual-based Buddhism of the masses, tainted by belief in spirits and magic. See, for example, Aung San’s views on the subject in Mya Han (1998, 61-3). I look at the discourse on “true” or “real” Buddhists in more detail in Chapter 4.

U Nu frequently emphasized that socialism was not in competition with or contradiction to Buddhism. As a worldly activity, it was merely the proper political and economic implementation of a lay Buddhist ethic (U Nu 1967, 55-6). However, even before he began to distance himself from Marxism, he responded strongly to criticism of Buddhism that came from the left. In a speech to Parliament on October 3, 1950, in which he supported the “Buddha Sāsana Council Act” which was to create a central organization for Buddhist activities in the country, he spoke forcefully against “doubts regarding the true wisdom of Lord Buddha and assertions that Marx was a wiser man than Lord Buddha” (*The Light of the Dhamma*, I:I, 1952a, 47). He went on to assert that, “It will be our duty to retort in no uncertain terms that the wisdom or knowledge that might be attributed to Karl Marx is less than one tenth of a particle of dust that lies at the feet of our great Lord Buddha. The contrast is so marked” (ibid., 47).

Other socialists such as U Ba Yin, a former Burmese Minister of Education, also put Marx and his philosophy in a secondary position to the Buddha and his teachings.<sup>62</sup> U Ba Yin saw Buddhism as providing a necessary moral context for Marx’s critique of the socio-economic structure of capitalism. He positioned the Buddha as engaged in a struggle against dictatorship on multiple levels: against the oppression of a ruling class, against the spiritual oppression of an all-powerful God, and against the tendency of desire and craving to control human action. By challenging hierarchy and providing humans with the tools to free themselves from “the bondage of all forms of dictatorship” as well as fear and desire, the Buddha “laid foundations for the establishment of a real world-wide democracy” (*The Burman* April 26, 1954, 5). Marx, Lenin, and other communists were misguided in their belief that a revolution would be able to eliminate oppression and suffering completely.<sup>63</sup> Only the Buddha’s teachings could help humans to overcome greed and ignorance, the root causes of oppression and suffering.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, one commentator saw Buddhism as superior to Marxism but sought to carve out a space for the compatibility of Buddhism and “leftism,” while still strongly renouncing communism. Thus, he saw the two as similar in that “Buddhism stands for the salvation of soul while Leftism for the

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<sup>62</sup> This comes from a serialized article written by U Ba Yin and published under the title “Buddha’s Way to Democracy and Peace” in *The Burman* daily newspaper over a period of several months in 1954.

<sup>63</sup> U Ba Yin cites Marx’s “Jewish Nature” (presumably as one conditioned by the “dictatorship” of a theistic faith) as the reason why he was unable to conceive of a true democracy and instead formulated his post-capitalist utopia in terms of the dictatorship of the proletariat (*The Burman* April 26, 1954, 8).

<sup>64</sup> In Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk also distinguished between Marxism and what he called “Our Buddhist Socialism” in a 1965 book of the same name. He rejected the revolutionary violence he saw in Marxism and instead argued that economic equality through Buddhist socialism would come through compromise and a realization on the part of the rich that they should give up some of their property in accordance with Buddhist values of charity (something Marx would have no doubt dismissed as naïve!) (Yang Sam 1987, 14).

salvation in the sense that is mundane” (May Aung 1948, 2). However, since that *lawkouttara* method was not itself effective for confronting *lawki* situations, Buddhists should rely on “leftism” as a guide to action in the world, while at the same time aiming to actualize the highest Buddhist values such as *mettā* (non-discriminating loving-kindness) in their politics. In a similar way, some Burmese writers sought to separate what they saw as a useful Marxist critique of capitalism and class domination from the foreign totalitarianism of communism and the looming threat of the communist rebellion in Burma. In defending their claims that, before the destructive invasion of British colonialism, the Burmese lived according to the true spirit of communal living, some writers invoked an idealized (and sometimes partially fabricated) image of the “classless” Burmese village society (Sarkisyanz 1965, 198).

An Italian Buddhist monk named U Lokanatha gave a sermon to students at Rangoon University in 1952 in which he was very critical of “materialism,” the aspect of Marxism that Burmese Buddhists most commonly rejected.<sup>65</sup> He offered another perspective on liberation, but in this instance, Buddhism was the vehicle for liberation from the excesses of materialism. “Materialism offers three forms of slavery,” he proclaimed, “slavery to a totalitarian state where man is zero and the state is everything, slavery of the mind where man has no freedom to think and slavery through the senses where man becomes an animal. These are three forms of slavery under the Materialistic Regime. And Buddhism saves us from all forms of slavery” (*The Light of the Dhamma* 1:1 1952b, 61). Francis Story, an English monk who spent many years in Burma also wrote a book in 1951 entitled *Buddhism Answers the Marxist Challenge* in which he sought to demonstrate both the continued relevance and superiority of Buddhist teachings in responding to the challenges of the modern world (1952).<sup>66</sup>

Gradually throughout the early 1950s, the mainstream socialists of the AFPFL government shifted from claiming that Marxism helped to promote Buddhism, to putting Marxism in a subservient position to Buddhism, to—as part of a campaign to discredit the Communists who had been in rebellion since 1948—declaring that many elements of Marx’s teachings were incompatible with the Buddha’s teachings.<sup>67</sup> They were also responding to criticisms from prominent Buddhist monks as to the

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<sup>65</sup> In fact, in his critique, U Lokanatha never actually defined “materialism” as a philosophy and set it up primarily as a straw man, embodying the opposite of all of the sublime characteristics of Buddhism. He echoed a common Buddhist complaint against Marx that mind was the ultimate source of material existence and since Marx argued the opposite, Buddhists should reject his philosophy entirely.

<sup>66</sup> The opinions of these two non-Burmese monks are relevant here because of their prominent positions in Burmese society at the time. Buddhist journals that were widely read among the elites in Rangoon and Mandalay frequently included their essays, as did a number of periodicals. Francis Story’s anti-Communist tract was also translated into Burmese and widely read.

<sup>67</sup> This is a contrast to the ways in which Buddhism was subordinated to Communism in Laos and Cambodia. For example, Evans quotes a 1976 proclamation from the government-controlled Lao United Buddhist Association:

incompatibility of the two sets of teachings. In response to this ongoing debate, but also because of a decade of mostly unsuccessful socialist reforms, U Nu also began to shift the emphasis of his Buddhist-leftist syncretic worldview.<sup>68</sup>

### **The Waning of Marxism in Burma**

On January 29, 1958 U Nu gave a marathon, four hour speech in which he reinforced his rejection of certain aspects of Marxism, focusing primarily on the incompatibility of Marxist dialectical materialism with Buddhist principles of *anicca* and *anattā* (*New Times of Burma* January 31, 1958, 3). According to the Buddha, U Nu said, *rupa* (physicality) was impermanent and lacking in any essence and mind was the ultimate source of everything that exists. This was a direct refutation of materialism, which took *rupa* to be not only permanent but also the basis of every other aspect of existence. He provided examples of scientific research that he claimed supported the Buddhist view over materialism, including a citation of quantum theory, to dispute Marx's claim of a distinct, linear historical trajectory (*New Times of Burma* February 1, 1958, 4). U Nu also expressed remorse for his previous claims that Buddhism and Marxism were compatible, explaining that he and others who held similar views didn't really understand either system fully at the time (*ibid.*).

In the same speech, however, U Nu renewed the intention of the government to create a socialist state and in a subsequent speech he reaffirmed that the AFPFL would continue to accept some parts of the economic doctrine of Marxism (*New Times of Burma* February 1, 1958, 6). However, in an indication of the extent to which he was re-prioritizing Buddhism, rather than promote socialism as providing the material conditions for successful Buddhist practice, he turned to Buddhist morality as the necessary ethical foundation for a society with a socialist economy. He admitted that immorality was "a consequence of economic insufficiency" but at the same time insisted that the failures of socialism were the result of moral laxity and the AFPFL needed to refocus its efforts in this area (*New Times of Burma* January 30, 1958a, 2). In this reformulation, U Nu reaffirmed the primary place of Buddhist reasoning in

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"The spread of Buddhist morality must accord with the line and policies of the Lao People's Revolutionary Part" (1998, 61).

<sup>68</sup> In the mid-late 1940s Marxism also had a strong following among Sri Lankan Buddhists, including many monks, who were led by the Ceylon Union of Bhikkhus (LEBM, founded in 1946). In 1946 monks supported a general strike and in 1947 campaigned for left-wing candidates. Tambiah notes that, in addition to finding it difficult to respond to charges that Marxism was opposed to Buddhism, the socialist elements of Sri Lankan politics gradually disappeared into the "populist chauvinism" of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that came to define Sri Lankan politics (1992, 20). Trevor Ling claimed that the rising standard of living in Sri Lanka after 1950 also limited the appeal of revolutionary Marxism (1966, 98).

his political philosophy, interpreting change in the world as fundamentally driven by moral action.<sup>69</sup> Even though he continued to advocate for socialist reforms that would create ideal conditions for Buddhist practice, by the late 1950s U Nu had refocused on moral conduct as the factor that would make or break a socialist state.<sup>70</sup>

U Nu also took a decisive stand on the *lawki-lawkouttara* separation in a work he wrote during a hiatus from politics in late 1959 (*New Times of Burma* November 17, 1959).<sup>71</sup> Having rejected Marxist materialism, a belief in the need for violent revolution, and Marx's view of history as progressive, he was still attempting to prove that socialism was completely compatible with Buddhism.<sup>72</sup> Here he argued that religion and politics were inseparable. Religion was a necessary civilizing force in providing the moral grounding for human beings to live in society. Furthermore, although he argued for socialism on the grounds that "in a socialist economy, the motives that urged men to greedy acquisition of wealth would be totally absent," he also stressed the primacy of individual moral conduct in bringing this state into existence (*ibid.*, 1). "If we aspire to lead in the building of this Socialist State," he claimed, "we must first of all try to become good men ourselves" (*ibid.*, 4).

In the contemporary political period, Aung San Suu Kyi has also expressed criticism of what she saw as the naïve belief that economic reform would, by itself, usher in a perfect society. She disputed the common interpretation of the Burmese maxim, "Morality can be upheld only when the stomach is full," arguing instead that there was nothing about conditions of prosperity that would *automatically* lead society or individuals to proper moral conduct. Instead, "the possession of a significant surplus of material goods has never been a guarantee against covetousness, rapacity and the infinite variety of vice and pain that spring from such passion" (Aung San Suu Kyi 1993, 17).<sup>73</sup> She noted that greed could be a

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<sup>69</sup> Some former Marxists and Communists in other countries also underwent a similar reorientation. Phumi Vongvichit, who led the Pathet Lao effort in the 1970s to use monks in propaganda efforts, told Martin Stuart-Fox in 1993 (a month before he died) that the country needed to return to Buddhist morality (Stuart-Fox 1996, 107).

<sup>70</sup> Buddhists were not the only ones in Burma who believed that the cultivation of moral virtue generated success in the political and economic spheres. In a letter to the editors of *The Burman* "A Christian Patriot" exhorted the leaders of the country to "bend their energies towards the moral uplift and the undergirding of the moral character of the nation" (*A Christian Patriot* 1948, 2).

<sup>71</sup> Citing concerns over disunity within the government and the ruling party, U Nu asked General Ne Win to take over the state as the leader of a temporary, military-led caretaker government in October 1958. U Nu returned to power in the April 1960 elections.

<sup>72</sup> Buddhists in other Theravāda countries were also hard pressed to reconcile Buddhism and revolution. In 1995, as both communist and socialist ideology were on the wane in Laos, Khamtan Thepbouali, one of the leading apologists of the Pathet Lao politicization of Buddhism, argued that political revolution should be understood as a (not necessarily violent) struggle which corresponds to the internal struggle over right and wrong thinking (quoted in Evans 1998, 66).

<sup>73</sup> In attempting to counter communist Khmer Rouge propaganda in the early 1970s, the Khmer monk Ven. Khiev Chum argued that material and moral development must balance each other. "Materialistic progress alone

“bottomless pit” and that the commonly cited requirement of “basic needs” was so malleable as to be able to justify an overwhelming amount of acquisition (ibid., 17). Conditions of poverty were an impediment to correct moral practice but conditions of prosperity also required sustained collective attention to moral issues if increased wealth was expected to result in less, not more, desire and conflict.<sup>74</sup>

Although neither expressed it in this way, both U Nu’s and Suu Kyi’s critical perspectives contain an implicit questioning of the logic of the Burmese myth of the *padetha* tree, the time of perfect morality when everyone’s needs were filled. In at least one version of that story, it was the condition of overabundance that enabled individuals to perfect their moral conduct, calming their minds and turning their focus away from acquisition. Instead, both U Nu and Aung San Suu Kyi have emphasized the insatiable quality of desire as a fundamental element of human nature, casting doubt on the simple causal connection between abundance and morality and insisting instead on the necessity of sustained attention to proper moral conduct.

Despite its ideological dominance among the leaders of the independence struggle, leftist unity remained elusive in the country, dogged by political and interpersonal rivalries as well as ideological differences. One of the first splits was within the Communist Party. The “Red Flag” faction, led by Thakin Soe broke with the “White Flag” group, led by Thakin Than Tun. Aung San had expelled both groups from the AFPFL before independence and it was not long before they initiated a rebellion against the AFPFL government, the Red Flags in 1946 and the White Flags in 1948. The civil war that engulfed the country hampered U Nu’s attempts to create a socialist welfare state in Burma in the 1950s; ethnic and religious groups rebelled along with the communists. However, dedication among the leaders of the government and the military to building a socialist country remained strong.<sup>75</sup> When the military seized control permanently in 1962 under General Ne Win, it created a one-party state guided by an ideology

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without the supplementation of spirituality and morality cannot insure peace, harmony and happiness in a society” (quoted in Yang Sam 1987, 55).

<sup>74</sup> This sentiment is particularly relevant to the situation in contemporary Myanmar, where the quasi-civilian government’s political and economic reforms have prompted many formerly hostile Western countries to ease or drop sanctions and allow Western companies to rush in and compete with the Chinese, Thai, and Indian companies that are already present.

<sup>75</sup> While some political figures (like Aung San) were critical of the “superstitious practices” that they believed had muddied the purity of Buddhism in Burma, socialist leaders (whether from the AFPFL or the subsequent military government) rarely attempted to criticize or alter Buddhists’ daily practices. This was a sharp contrast to Cambodia and Laos, where communist movements (with the support of some monks) sought to impose changes such as forcing monks to work for their food (Evans 1998, 59) or forcing them to disrobe and become “re-educated” (Harris 2005, 174-181).

that combined Buddhism and Marxism.<sup>76</sup> This esoteric and confusing doctrine was delineated in a handbook called “The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment” and elaborated in U Chit Hlaing’s *Lawka Amyin (Man’s Worldview)*. While the military government successfully brought most of the country under its control, it also severely limited freedoms of speech and the press in the name of national unity. As a result, the boisterous, free-wheeling (and occasionally violent) ideological debates among leftists gave way to the ideological uniformity of the “Burmese Way to Socialism.”<sup>77</sup>

This economic policy, instituted in 1962, was a colossal failure, nationalizing businesses and restricting private capital in ways that led to widespread poverty and inflation. While the Communist Party of Burma continued to oppose the government through guerrilla warfare until the late 1980s, the military proved to be effective at minimizing its influence. Attempts by the AFPFL and military governments to demonize communism were largely successful. But the economic failure of socialism under Ne Win also disillusioned many advocates of leftist thought in Burma and tight censorship meant that there was little room to discuss alternative ideologies. Democratic activists, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, have generally advocated a liberal, capitalist democracy, open to foreign investment and development, and have remained largely disconnected from the previously robust tradition of leftist political thought in Burma.<sup>78</sup>

### **After Independence, a Renewed Emphasis on Order**

In a telling switch, after independence the leaders of the AFPFL government adopted a new focus on order in their rhetoric and policies, a distinct contrast to their previous emphasis on political liberation. Presumably, with the renewal of Burmese leadership, citizens of the country no longer had to be concerned about the government acting in their interests and any expressions of dissent were thus suspect. U Nu issued a critical rebuke to students in a speech on National Day on November 23, 1951 (U Nu 1953). He painted a derisive picture of the student political activist, with unkempt hair and clothes, claiming that across the country, people had lost respect for students because of their continued

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<sup>76</sup> While official accounts credit the creation of this ideology to U Chit Hlaing, the director of the Burmese military’s Political Science Institute (Badgley and Aye Kyaw 2009, vi), several Burmese scholars related to me in interviews their belief that Thakin Ba Thaug was the intellectual force behind the BSPP’s Buddhist-Marxist hybrid philosophy.

<sup>77</sup> Although a number of observers pointed out the similarity between the Burmese Way to Socialism and Prince Sihanouk’s “Buddhist Socialism,” the latter strongly rejected suggestions that the former had influenced his thinking, arguing that “Buddhist Socialism” was deeply rooted in the Cambodian character and inspired more by Buddhist morality (Harris 2005, 148).

<sup>78</sup> However, if the new government continues to ease restrictions on the press and the works of leftist writers from this period become more widely available to Burmese readers, we could see a renewed interest in leftist thought similar to that which galvanized some representatives of Thai “reformist” Buddhism in the 1980s and 90s such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

political activities. Many saw U Nu's attempt to suppress student voices as hypocritical since he himself had been a part of the student movement in the 1930s that took up the fight for independence. However, his speech made it clear that he believed the time for oppositional, liberation struggles was over and that the primary concern now was for the citizens to support the government in restoring order and peace. Here U Nu also questioned the ability of the students to be savvy political participants, suggesting that they were simply being manipulated by politicians. "I do not want to see student jacks-of-all trades meddling in politics, attending political classes, and submitting themselves as pawns on the political chess-boards" (1953, 21). Even champions of democracy in Myanmar advocated self-determination and liberation during the independence struggle yet renewed their focus on order when presented with the challenges of governing.

We can also note the shift from a concern with liberation and freedom to an emphasis on order and harmony in another one of U Nu's speeches from 1952 (U Nu 1953). Here he explicitly declares political liberation to have been a matter of self-rule (meaning sovereignty) and now that "there is no difference between the Government and the masses," people should cease their protests and criticism of the government (1953, 107). He gave a nod to the continued goal of economic liberation, but insisted that since the government was implementing policy on behalf of the people in order to eliminate economic exploitation, this was also not an area for concern. We can hear echoes of U Ottama's assumption that the end of colonial rule would automatically bring both freedom and justice as U Nu tells his listeners that they should refrain from false differentiation between "the government" and "the people" since the implementation of democracy means that the two are one and the same.<sup>79</sup> U Nu claimed that the people were no longer exploited because they all "owned" the land, although the 1947 Constitution declared "the State" to be the ultimate owner of all lands, a condition affirmed in the Land Nationalization Act of 1948 (Burma 1948).<sup>80</sup>

The renewed focus on order after independence in 1948 had the effect of delegitimizing continued struggles based on various interpretations of "liberation." Communist leaders were strongly critical of the economic policies of the AFPFL government, which they perceived as being opportunistic in negotiating independence from the British and too accommodating to capitalist interests. H.N. Goshal issued a harshly worded denunciation of U Nu and the AFPFL in December 1947, claiming that they had

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<sup>79</sup> While not explicit in U Nu's rendering, there is an implicit *lawkouttara* critique in his claim. From a *lawkouttara* perspective, conceptual labels that distinguish things are not only subjective, they are ultimately false. By calling the division between the government and the people a false distinction, U Nu is adopting a sort of moral and metaphysical high ground, implying that he can see the ultimate sameness between these two categories and is not hindered by a limited *lawki* perspective of differentiation.

<sup>80</sup> Chapter III, Paragraph 30 of the 1947 Constitution states, "The state is the ultimate owner of all lands."

“crossed over to the imperialist camp” and that the agreements with the British resigned the Burmese to a state of “permanent slavery” (cited in Thompson 1959, 38).<sup>81</sup> The Communist opposition turned to open revolt in March 1948, just months after independence and continued to threaten the newly independent state throughout the 1950s. In 1959, the Burmese government published a pamphlet entitled *Dhammantaraya (Buddhism in Danger)*. The pamphlet claimed to include a collection of teaching materials and notes used by Communist cadres in their trainings denouncing Buddhism. The government was presenting this evidence to Burmese Buddhists so that they would realize the threat that Communism posed to Buddhism. For example, one of the lessons allegedly discusses how, during the Buddha’s time, feudalism and slave labor were still common. Rather than advocate for true (presumably Marxist economic) liberation, he presented people with a fanciful idea of liberation beyond the material world; because of this, Buddhist liberation was really just another impediment to ultimate human liberation in a Marxist sense (Burma 1959, 3-4).<sup>82</sup> The government used publications like this to present Communism as a threat to the *sāsana* (Buddhist community) and to delegitimize alternate interpretations of the liberation struggle.

We can also see a conflict between the demands of order and different understandings of liberation in the efforts of the Burmese government and military to crush ethnic rebellions after 1948. After independence, U Nu and the AFPFL saw liberation as having been achieved. However, several non-Burman groups did not share this view and saw what they perceived as Burman domination post-1948 as an impediment to their own liberation and self-determination.<sup>83</sup> Some saw existence in a country dominated by the Burmans in the AFPFL as even more restrictive than life under the British. For example, during the first Panglong Conference of 1946 (an event that brought together many different ethnic groups to discuss cultural, economic, and political issues of shared interest) U Nu, as a representative of the AFPFL, criticized the British for their attempts to divide the various ethnicities of Burma (a rumor that was widely circulating in Rangoon at the time). Some Kachin leaders issued a

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<sup>81</sup> Goshal, a Communist of Indian descent who was born in Burma and was a chief advisor to Thakin Than Tun, was also known as Thakin Ba Tin (Lintner 1990b).

<sup>82</sup> Communists in other Theravāda countries also tried to paint initial independence movements as providing sham independence, although they usually expressed this claim in terms that were more appealing to a Buddhist population. Phumi Vongvichit, a leading figure in the Pathet Lao, said in a 1976 radio address that “the supreme goal of the revolution is to liberate the nation, to liberate the people so that they can be free of suffering, and to make all men happy” (quoted in Stuart-Fox, 1996, 96).

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, many instances of non-Burman leaders expressing skepticism or fear of their treatment under a Burman-led government in Walton (2008). Although not usually couched in the same Buddhist terminology of liberation that characterized the Burmese independence movement, many ethnic rebellions did see their efforts as continuing their own struggles for liberation from Burman domination. Also see Ashley South’s (2003) study of Mon nationalism.

statement that strongly refuted this claim, and emphasized their skepticism at joining a union alongside the Burmese (Lintner 1997). Their statement went on to ask: “What have the Burman people done toward the hill peoples to win their faith and love?” (quoted in Silverstein 1980). While many non-Burmans saw the armed movements that sprang up after independence as legitimate liberation struggles, most of the leaders of the AFPFL and the military saw them as evidence of treasonous disloyalty.

Usually, leaders presented the renewed emphasis on order in terms that continued to valorize liberation, but deferred it to an unspecified future. Regarding General Ne Win, the instigator of the 1962 coup and leader of the military junta for several decades, Gustaaf Houtman has said: “democracy was, in my view, a vital element in his political path with a meaning that shifted in the course of his career” (1999, 21). This is a provocative statement, since, in the common opposition narrative of military rule in Myanmar, Ne Win was nothing more than a power hungry autocrat. Here, Houtman acknowledges that Ne Win may have planned for a future democracy, but one that was perpetually and indefinitely postponed because of the concerns of order and stability. In his speeches Ne Win continued to speak of the democracy that would come, promises that sounded increasingly hollow as military rule continued, but statements that are consistent with the concern for order as a prerequisite not only for democratic practice, but for the liberation-focused benefits of political rule as well. This is reminiscent of the case in which the Buddha waited to preach to a starving man until after his material hunger was satiated. In order for the man to be calm enough to grasp the Buddha’s teachings, he needed to be relieved of his immediate, overpowering cravings; a calm mind, not consumed by either desire or aversion is necessary to realize the *dhamma*. While in the Buddha’s case the deferment was only temporary, political authorities in Myanmar have used this justification to implement policies that focus on restoring or protecting order as a necessary initial step towards liberation, thus indefinitely deferring democracy.

### **A Brief Note on Liberation in the Democratic Opposition**

Gustaaf Houtman has discussed another conception of liberation that was common among members of the NLD in the 1990s (1999, Chapter 5). In Houtman’s analysis, *vipassanā* (insight) meditation functioned as a psychological coping mechanism for democratic activists who were imprisoned or confined to house arrest.<sup>84</sup> The practice of *vipassanā* allowed individuals to refocus on

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<sup>84</sup> Houtman acknowledges that this understanding and usage of *vipassanā* meditation was limited to the older generation of NLD leaders and that younger generations of activists, particularly those who had fled to Thailand after the 1988 uprising, did not appear to practice *vipassanā* nor approach it from the same perspective (1999, 307). Today that older generation rarely speaks about their own Buddhist practice or the ways in which it informs their political thought (a subject I revisit in Chapter 5 and in the Conclusion), so it is difficult to know if they still

concerns related to ultimate liberation, that is, from moral defilements (*kilesa*) and eventually, from desire itself. The “insight” of *vipassanā* meditation is the realization of Buddhist truths of *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and *anattā* (no-self or no control). We could formulate this in other terms that I have been using throughout this dissertation to say that insight entails bringing a *lawkouttara* perspective to bear on *lawki* existence. Attention to *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* helped some democratic activists realize that not only were the conditions of their imprisonment inherently impermanent, their physical confinement did not limit their ability to practice for ultimate liberation. If anything, it enhanced the possibilities of *vipassanā* practice by taking away many of the daily activities and responsibilities that can inhibit meditation practice and providing examples of severe *dukkha* (suffering/unsatisfactoriness) on which to meditate. The conception of liberation that Houtman described, however, was most likely limited to a distinct period among a particular group of people. No one among the former political prisoners I interviewed had a regular meditation practice, nor did they interpret imprisonment from this perspective.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, very few of the prisoners who were released in the sweeping amnesty in January 2012 have mentioned elements of Buddhist meditation practice as an aspect of their prison experience.

It is also worthwhile to briefly discuss one final Burmese Buddhist understanding of liberation. In addition to referring to the democracy movement as “the second struggle for national independence,” Aung San Suu Kyi also cited the need for a “revolution of the spirit” (1991, 199 & 183). In an essay entitled “Freedom From Fear,” she discussed the need for the population of Myanmar to combine democratic change with personal, internal transformation. Beginning from the four *agati* (which she translates as the four “corruptions”), she acknowledged the detrimental effects of desire (*chanda*), anger (*dosa*), and ignorance (*moha*), but asserted that fear (*bhaya*) was the worst because it destroyed a sense of right and wrong while also hindering efforts to reform the other three areas (ibid., 181). Fear had not only kept the majority of the population of the country from its potential, it had also driven the military to continue to repress its own citizens. Freedom from fear, according to Myanmar’s democracy

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adhere to a similar idea of liberation. Of course, since the government released the majority of political prisoners in January 2012 and has been gradually opening up political space with its reforms since March 2011, it is possible that the older generation of activists no longer finds this conception of liberation to be compelling or even relevant.

<sup>85</sup> Although they did not practice *vipassanā*, many did discuss the ways in which they used Buddhist teachings to better understand and cope with their imprisonment. Students jailed after the 1988 protests often found themselves imprisoned alongside disrobed Buddhist monks who would share *dhamma* wisdom related to conditions of suffering. Other former political prisoners found that the Buddha’s teaching of *mettā* (non-discriminating loving-kindness) was invaluable in helping them manage their relationships with abusive soldiers and prison guards and eased feelings of hatred and bitterness after their release.

icon, would liberate citizens to strive for the heights of moral perfection and to create a more just society. Reflecting on the human quality of self-improvement, she wrote that “At the root of human responsibility is the concept of perfection, the urge to achieve it, the intelligence to find a path toward it, and the will to follow that path if not to the end at least the distance needed to rise above individual limitations and environmental impediments” (ibid., 185). Here Aung San Suu Kyi perfectly expressed the delicate yet unavoidable intertwining of the realms of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* and both the challenge and the possibility of envisioning a role for Buddhist moral practice within politics.

### **Purification in the Moral and Political Realms**

Perhaps the most striking and persistent incarnation of the twin goals of order and liberation has been the drive for purification that incoming political authorities have consistently expressed. Most kings, upon ascending to the throne, issued decrees intended to cleanse society of previous moral failings and establish a new moral order. They usually claimed that their changes were carried out in the name of the religion and for the protection of the *sāsana*. Mendelson has called this justification the “myth’ of protection and purification” and indeed, political authorities regularly used this reasoning as an excuse to centralize power and extend their control over the *sangha* (1960, 114).

The original Burmese purification story is also the common explanation of the origin of the Burmese nation and of Theravāda Buddhism among Burmans. King Anawrahta, who ruled from 1014-1077 was the founder of the Pagan dynasty. Burmese history recounts Anawrahta’s sack of the Mon city of Thaton, taking the Mon monk Shin Arahan back to Pagan, along with a number of texts.<sup>86</sup> Anawrahta proceeded to establish a Theravāda *sangha* in his kingdom, persecuting a number of (now) heretical sects (Smith 1965, 12-13). Similarly, the fifteenth century king Dhammaceti sent monks to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to receive re-ordination, as he believed that the ceremony had become corrupted in Burma (ibid., 29-30). When they returned he insisted that all monks be re-ordained in the new order, thus purifying the *sangha*, but also ensuring his control over the institution.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Most Burmese and Western historical accounts cite King Anawrahta’s “sack of Thaton” as the founding of the Burmese nation, although this common narrative has only recently been subjected to more critical examination. Smith relates that Anawrahta destroyed the city because its leaders denied his request for Buddhist texts (1965, 26). However, some texts suggest that the process by which Anawrahta imported Theravāda Buddhism from the Mons was actually consensual (Aung Thwin 1998).

<sup>87</sup> Michael Aung Thwin has portrayed the throne’s occasional seizure of religious lands (always defended as purifying the *sangha* of attachment to material things) as a cyclical and inevitable response to re-balance a system in which increasing amounts of land were donated to the *sangha* for religious purposes, thus making that land non-taxable and reducing royal incomes (1979). Aung Thwin and Victor Lieberman engaged in a lively debate over the utility of this framework for adequately describing the economic decline of Burmese monarchies (Lieberman 1980 and Aung Thwin 1980). However, they both agreed that most Burmese kings (with the possible exception of

King Bodawhpaya expressed his concern over what he viewed as the moral deterioration of the *sangha* prior to his reign (Koenig 1990). He cited drought, famine and rebellions as societal indicators of this degeneracy and attempted to reverse the trend by appointing new monks to lead the *sangha* and by persecuting groups of monks that he and his new monastic advisors viewed as heretical (Smith 1965, 27-28).<sup>88</sup> Mindon, the penultimate king in the Konbaung dynasty, who ruled from 1853-1878, also tried to enforce a revised *vinaya* (monastic discipline) code (Ferguson 1975, 220). He was concerned that monks in lower Burma, living under British control without the king or the *sangha* hierarchy, were becoming more lax in their discipline, which would further threaten the *sāsana*.

Attempts to purify the *sangha* and by extension, the society, were not limited to Burmese kings.<sup>89</sup> On several occasions, U Nu attempted to more formally institutionalize the structure of the *sangha*, bringing it under more sustained government oversight. He was unsuccessful in repeated efforts to implement a system of monastic registration (Smith 1965, 216). In fact, even the military government faced strong resistance throughout the 1960s and 70s to *sangha* registration. They were finally able to begin implementing more centralized authority over the monkhood beginning in 1980, but it took almost another decade to effectively bring the *sangha* under the purview of the government, despite apparent public support for this “purifying” action (Tin Maung Maung Than 1988).

E.M. Mendelson, an authority on the relationship between the *sangha* and the government, saw the entire “religious revival” of Buddhism that occurred under U Nu’s leadership in the 1950s as a move on the part of the government to gain control over the *sangha*. While the Burmese government claimed they were pursuing a religious policy intended to gain Burma membership in the UN (their reasoning in this regard was rather confusing), Mendelson viewed their actions as little more than a thinly veiled “disciplinary” operation (1964). During the first military coup from 1958-60, the Army also extended lay control over the *sangha*, with the excuse that they were protecting Buddhism from the dangers of Communism (Mendelson 1960).

When monks joined democracy protests in 1988 and instituted a religious boycott against the military in 1990 by refusing to accept alms from them, General Saw Maung, at that time the leader of the junta that had assumed power, directly challenged the monks’ actions. In a meeting with leading

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Alaunghpaya) attempted to assert their control over the *sangha* with the justification that they were fulfilling the king’s historical role as purifier and protector of the *sāsana*.

<sup>88</sup> Of course, even his loyal monastic advisors eventually resisted Bodawhpaya’s attempts at purification when he himself began to make heretical claims that he was the future Buddha Metteyya (Mendelson 1975, 88).

<sup>89</sup> Nor were they limited to the Burmese. Thai monarchs regularly intervened in *sangha* practices to purify monastic preaching and conduct, and *Sangha* Acts in 1902, 1941, and 1962 all led to increased centralization and royal oversight (Suksamran 1982).

abbots he claimed that the government's actions in suppressing the protests and disciplining monks was consistent with Buddhist law and Burmese history, even likening the government's actions to King Anawrahta's purification of the *sangha* (McCarthy 2008). Leaders of the military government also used similar rhetoric in justifying their brutal crackdown on widespread monastic protests during the so-called "Saffron Revolution" of 2007.

We can also understand the current government's campaign for "clean governance" as a continuation of the purification trend among political authorities (and as an indication, despite current leaders' "secular" rhetoric, that they still operate from within the Theravāda worldview). Many observers awaited the installation of Myanmar's new quasi-civilian government in March 2011 with justified skepticism, given that much of the leadership of the new government had only recently transitioned out of high-ranking military positions (Zarni 2011 and New York Times 2011). There was general surprise when Prime Minister Thein Sein dedicated much of his inaugural speech on March 31, 2011 to calls for "clean government" and "good governance" (Ko Htwe 2011). As part of this campaign to purify political authority itself, the government has investigated and even prosecuted a number of prominent military generals (The Irrawaddy 2011). Not only is Thein Sein's anti-corruption program appealing to potential foreign donors and investors, it is also consistent with the purification actions taken by previous Burmese political leaders.<sup>90</sup>

Purification of the *sangha* and society effectively melds the two goals of order and liberation. Regardless of intention, the effect is to increase the purview of the political authority over the religious order and lay society. As we have seen, adherence to the *vinaya* was necessary for the maintenance of morality among the monks. Only virtuous monks could provide guidance to the population, supporting the proper moral practice that was the foundation of order within society. Leaders justified policies of purification that extended and deepened political control over different segments of society through reference to the ultimate goal of spiritual liberation. However, in practice they also deferred that ultimate goal, sometimes going so far as to promote order as the sole end of political authority rather than as a means to spiritual progress and enlightenment. The deferral of spiritual liberation in favor of political order has also meant the deferral of political freedom, currently enacted through the government's program of "discipline-flourishing democracy," a topic I examine in more detail in Chapter 5.

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<sup>90</sup> Although, Thein Sein has not used the rhetoric of liberation to justify his purification campaign, as previous rulers did.

## Conclusion

The pre-colonial Burmese polity focused on the maintenance of order, influenced by a view of human nature that saw people as fundamentally flawed in their enslavement to desire and in need of proper management to prevent them from indulging their baser instincts. The rhetoric of political legitimation, however, suggested that the maintenance of order would support the ultimate purpose of spiritual liberation and the overcoming of desire. That is, people needed a certain set of organized life conditions to either promote correct moral action or, in the case of monks, allow advanced practice for enlightenment. The Burmese Buddhist response to colonialism engendered a creative and productive discourse that expanded the meanings of “liberation.” Burmese nationalists at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth linked the prospects of spiritual development (and ultimately, enlightenment) to political liberation, or national independence. Beginning in the late 1930s, leftists added an emphasis on economic liberation from capitalist exploitation, one that became more prominent after independence in 1948. In more recent years, democratic opposition activists have contrasted spiritual liberation (and specifically meditation practice) with their physical circumstances of incarceration and called for liberation not only from government oppression, but from conditions that engender moral corruption.

Political figures have also explicitly linked the ultimate “goal” of liberation with more mundane societal aspirations. Many writers in the 1930s-60s used the paradoxical term “*lawka neikban*” or “worldly nirvana” to describe the ideal Buddhist political community. In most cases, they conceived of the path to this perfect state using socialist methods, but justified these methods through Buddhist teachings. Different views on the connection of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* matters shaped Burmese perspectives on the different types of liberation and the connections between them. Some Burmese Buddhist political figures, while advocating for a distinct separation between religion and the state, still accepted that the higher “truths” of the *lawkouttara* realm, as universal truths, could inform and direct worldly action. The gradual (and in some cases only partial) rejection of Marxism among most of the Burmese political elite through the 1950s resulted in a resurgence of hardened boundaries between *lawki* and *lawkouttara*, in an effort to assert the primacy of Buddhist doctrine and combat continuing Communist rebellions. These differing viewpoints helped to establish the poles between which Burmese Buddhists in the post-colonial era have debated the proper ends of politics.

## CHAPTER 4: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: WHAT IS “POLITICS” AND WHAT CONSTITUTES “PARTICIPATION”?

There is no word or phrase in Burmese that approximates the meanings and implications of the English phrase “political participation.” The English term can include activities such as voting, running for office, contributing time or money to a campaign, organizing or attending a rally, signing a petition, or attending a public forum. We also use it to refer to actions that make the political aspects of everyday life recognizable as such, including debating a political issue with a neighbor, challenging racially biased hiring practices at a company, or insisting on more gender equity in domestic work. In Chapter 2 I presented multiple interpretations of the Burmese word *nain ngan ye*, which is almost universally used for “politics.” To most Burmese, the words for “politician” (*nain ngan ye thama*) or to “do politics” (*nain ngan ye louk de*) are not only associated almost completely with electoral or legislative politics, they also have strong negative connotations.<sup>1</sup> Aung San’s attempts in the 1940s to raise the status of “politics,” change people’s perceptions of the practice, and expand it to include every aspect of human interaction found mixed success. After independence, political leaders failed to construct a system hospitable to broader citizen participation and the political dysfunction of the parliamentary period in the 1950s paved the way for the military to rule for almost fifty years while paradoxically claiming that it was not “doing politics.” During that period the only opportunities for most citizens to “participate” in “politics” was through occasional campaigns to oppose the government. Myanmar had its first public ballot in almost twenty years in the 2008 referendum to ratify the constitution, followed by parliamentary elections in November 2010 and April 2012.<sup>2</sup>

Myanmar appears to be entering an era of renewed citizen participation in a semi-democratic system; former democratic opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was elected to parliament in April 2012, has said that “people’s participation in social and political transformation is the central issue of our time” (1994). Yet the history of Theravāda Buddhist political thought, both in its classical form and throughout most of Burmese history, has provided very few resources for theorizing citizen participation in politics. Nationalists in the early twentieth century and democratic activists since 1988 have attempted to counter this tradition using Buddhist reasoning, but political figures have also expressed

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<sup>1</sup> Bur. နိုင်ငံရေးသမား / နိုင်ငံရေးလုပ်တယ်

<sup>2</sup> The military government did hold a referendum in 1973 on a new constitution although observers almost universally condemned it as a sham, with an over ninety percent approval rate.

reservations regarding the moral and intellectual abilities of citizens to participate effectively and appropriately. These conflicting attitudes toward participation become even more complex when we consider how Burmese Buddhists have also pushed the boundaries of both “politics” and “participation” by presenting individual moral practice as a type of political engagement.

This chapter asks the following questions: How have Buddhists in Myanmar theorized participation in politics, particularly as space for popular participation expanded at the beginning of the twentieth century? What kinds of acts do they understand as political participation and what resources (textual, practice-based, cultural) have they drawn on to make their arguments? How do contemporary Burmese Buddhist notions of participation reflect norms of how the political realm should be perceived and how individuals and groups ought to engage with it? Does the Buddhist tradition in Myanmar provide a distinctive way of conceptualizing the notion of political participation itself? Once again, I find in various Buddhist arguments for and against popular participation references to expectations of moral capacity. These arguments about moral worthiness are situated within the complex Theravāda understanding of human nature as inherently limited by attachment and craving yet potentially capable of transformative spiritual development and liberation. Additionally, those Burmese Buddhist thinkers who have envisioned closer connections between the *lawki* and *lawkouttara* realms have also expanded their understanding of “political participation” to necessarily include moral practice.

Most Burmese Buddhist thinkers have conceived of politics as a necessary evil. While a good king was expected to conform to certain moral guidelines, Buddhists also assumed that to be an effective ruler, he would also have to commit a number of “immoral” acts, including killing other beings. The moral ambiguity of political action has carried over to contemporary views of political participation. Part of this comes from a distrust of politicians and “dirty” political practices that has been present since the beginning of electoral politics in the country at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the vocabulary used to describe political participation in Myanmar most often carries negative connotations and refers to explicitly political actions. However, the rise of NGO activity as well as the increase in social donations (as opposed to purely religious donations) by Buddhists has expanded the discourse to include positive interpretations, often justified through Buddhist teachings.

My examination of these subjects reveals a wide range of what it means to “participate” in “politics.” With regard to the latter term, I uncover a number of different definitions, from electoral politics to civil society work to proper moral conduct in daily social interactions. The former term also carries a wide array of meanings. Of course, among most Burmese “participation” can mean voting or running for office, although these methods are still relatively recent practices that had been severely

restricted throughout most of the last five decades. But other actors identify different methods of participation, some of which are deeply rooted in Buddhist ideas about the efficacy of individual moral action. For example, many of the monks who marched during the “Saffron Revolution” believed that the simple act of chanting the *mettā* (Loving-Kindness) *sutta* could bring tangible political change. Some members of civil society groups are guided in their activities by the Buddhist concept of *dāna* (donation/generosity) in which purity of intention determines the efficacy of an act. But beliefs about moral purity can also deter participation, casting doubt on the ability of regular citizens to either effectively participate in politics or to do so in a way that is consistent with the Buddhist *dhamma*.

I begin with a brief account of changing ideas about political participation in recent Burmese history. In a departure from the traditional support for social hierarchy and absolute monarchical rule, the nineteenth century Burmese minister U Hpo Hlaing argued for broader participation in political decision-making. The fall of the monarchy and the decline of the traditional cosmology, along with the increased influence of Western political thought, generated arguments for citizen participation in politics rooted in a more empowering interpretation of *kan* (Pāli *kamma*). Next, however, I note the persistence of a skeptical discourse on the moral worthiness of inherently flawed human beings to take part in politics in appropriate ways. I look at how monks, as presumable moral exemplars, have participated in politics through familiar methods (electioneering, protests, etc.) and through unique methods that harness the power of their moral authority and exalted societal position. Both monastic and lay participation in social work activities has increased, along with an increasing propensity among civil society actors to see their community activities as “political,” a trend that I examine in the following section. Finally, I explore the implications of Burmese Buddhist understandings of individual moral practice as a type of political participation. The move away from electoral and legislative politics has historically occurred for various reasons, including disenchantment with party conflict and the former military government’s restriction of opportunities for traditional participation. Turning to another work of comparative political theory, I compare Burmese conceptions of individual moral practice as political participation with Leigh Jenco’s assessment of the Chinese political philosopher Zhang Shizhao. Whereas Zhang’s notion of individual practice could inhibit the formation of a more cooperative political community, individual moral practice in the Burmese Buddhist tradition is oriented explicitly toward overcoming the conceptual fiction of the self, enabling stronger engagement with a broader community.

### **A Brief Chronological Overview of Political Participation in Burmese History**

As discussed above, scholars have referred to the traditional Theravāda Buddhist model of politics as the “two wheels of *dhamma*” (Reynolds 1972). The wheel of moral authority (embodied by

the *sangha*, the community of monks) both legitimated and restrained the wheel of secular authority (personified by the monarch); in return, the king provided moral leadership as well as the material necessities for the *sangha's* existence and for the flourishing of society in general. Lay people were present in this conception of politics only as political subjects, and, while the Buddhist scriptures do contain a basic code of lay ethics, they say almost nothing about the role of the laity (apart from kings and a select group of elite ministers) as autonomous participants in the political realm. This is consistent with the logic of the traditional model, which viewed kings as having acquired their power as a result of exemplary moral conduct in previous existences, thus providing a spiritual justification for their position. While the status of Burmese Buddhist kings was different than, for example, the status of monastic *lamas* as political rulers in the Tibetan tradition of “enlightened governance,” the logic was similar (Frechette 2007, 99). This powerful being had demonstrated his achievement on the moral path through his superior *kan* and was thus justified in exerting political authority over the community.

Whatever evidence may have existed to counter the image of the king as deserving of authority (and even the highly selective and edited chronicles contain a plethora of examples of immoral kings), Buddhist conceptions of human nature also provided grounds for justifiable skepticism towards the ability of the general population to take part in political decision-making. As *pu htu zin* (Pāli *puthujjana*), creatures ruled by desire and craving, most individuals would not have been expected to be able to act in morally appropriate ways in their own lives without the benefit of the Buddha's teachings. Additionally, acceptance of the Buddhist cosmology and the natural hierarchy that it contained meant that any political system other than that led by a powerful ruler who could maintain order was virtually unimaginable and would risk chaos. Of course, in practice, the dictates of the king rarely affected the daily lives of most of his subjects and villages and other local communities obviously possessed their own forms of political organization. Yet, as we have seen, even in the twentieth century, many people continued to distinguish between their local governance practices and “politics” (Badgley 1965, 68ff). Traditional frameworks still influence popular attitudes, not because Burmese Buddhists are necessarily waiting for an ideal Buddhist king to return, but because many people retain doubts about the moral worthiness of the masses to exercise political rule.

However, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Burmese political figures drew from Buddhist doctrine and from other traditions of thought to justify expanded opportunities for participation in the political realm. Michael Charney notes the ways in which the rise of newspapers from the 1830s increased the availability of information (2006, 196). The royal minister Kinwun Mingyi U Kaung also circulated information about Western political systems, economic developments, and

technological advances through publication of his diaries of trips to Europe in the 1870s (Kinwun Mingyi 2006). U Hpo Hlaing, another minister who advised several monarchs in the second half of the nineteenth century, was one of the first to open up space for individuals other than the king to participate in political decision-making. His suggestion of an assembly that would make political decisions was drawn from European political institutions and justified with reference to Buddhist scriptures, but was limited in that it only expanded the sphere of participation to a wider circle of elites (Maung Htin 2002). Aurore Candier demonstrates that U Hpo Hlaing's explanation of *a-wirawdhana* ("non-opposition," one of the ten Duties of the King) broadened the concept while still reinforcing a sociopolitical hierarchy that envisioned "high officials" (*hmu-maq*) as "an intermediary group between the king and the *pyi-thu* [the people]" (Candier 2007, 31-32).

The proliferation of social organizations at the beginning of the twentieth century and the gradual engagement of many of these groups with political issues marked the first significant expansion of political participation in the country.<sup>3</sup> Groups like the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA, founded in 1906) entered the political stage in 1916 by organizing demonstrations against Europeans who insisted on wearing their shoes inside Buddhist temples, a stunning display of disrespect from a Buddhist point of view (Smith 1965, 87ff). A new generation of Burmese who had been educated abroad returned to agitate for elections and popular representation, which the British eventually granted in 1922 (Taylor 1996, 165). Turnout was low in the first election, but increased in subsequent elections. However, at various times parties and coalitions also organized boycotts of elections as a form of political participation. The nationalist writer Thakin Kodaw Hmaing gave this tactic grounding in the Buddhist tradition in his 1927 *Boycott Tika* by connecting the secular political action to the rare but powerful monastic practice of *thabeik hmauk*, "turning over the alms bowl" (Maung Hmaing 1927). In carrying out this spiritual punishment, monks refuse to collect donations from specific lay people and their families, thus deriving them of the opportunity to make merit. While the 1930s-50s were characterized by regular electoral boycotts, the democratic opposition since 1988 has often included monastic religious boycotts, such as during the 2007 demonstrations.

The General Council of Buddhist Associations (GCBA, renamed the General Council of Burmese Associations in 1920) evolved out of the YMBA and gradually began to include the rural population. Burmese historians have used the term *wunthanu athins* ("nationalist organizations") to refer broadly to

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<sup>3</sup> According to U Ba Khaing's history, several religious organizations, some with social service goals, were formed around the turn of the century, including the Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Athin in 1897 in Mandalay and the Asoka Society in 1902 in Patheingyi (Zöllner 2006b). These groups, however, did not express any political goals nor did they connect their activities explicitly to politics.

the many groups formed throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, although Western scholars usually use the term to denote a loose network of more rural groups that were associated with the GCBA.<sup>4</sup> In many cases the individuals who brought these rural and urban groups together were the monks. The General Council of *Sangha Sameggi* (GCSS, formed in 1920) was a monastic organization that sent hundreds of monks out to the *wunthanus* to offer moral guidance and, in many cases, political training (Moscotti 1974, 32).

Josef Silverstein has described the transformation in Burmese attitudes towards politics that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century: “Freedom in the mainstream meant many things - personal, social, intellectual and political - and led to greater participation by the people in political organizations, elections and direct action outside the legal limits. Together, they reflected a fundamental change in the popular outlook toward politics. Man, they were coming to believe, could affect his political condition in this existence and it did not depend upon his karma [*kan*]” (Silverstein 1996, 217). While he was absolutely correct in noting this change, the traditional view of humans as constrained by *kan* and morally unworthy of political decision-making (as well as the perception of politics as a “dirty” worldly undertaking) persisted alongside this new understanding of human freedom and its connection to political participation.

Indeed, members of the educated Burmese class that was leading the independence struggle by the late 1930s held complex positions on participation. Many were skeptical of extending the franchise to the entire population and believed that education and social class still functioned as indicators of the moral and political capacity of individual citizens. Sarkisyanz provided a cynical assessment of their usage of Buddhism in their political reasoning, claiming that, “For that Educated Class, the people’s Buddhism was largely but a religious means for their political ends of self-government, that is for greater participation in government” (presumably he meant greater participation by the elite, educated class) (1965, 135). He also noted that the colonial Burmese administrative class had come mostly from elite families, who could use their wealth and connections to acquire the education and bureaucratic skills necessary for success in the colonial government (1965, 229). As a result, despite increasing political organization and agitation in rural areas, the general administrative pattern was the same as under the monarchy: most of the population remained political subjects and objects of policy rather than participants in the political decision-making process.

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<sup>4</sup> Thakin Ba Maung’s 1975 book entitled *The History of the Wunthanu Revolution* (in Burmese) provides a detailed history of this period from a Burmese perspective.

While Aung San and others tried throughout the 1930s and 40s to rehabilitate the image of “politics” (and of those who practiced it), they were not entirely successful. No doubt the popular image of politics was tarnished by seemingly selfish and petty squabbles among prominent politicians and parties. Additionally, however, as a fundamentally worldly activity, politics could not have any ultimate value for Buddhists oriented toward the final goal of spiritual liberation. Regarding the traditional monarchical model of political authority, John Badgley wrote: “The ethical codes assumed that political activity was an obligation upon rulers, but that it had no inherent virtue” (1965, 62). This characterization has continued to haunt Burmese Buddhist perceptions of participation in politics and has posed a challenge to attempts at creating a more inclusive, participatory political system in contemporary Myanmar. How should Buddhists oriented toward the ultimate goal of liberation balance the *lawkouttara* demands of that path with the *lawki* practice of political engagement?

Under the military controlled Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the state employed an expanded rhetoric of popular participation, establishing Worker’s Councils and People’s Councils at various levels of the government hierarchy. However, Wiant notes that space for participation was still very restricted as citizens could only participate through organizations that were “allowed to exist under the constitution” (Wiant 1981, 65). In practice this limited participation to government controlled groups, which took away opportunities for the development of independent civil society organizations. In his 1970 study of local level politics, Badgley argued that “Burma probably does not have a national political process, if by that term one means the connection of groups and leaders in the many local communities into an ongoing process influencing, or attempting to influence, public policy. It certainly has no operative state-wide political process” (1970, 3).<sup>5</sup> These mixed traditions and attitudes toward mass participation in politics continue to present a difficulty to the current Burmese government as it moves to enact reforms and attempts to create a more inclusive political system. Another challenge, however, has been the persistence of ideas that question the moral capacity of individuals to participate in collective political decision-making.

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<sup>5</sup> Badgley’s study also revealed a weakness of the Burmese political process at the time that is a universal concern in democratic systems: barriers to participation among certain socio-economic classes. He noted the way in which political leadership at the local level required a good deal of free time. “Conversations occupy a large portion of the daily activity for a leader in both town and village. Since the cultivator has little time for talk, his chances of attaining leadership are reduced” (Badgley 1970, 78). Some commentators have expressed optimism regarding the role of the internet and advanced communication technology in broadening opportunities for political participation among the rural population. With a significant percentage of its rural population still employed in the agricultural sector, those interested in expanding political participation will need to take into account the persistence of these socio-economic barriers.

## Moral Worthiness and Political Participation

We have seen how Burmese kings used the traditional model of Buddhist kingship to justify their rule with reference to their superior *hpoun*, merit accrued through presumed exemplary moral conduct in previous existences. But even below the level of the monarch, the logic of *hpoun* and *kan* created local hierarchies that coalesced around individuals with significant power. Oliver Wolters, a historian of Southeast Asia, noted the persistent pattern across the region of the organization of political and social groupings around what he termed “big men” (1982). According to Wolters’ comparative study, these “men of prowess” ascended to their positions because they possessed an abnormal amount of what he called “soul stuff.” While every society has used different language and concepts to explain this “soul stuff” (Burmese Buddhists would speak of *kan* and *hpoun*), the idea was the same. This explanation not only justified the position of “big men” through reference to their moral achievement and capacity, it put the majority of the population in an inferior position with regard to their ability to participate in political decision-making. The Burmese Buddhist discourse on democracy and political participation has obviously challenged the “big man” model by advocating broader citizen involvement in politics. But, even as many political figures have argued for popular participation, the language and logic of the Theravādin conception of human nature brings with it doubt about the moral worthiness of most human beings in the political realm.<sup>6</sup>

What emerges in Burmese Buddhist perspectives on political participation is skepticism on two points. First, many are doubtful of the moral capacity of individuals to make good political decisions. As I will show, U Hpo Hlaing was progressive for his time in extending this concern even to the king, but after the fall of the monarchy, political figures used their skepticism of the moral worthiness of the masses for the opposite purpose, to justify limiting opportunities for political expression and participation. Second, although U Hpo Hlaing constructed a Buddhist justification for collective decision-making, many political figures were equally concerned about the divisiveness of party politics. Much of this stemmed from the Burmese experience of party politics at the end of the colonial period and during the parliamentary period where factionalism was the rule rather than the exception. Some of it also came from the persistence of the “big man” model in which party politics was personalized around particular leaders

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<sup>6</sup> The prominence of a small set of business tycoons in contemporary Myanmar as well as the aura of inevitability surrounding their success and dominance in economic endeavors could point to a modern Burmese incarnation of the “big man” model. The Burmese scholar Min Zin has argued that *hpoun* continues to shape Burmese views of political and economic status, although it is unclear how these perceptions might change (if at all) in an increasingly democratic context (Min Zin 2001).

rather than ideologies. In this section, I look at perspectives that express skepticism about the moral worthiness of individuals or groups to take part in politics.

In the *Rajadhammasangaha* U Hpo Hlaing presented the practice of meeting in an assembly as having the practical governance benefits of overcoming individual weaknesses and contributing to unity. He recognized that not only would the decisions of individual kings or ministers be inherently partial, but that the resulting divisions would spread to their supporters throughout the country and to those who benefited from or were disadvantaged by their policies.

“Since the people in general will be led astray if the country’s government is in the power and authority of one man, it should not be carried on through a single man, or even through two men. If it is in the hands of the King and his officials in an assembly, they will not go astray. On a different point, among the people living in the country, the officials will have their own separate policies and adherents. If the government is in the hands of only one or two of overwhelming influence, people who are the adherents of the other officials, having no powerful patron, will be discontented at heart. For these two reasons, the whole body of officials must make it their first duty in arranging the administration of the country to come together in council. It is only by governing in this way that the country will advance and prosper. (Bagshawe 2004, 91-2)

We can see here his adherence to the common belief that the actions of those with political power would influence the conduct of the citizenry. Rather than put his faith in the wise decision-making of a single king (which the history of the Burmese chronicles had proven to be a questionable choice) he advocated for an institutionalized practice that would increase the prospects for unity and harmony and guard against partiality in government decisions (Bagshawe 2004, 88).

His justification for collective decision-making was rooted in beliefs about the limitations of human beings as *pu htu zin*, even a human being as elevated as the king. Being inherently bound by desire and craving, every individual was subject to the sway of the four *agatis* (“corruptions,” “biases,” or “partialities”). The four *agatis* of desire, anger, fear, and ignorance influence everyone’s actions and U Hpo Hlaing acknowledged that it was impossible for government officials (as individuals) to avoid these destructive biases. However, “if a number of people get together for any sort of action, there can be no question of following the *agati* way. In such assemblies what one man does not know another will; when one man has feelings of hate, another will not; when one is angry, another will be calm. When people have agreed in a meeting and preserve their solidarity, there will be no need for fear” (Bagshawe 2004, 174). Citing both the Buddhist conception of the fragility of human nature and what he saw as the

Buddha's endorsement of participatory decision-making for the Licchavi princes, U Hpo Hlaing sought to justify a modern governance practice that expanded ministerial participation in political deliberation.<sup>7</sup>

U Hpo Hlaing subtly challenged the "big man" model with his advice in the *Rajadhammasangaha*. While he situated all of his recommendations within both the Pāli *suttas* and traditional Burmese wisdom, he also expanded the scope for participation in political decision-making—albeit still in a limited way. Although he never directly challenged the monarchical model or the presumed authority of the king, his suggestions about meetings with advisors implied a degree of skepticism and realism regarding the governing abilities of any single individual, even a monarch. In one sense we can see this as a practical political acknowledgement of the Buddhist view of human nature as influenced by desire and fundamentally subject to partiality. In order to overcome the inevitable moral failings of the *pu htu zin* he proposed a system of collective decision-making. In this case he made an explicit *lawki/lawkouttara* distinction, insisting that the rules of political decision-making were inherently different than those which would guide the solitary actions of individuals on the path to enlightenment (Maung Htin 2002, 154).

One aspect of the argument for participatory decision-making that is common in many Western accounts but appears to be absent in U Hpo Hlaing's is the transformative potential of the practice.<sup>8</sup> In fact, this is a conspicuous absence in most Burmese Buddhist accounts of politics. U Hpo Hlaing tells us that the decisions that come from an assembly rather than an individual will be better, more universally acceptable, and less influenced by partiality or selfishness. However, he does not explore the ways in which collective decision-making can open individuals to alternate or opposing perspectives, eroding their own self-interest and functioning as a moral practice in itself. Indeed, most of the discussions of political participation that I examine here offer critiques of the moral worthiness of certain subjects and even posit alternative notions of individual participation, yet they do not necessarily explore the possibility of collective political participation being a morally transformative activity itself. This is a subject that I return to at the end of the chapter.

It is also difficult to tell from U Hpo Hlaing's writings to what degree he envisioned a political system of wider citizen participation, such as a democracy with expanded suffrage. Undoubtedly, he still saw the monarchy as an essential institution, although his participation in the machinations to create an

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<sup>7</sup> U Hpo Hlaing's ideas about the importance of an assembly are reminiscent of Aristotle's. The latter, while also expressing concern about the rule of the many, suggested that "the many, who are not as individuals excellent men, nevertheless can, when they have come together, be better than the few best people, not individually but collectively" (Aristotle 1998, 83).

<sup>8</sup> Some writers who conceive of democratic participation as a transformative process include Barber (2003), Habermas (1998), Pateman (1970) and the contributors to Hickey and Mohan (2004).

administrative system that would limit the power of King Mindon's successor suggests that he may have viewed it as having power merely as a symbol rather than as a sort of cosmological anchor.<sup>9</sup> U Htin Fatt, the editor of a 1960 edition of the *Rajadhammasangaha*, claimed that the work was part of an attempt by a faction of ministers to move the system of governance toward official rather than royal control (Bagshawe 2004, 55). U Hpo Hlaing seems to have had a positive assessment of the dual British parliamentary system, in which some representatives are elected by the citizens and others are selected based on their elite heritage (Maung Htin 2002, 154). He also saw an indirect role for citizens as participants through the media, emphasizing the importance of newspapers in disseminating the decisions of the government and channeling public opinion on those decisions back to members of the assembly (ibid.).

Whatever his views on broader citizen political participation, U Hpo Hlaing was certainly one of a very few voices in the wilderness advocating for more collective political decision-making processes at the nadir of the Burmese monarchy in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, there was some continuity between his ideas set in a monarchical context and the democratic political framework that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. The political figure and scholar U Ba Khaing, one of the founders of the Fabian Party in Burma, also expressed a concern for the moral failings of individual Burmese political leaders in his *Political History of Myanmar*, the third volume published by the *Nagani* Book Club in 1937 (Zöllner 2006b). His account focused mostly on nationalist politics and the maneuvering and machinations among parties during the first few decades of the twentieth century. U Ba Khaing was sharply critical of most of the political figures of his time, believing that they were more concerned with using politics to enrich themselves than with bringing about independence or development of any sort. However, the work is also suffused with frustration bordering on disdain towards the general population of the country for their apparent inability to participate in politics in a constructive fashion.

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<sup>9</sup> Bagshawe (2004, 7) describes the tense and uncertain circumstances surrounding the transfer of power during the last days of King Mindon in 1878. In a meeting of ministers, the Kinwun Mingyi U Kaung (who had traveled to Europe as part of a Burmese delegation and described in his journal the economic, political, and military innovations he encountered) proposed that Prince Thibaw be crowned as successor, presumably because he would be more malleable and open to U Kaung and U Hpo Hlaing's proposed reforms (Tun Aung Chain 2006, 32). The ministers planned to implement a number of institutional reforms that would have taken much of the day-to-day decision-making out of the hands of the king, but Thibaw resisted the implementation of most of these reforms once he came to power. Reflecting a view held by a number of Burmese scholars and historians, U Ba Khaing, the historian and political figure, saw U Kaung as a traitor to the throne who worked with the British to destabilize the monarchy (Zöllner 2006b, 25).

He directed his criticism at his fellow citizens, calling them “individualistic” and claiming that they had “no mutual regard or trust” (Zöllner 2006b, 131). He referred condescendingly to what he saw as the dominant pattern in Burmese society: “Looking at Burmese history, we notice that there never had been a national success due to collective effort. We find that we used to reach the peak due to the leadership of an individual” (ibid., 27). He went on to list some examples of good and bad Burmese kings, then continued, “Likewise, the level of politics in Burma depends solely on the leaders of political parties. Wrong leadership took the country on the wrong path and left it in poor condition. The present status testifies this fact” (ibid., 27).

U Ba Khaing was also disappointed with the general state of party politics in the country. The degree of personalism not only led to factions and splits (indicative of disunity) but also prevented the institutionalization of the party system. He caustically noted that, “A pathetic state of Burmese politics is that political parties do not have definite ideology. In England there is no such thing as Baldwin’s party, or Landsberry’s party, or Mac Donald’s party, or Lloyd George’s party. The parties in England are Conservative, Socialist, Labour, Liberal, which are based on party ideology” (ibid., 113). Without an ideology, people would have nothing to bring them together in real unity, simply the charisma and sway of the leader. “As the parties are named after persons there can be no definite -ism; only activities that follow the will of the leaders prevail. This is the greatest defect in Burmese politics; it is the duty of the people to correct it” (ibid.). As U Ba Khaing saw it, the problem was the persistence of the “big man” model and over-reliance on individuals who, because of their inherent susceptibility to craving, would lead their unthinking followers possibly to glory but eventually and inevitably to ruin.

U Ba Khaing’s expectations of his fellow citizens are difficult to sort through. On the one hand, he dismissed their reliance on powerful individuals to create political change. Yet he was equally contemptuous of their ability to work collectively, thereby reinforcing the paradigm that the success of a political community is dependent on the actions and moral conduct of its leader(s) and minimizing the agency of the citizens. U Ba Khaing’s text appears to be a call for a different model of citizen engagement with politics, one that was not dependent on the charisma or power of individual leaders. But the work is rife with criticism of Burmese attempts at collective political action, from the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) to the rural *wunthanu* (nationalist) associations (calling them “destructive”) and ends with an indictment of nearly every political party in existence at the time. For him, party politics had reached its lowest level (mere decades after it had begun!), a condition evidenced by the fact that the population was already dependent on a corrupt and ineffective elected body and unwilling or unable to act for itself. “Even the brave university students and young men,” he

lamented, “are no longer adventurous; they assume the legislative assembly the last place for politics. And the peasants and workers, the village folk are relying on the legislative assembly. They have mean attitudes; they would ask for government in trivial matters...The grandeur of independence is out of sight; the people are tangled in the vicious cycle of thirty one realms of existence” (ibid., 134). Here U Ba Khaing resigned himself to accepting the negative Buddhist conception of human nature. The “vicious cycle” was *samsāra*, the unending round of rebirths caused by the inherent human condition of ignorance and enslavement to desire. In his eyes, ignorance prevented people from effectively working together for political development, while the compelling nature of craving ensured that leaders would use politics for their own gain.

Concern regarding the continued prominence of individuals in Burmese politics and hand-wringing over the inability or the unwillingness (depending on the perspective) of the masses to take part in collective political action continues today. In his study of Burmese politics, Gustaaf Houtman noted the way in which the “legitimacy of the Burmese State is bound up with the Buddha *dhamma*” which has meant that it has focused on “persons with particular qualities and particular states of mind” (1999, 15). In the pre-colonial period this referred to the king, but for most of the twentieth century that figure has been Aung San, almost universally presented as having near-mythical status as a selfless political figure. In a piece on the political symbolism used by Ne Win’s military government, Jon Wiant noted that “Since 1962, there has been a continual symbolic effort to cast Aung San in the role of the fourth great unifier king, following the dynastical founders Anawratha, Bayinnaung, and Alaungpaya” (1981, 61).<sup>10</sup>

People inside and outside of the country have observed a similar process with Aung San Suu Kyi and her dominant position within the democracy movement. Houtman has noted that “the chief criticism the regime levels at Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD colleagues, and party politicians more generally, is that they and the people who support them practice ‘personality politics’” (2005, 133). Sitagu Sayadaw, a popular monk who was exiled for a period after an inflammatory political sermon in 1988, has also expressed concern about this inclination in Burmese politics in terms reminiscent of U Ba Khaing. “Teamwork is not traditionally valued in Burma,” he said in a 2008 interview (Kyaw Zwa Moe 2008). “Burmese people worship heroes...Look at the National League for Democracy. Without Aung San Suu Kyi, it could just disappear” (ibid.).

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, once Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as the leader of the democratic opposition, the military regime reduced the prominence of Aung San in their legitimating rhetoric, experiencing what Houtman called “Aung San amnesia” (1999, 15-36).

Sarah Bekker approached the problem of participation from a cultural angle through an insightful study of the Burmese concept of *anade* (1981). *Anade* has no exact equivalent linguistic or social reference in English. It refers to a feeling of reluctance on the part of one individual to inconvenience or impose on another. Many Burmese have lamented that social customs such as this one contribute to a subdued and quiescent population, keeping people from asserting their rights or standing up to unjust situations. Becker surmised that the personalized, relational nature of *anade* was reflective of the absence of broader, more abstract concepts in Burmese thought, things like “society” or “nation” (ibid., 35). This reinforced the belief that areas such as politics were reserved for people of higher status or ability. “Because of the lack of larger group concepts and the traditional impossibility of individual participation in national decision-making, politics is to most Burmese still a dangerous drama which he observes as a spectator” (ibid., 32). The Burmese political system is in the midst of democratic reforms, yet traditional beliefs, bound up in presumed hierarchies based on morality, as well as persistent socio-economic impediments, could continue to keep many Burmese from more active political engagement.

Burmese framed the independence struggle in terms of liberation from foreign control and the freedom to make one’s own destiny, to create one’s own *kan*. Political leaders argued that political liberation was necessary in order to facilitate proper moral conduct among Burmese Buddhists. However, the obverse of these arguments was the frequently expressed concern that people might not be equipped (morally or intellectually) to make their own political choices, that they might not be free from the moral defilements that would lead them to make bad decisions. U Ba Khaing bemoaned the “ignorance of the masses” and dismissed the gullibility and lack of morals of the political “followers” among his fellow citizens (Zöllner 2006b, 22). A 1948 editorial in *The Burman* newspaper warned of the dangers of democracy if practiced by an uneducated population. Otherwise, “if not properly handled and if imperfect, Democracy could easily degenerate into confusion and chaos” (July 5, 1948, 2).<sup>11</sup> And, after championing the political participation of students when he himself was one, U Nu, once he became Prime Minister, questioned the ability of the students to be savvy political participants, suggesting that they were simply being manipulated by politicians. “I do not want to see student jacks-of-all trades meddling in politics, attending political classes, and submitting themselves as pawns on the political chess-boards,” he said in a speech to students (1953, 21).

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<sup>11</sup> This concern, of course, is not unique to the Burmese case and has been regularly expressed by observers from Plato and Aristotle to politicians and citizens in contemporary democracies.

Other political figures lamented the lack of a moral element in the educational realm. U Thant, who would later become Secretary General of the United Nations, but who was then representing the Ministry of Information, said in a 1948 radio broadcast that social and political education required “training in the art of governing—and still more difficult—that of being governed” (Burma 1950, 60). Significantly, he saw this training as having a necessary spiritual or moral element and believed that the decline in religious education from the colonial period had resulted in the deterioration of morality and by extension, the skills of citizenship. U Tin Aung, another member of the government, gave a talk in 1949 in which he blamed the current political crisis on disunity among leftists, which resulted from the lack of training in morality and self-discipline. Politics had been reduced to slogans, he complained, and “without the constructive building up of the common man as a responsible citizen” that common man lost all sense of proportion, becoming susceptible to the extreme arguments of the communists (*ibid.*, 132).

Concern over citizens’ moral capacity as political agents continued throughout the period of military rule. In a speech on Armed Forces Day on March 27, 2005, Senior General Than Shwe stated that “Under a democratic system, only high education standards can ensure discipline and a clear perception of right from wrong” (Burma 2005, 23-4). Using language that underlined the implication of moral failure in conditions of disunity, he warned of the dangers of a return to the disorder and chaos that characterized the parliamentary period. He then drew on the four *agatis* (biases) that U Hpo Hlaing used to argue for collective decision-making and that Aung San Suu Kyi used to criticize military rule. “Genuine democracy can flourish only when each and every citizen possesses reasoning power and is able to vote for delegates without [the] four forms of partiality” (*ibid.*, 24). Here he reinforced the reasoning behind the former military government’s plan for a transition to “disciplined democracy”: because of inherent human moral weaknesses, democracy is a potentially dangerous political system, allowing people to participate in politics under the influence of moral defilements (*kilesa*). The military has instituted “disciplined democracy” as a form of moral and political guardianship, providing a justification that is rooted in Burmese Buddhist views of human nature.

While some observers expressed skepticism regarding the moral and intellectual capacity of individual citizens to participate in politics, there was equal concern for the collective political action of the party system. U Ba Khaing’s disappointment in the party system reflected his skepticism of the ability of individuals to lead morally and of party members to hold leaders accountable for their behavior, rather than merely following them in the hopes of personal gain. The proliferation of political parties was evidence of disunity. Many people considered the 1958 split in the AFPFL, the ruling party

throughout the parliamentary period, to be evidence of the moral deterioration of the government (Sein Win 1989). A September 1958 editorial in the *New Times of Burma* that mocked the proliferation of parties, candidates, and all manner of charlatans in politics, sarcastically described the formation of a schoolboys' party in order to poke fun at special interests. In a series of examples meant to expose the hypocrisy of candidates, their view of politics was very apparent: "...the voter should be ready to hear the principles of Panca-Silas [the five moral precepts] from a group of candidates whose firm belief in the Silas should [have made] them forsake the dirty game of politics long ago" (September 20, 1958, 2).

Suspicion of political parties as evidence of factionalism continued throughout the period of military rule. Ne Win instituted a one party system, with the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as the only venue for political participation. The government acquiesced to multi-party elections in 1990 but in their subsequent narrative of that period, they saw the explosion of parties as evidence of the political immaturity of the Burmese people (Kyaw Min Lu 2008a). Similarly, the official view was that political parties should ideally be bound by the moral expectations of unity. A December 3, 1998 article in the government-controlled newspaper the *New Light of Myanmar* stated, "As to freedom of organizational activity and expression, it can be a big danger, as long as there are political parties that still cannot renounce the way of confrontation, defiance of authority and anarchy, so there will be only such freedom within the bounds of rules and regulations" (Burma 1999a, 8).<sup>12</sup>

Burmese political thought has also contained an anti-politics strain, arising from the *lawkouttara* critique of the *lawki* activity of politics as fundamentally oriented towards the acquisition of power, a process that feeds the false sense of self instead of minimizing it. In his 1951 convocation address at the University of Rangoon, U Nu told his audience of students that he knew that the majority of them wanted to work "free from political influences and political attachments" (U Nu 1953, 38). The rest of the speech makes it clear that he was using "political" as a term of disparagement. This was a somewhat surprising statement given U Nu's involvement in politics as a student and the prominent role that student groups across the country played in the struggle for independence. It also suggests that, despite Aung San's attempt to rehabilitate the term and demonstrate to the Burmese population that politics was in fact an unavoidable element of everyone's daily life, the trope of "dirty politics" persisted after independence and probably gained strength as a result of the partisan turmoil of the parliamentary period.

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<sup>12</sup> The Thai king has also criticized party politics, seeing parties as divisive and even praising the potential value of a benevolent dictator figure (Hewison 1997, 68). The Thai monk Buddhadasa, on the other hand, reversed the direction of his analysis, claiming that it was lack of proper moral orientation among the people that led to factions and the divisions of party politics (Jackson 1988, 273).

The use of the phrases “being political” or “playing politics” in order to disparage or delegitimize political opponents is obviously not unique to Burmese politics. However, in the Burmese Buddhist worldview, these phrases take on an additional moral dimension. The implication is that someone who is “being political” or has “political attachments” is acting according to selfish desire. That is, they are following the baser parts of their human nature. In this way the phrase functions in a similar disciplining way as the discourse on unity, where “being political” indicates a moral failure, an inability to rise above the concerns of the (ultimately illusory) ego in order to work for the benefit of the community. Because moral capacity is also rooted in a particular understanding of the characteristics of existence (*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*, or impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and lack of self or control) the charge of “being political” also suggests a level of ignorance at the *lawkouttara* level, a sort of moral-intellectual deficiency.

Thus, U Ba Khaing could praise monks such as U Wisara and U Ottama for their actions in rousing the Burmese to political consciousness, yet still criticize U Ottama and other “political” monks for acting “politically,” explaining that “just as monks can be helpful in building unity, they can also cause political disruption” (Zöllner 2006b, 63). In a similar manner, he spoke highly of some of the political activities of U Chit Hlaing, one of the leaders of the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), while also labeling him disdainfully as a “modern politician,” implying someone who did not keep his promises and worked for his own gain and prestige rather than for the country (*ibid.*, 56). Again we see that “politics” and “politician” were malleable concepts that actors deployed to alternately laud or disparage their political allies or opponents. My purpose in expanding on this subject here is to note the subtle (and often, not so subtle) ways in which the charge of “being political” functioned as a moral critique just as much as a political one.

The question of moral capacity and its significance for “correct” political participation is also complicated by a religious discourse that has been common in Myanmar throughout the twentieth century, the label of “true Buddhist.” As a reaction to Christian missionizing and criticism of the supernatural elements of Buddhism, a small but influential group of Burmese Buddhists, beginning around the turn of the twentieth century, attempted to emphasize those aspects of Buddhism that they felt were in accordance with modern science and philosophy while dismissing the “traditional” elements, which they disparagingly attributed to “superstition.”<sup>13</sup> Following the lead of the international

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<sup>13</sup> In a similar way, the group of Thai Buddhists that some scholars have labeled “reform Buddhists” (including Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Phra Thepwethi, and Sulak Sivaraksa) have attempted to prioritize both the philosophical and this-worldly-oriented aspects of Buddhist practice, while criticizing many traditional elements (such as the monarchical model endorsed by the popular Thai text the *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, “Three Worlds According to King

Maha Bodhi Society, which presented a Western-friendly “rationalized” Buddhism, Burmese newspapers and journals from the 1910s through the 1960s contained articles that sought to prove not just the compatibility of Buddhism and science, but the superiority of Buddhism to other religions because of its ultimate confirmation of emerging scientific theories regarding atomic structure and relativity.

Burmese Buddhists have prided their country on being the preeminent place for the study of the *Abhidhamma*, the section of the Pāli scriptures that contains a complex philosophical explanation of the nature of existence. The authors of these articles often used their knowledge of *Abhidhamma* to try to argue that the philosophical components of Buddhism were the essence of the religion; this is the point at which a discourse began to emerge that contrasted this new “modern” understanding of the religion with the superstitious practices of traditional or “*miyopala*” Buddhists.<sup>14</sup> The implication is that most Buddhists, by focusing on rituals of merit-making, do not have sufficient grounding in the *lawkouttara* knowledge that ideally guides a Buddhist toward proper moral conduct. A short book published in the late 1940s called *Adu Hnint Asit* (“What is False and What is True”) held out a *lawkouttara*-oriented model for political leaders. The perfect model for political action should be that of the hermit Sumedha (the Buddha in a past life) who vowed to perfect his *parami* over a number of lives in order to reach enlightenment and be able to assist others in their liberation (n.d., 19). This, the author of the book argued, would mean that political participation ought to *reduce* conceit and *weaken* the ego, rather than providing opportunities for personal advancement or the acquisition of wealth. The “true” political figure, then, would also be a “true” Buddhist.

Over the same time period, increased participation in *vipassanā* (insight) meditation strengthened the discourse of the “true Buddhist.” Ingrid Jordt has studied the mass lay meditation movement in detail and writes of the emergence of a community that defines itself by its epistemological and ontological orientation in a *lawkouttara* direction (2006). As Jordt argues, “Being a successful (or dedicated) meditator also implies a certain karmic tendency in an individuals’ multiple lives” (ibid., 196). Thus, participation in meditation acts as an indicator of moral capacity. It also sets them apart (in their own words) as “true Buddhists,” rather than the majority who are merely “born Buddhists” (a common translation of *miyopala*) or “Buddhists in name only” (ibid., 199). Acknowledged success in *vipassanā* meditation allows people to claim (usually implicitly, since an explicit claim would

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Ruang”) as Brahmanical-Khmer accretions that have sullied the teachings of the Buddha (Jackson 2002, 172ff). In this way, they paint opposing viewpoints as not only non-Buddhist, but foreign as well.

<sup>14</sup> Recall that U Ba Swe, in defending Marxism, said that while he had initially been only a traditional (*miyopala*) Buddhist, studying Marxism had deepened his faith and turned him into a true Buddhist with strong convictions (1952, 17).

be socially and religiously improper) access to *lawkouttara* knowledge, to a different way of seeing the world. Presumably, meditation practice is also ideal moral practice, moving one away from selfish, ego-driven action towards engagement with the world according to its “true” characteristics of *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and *anattā* (no-self or no control).<sup>15</sup>

The implications for political participation should be clear. By developing this moral capacity, one will be less influenced by desire and craving and thus able to make political decisions based on the benefit of the entire community. U Nu frequently spoke of his meditation practice when he was Prime Minister and he even took several long meditation retreats during his tenure in office.<sup>16</sup> The modern Burmese meditation master U Ba Khin held several high level government posts while also practicing as a meditation teacher and led frequent *vipassanā* classes for government employees.<sup>17</sup> While Aung San Suu Kyi has been reluctant to discuss her own meditation practice in detail, it certainly strengthens her position of moral authority. I want to stress that these Buddhist political figures have not explicitly used the moral and social position they gained through meditation to denigrate their fellow citizens or to question their capacity for political participation. However, the discourse that separates “true Buddhists” from “traditional Buddhists” contains an implicit moral and intellectual critique that questions the moral capacity of most of the Buddhist population of the country. Ingrid Jordt demonstrated how members of the lay meditation community were attempting to use their moral authority to influence the former military government to act in support of the *sāsana* (2007). It is unclear whether the “true Buddhist” discourse will begin to play a role in contemporary Burmese politics, but with the recent expansion of opportunities for political participation, it may re-emerge with political implications.

In the following sections I examine political participation among several groups, understood in a variety of ways. Monks, despite their ideal existence of detachment from worldly concerns, have a long history of political engagement in virtually every Buddhist tradition. I look at some of the complexities of their societal position as well as some of the unique ways in which they have used their moral authority to assert themselves in the political realm. Next, I describe an emerging trend among Burmese

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<sup>15</sup> My focus in this section is on *vipassanā* meditation, the goal of which is to overcome the self through a *lawkouttara* orientation. Progress in *samatha* (concentration) meditation, on the other hand, can allegedly result in worldly success and the development of special powers. Houtman discusses the differences between the two practices and their presumed results in more detail (1999, Part V).

<sup>16</sup> U Nu also spoke of his transformation from a “traditional” (*miyopala*) Buddhist to a “true” Buddhist (Butwell 1969, 65).

<sup>17</sup> U Ba Khin discussed the benefits of meditation and the role it should play in public life in his book *The Real Values of Buddhist Meditation* (1962).

Buddhists, involvement in social welfare activities as a form of political participation. While practices of communal social support are by no means alien to the Burmese Buddhist tradition, there are two aspects of current efforts that appear to be distinct. First, in many cases they are directed towards broader, more abstract communities and causes, rather than simply local groupings and second, in the absence of other avenues for political engagement, many of these civil society actors have understood their social efforts to be oriented toward broader political change. Finally, I explore Burmese Buddhist conceptions of individual moral practice as a form of political participation. Prompted in some cases by disappointment with the political process and in others by government-imposed impediments to popular participation, this turn inward is consistent with the logic of the Theravāda moral universe and points to alternate forms of political engagement (as well as different understandings of what it could mean to be “political”) that will remain relevant through Myanmar’s current democratic transition.

### **Monks and Political Participation**

I will not repeat the extensive discussion of monastic participation in politics by several other scholars, but I do want to make a few observations about monastic political participation as it relates to my arguments in this chapter on moral worthiness and expanded notions of both “politics” and “participation.”<sup>18</sup> Monks have a liminal existence in Burmese society, ideally removed from the concerns of everyday life yet intimately connected to lay people through their teaching duties and through their material dependence on the laity. Dr. Maung Maung, a Burmese legal scholar who also held government positions under various military regimes, wrote that “When a Burmese Buddhist becomes a priest...with intention to renounce the world, certain ties with his lay life are severed, and figuratively—though not entirely correctly—he ‘dies a civil death’” (1963, 125). He was right to qualify his statement, since Burmese history provides numerous examples of monastic involvement in the political realm, both directly and indirectly.<sup>19</sup>

Because of their vows of renunciation, their detachment from worldly concerns, and their orientation toward *lawkouttara* matters, monks possess a high degree of moral authority. Even monks whose conduct does not always accord with this ideal are generally respected because of their

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<sup>18</sup> Mendelson (1975) is the seminal study of monastic involvement in politics, although Sarkisyanz (1965), Smith (1965), Spiro (1982), Ferguson (1975) and Houtman (1999) also address the subject in some detail.

<sup>19</sup> The fact that men in Myanmar can and do move in and out of the *sangha* with relative ease also facilitates more monastic connections to lay life. In comparison to Sri Lanka, where the monkhood is usually a career path, many of the ordained men in the Burmese *sangha* are only in robes temporarily. Observers critical of monastic involvement in politics (whether British administrators, Burmese politicians, or members of the Burmese Armed forces) have frequently disparaged “political monks” (a term I address in more detail below) as agitators who became monks in order to use the moral authority of the *sangha* and to manipulate popular consciousness through Buddhism.

association with the institution of the *sangha*. However, it is this ideal of detachment that complicates monastic intervention into areas of lay life, including politics. Numerous rules in the *vinaya* (the monastic code of conduct) prohibit a range of common worldly activities. However, there is one circumstance in which monks are permitted (some might even say required) to involve themselves in lay matters. When the *sāsana* itself (the religious community as a whole) is threatened, monks can act to protect it.

Of course, there is a wide range of interpretations not only of what constitutes a threat to the *sāsana*, but also of the “political” activities permitted to monks. Unsurprisingly, this remains a contentious and much-debated issue among Buddhists, not only in Myanmar but around the world.<sup>20</sup> There is also variation, country by country, in the degree of monastic participation in politics that is allowed, either by law or by popular approval. Historically the *sangha* in Thailand has been much closer to the Thai state, which has acted to curtail its potential political opposition through both privileges and punishments (Ishii 1986).<sup>21</sup> This contrasts with the Burmese *sangha* which, although it has come under more sweeping state control since the late 1980s (Tin Maung Maung Than 1988), has generally been more independent of the state and has even been a source of political opposition. Monks have been prohibited from running or voting in elections in Myanmar since independence, yet they have served as MPs in Sri Lanka and monastic political parties have exercised significant influence in that country’s politics since the 1940s.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In the 1980s, in a clear repudiation the Khmer Rouge’s successor, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, the Cambodian Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party argued that monks should become more involved in social and political issues in order to liberate the people from “foreign domination” and “Marxist-Leninist ideology” (quoted in Harris 2005, 204).

<sup>21</sup> Keyes, however, has argued that the political crises of the 1970s (a student revolution in 1973 and a subsequent military coup in 1976) and subsequent Thai disillusionment with establishment Buddhism has resulted in a more fragmented, yet more open and inclusive landscape for Buddhist practice and politics (1999).

<sup>22</sup> Monastic engagement in politics marks an area that is ripe for a more detailed comparison between Theravāda countries, particularly examining ideology, methods, and resistance to/support of the state. Monastic political participation in Sri Lanka is starkly different from the Southeast Asian cases, although monks in Myanmar have entered the political field en masse on several occasions and there has consistently been a small but vocal group of politically active monks in the country since the colonial period. While the Thai *sangha* has been more closely aligned with the state and thus rarely opposed it, state control over Buddhism has weakened since the late 1980s, leading to a proliferation of Buddhist religious movements and an increase in the number of Thai monks who have publicly supported various political positions, ideologies, and parties in Thai politics (see, for example, Jackson 1997). Scholars have different opinions on the political activity of the Lao *sangha*, with Stuart-Fox and Bucknell (1982) arguing that monastic involvement with the communist Pathet Lao sullied the moral reputation of the monkhood and Evans (1998) suggesting that there was minimal *sangha* involvement in Lao politics. Cambodian monks were also active in the anti-colonial struggle and both supporting and opposing the post-colonial state until they were brutally suppressed by the Khmer Rouge after 1975 (Harris 2005). While the Khmer Rouge attacked Buddhist monks as “feudalist,” the Pathet Lao actively encouraged monastic engagement with politics; Stuart-Fox and Bucknell suggested that its intent to weaken their moral position in society (1982).

Recall that Aung San, while praising the potential of Buddhism as a guiding moral philosophy, was very critical of monastic involvement in electoral politics. Many monks have also insisted on the strict separation of monks from political activities. Sayadaw U Nanda Thami, a member of the *Sangha Maha Nayaka* (the presiding central body of the monastic hierarchy), sharply criticized monastic involvement in politics in a 1949 interview. He stated that the council had “clearly laid it down that no Buddhist monks should dabble in politics, and as a Member of that Organisation, I have no interest in either the political situation of the country or in party politics” (*The Burman* April 29, 1949a, 1). The anthropologist Melford Spiro, based on field research in the 1960s, claimed that “political” monks were, and always had been, “a very small minority” of the total *sangha* population (1982, 392). He even interviewed a village Sayadaw who told him that the monks who participated in the independence struggle—viewed as heroes and national icons by most Burmese—were “not true monks” (*ibid.*). The challenge that monks face in navigating these boundaries is apparent in the words of a 1921 public declaration from the Shwegyin sect, generally acknowledged as one of the more conservative and formal sects in the country. They said, “Members of the Shwegyin Nikaya shall take upon themselves the duty to preach religion to lay people to promote peace and eliminate sin” (quoted in Than Tun 1988, 174). To some, the promotion of peace necessitates involvement in politics, but others insist on a clear and impermeable line dividing the duties of the monk from the political world.<sup>23</sup>

Juliane Schober has urged scholars and observers to be cautious with their use of the term “political monks” (2011, 138ff). Noting the pejorative nature of the label, she describes its origins in the colonial era as a “discourse intended to diminish the legitimacy of the anti-colonial struggle” of monks (*ibid.*, 140). The Burmese military government perpetuated this discourse, responding to monastic political action in 1988, 2007, and other periods of unrest by denouncing the participants as “bogus monks” and using these claims to forcibly disrobe and imprison them.<sup>24</sup> Ingrid Jordt has also expressed concern regarding the framing and language that journalists used to talk about the events of September 2007 (2008). She describes a conversation with a journalist in which she explained to him that by using the phrase “militant monks,” he was not only misrepresenting their actions, he was also endangering them and delegitimizing their struggle. Both of these scholars are right to draw our attention to the ways in which the use of the phrase “political monks” makes “scholars complicit in the hegemonic

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<sup>23</sup> This line was blurred in Cambodia when monks were allowed to vote in the 1993 elections under the principle of universal adult suffrage, an event that caused considerable debate within the monastic and lay communities (Harris 2005, 204).

<sup>24</sup> The Cambodian government and prominent members of the Cambodian *sangha* have also claimed in the past that monks who have taken part in political demonstrations are not “real monks” (Harris 2005, 217).

discourse of the state” (Schober 2011, 139). However, not only has monastic participation in politics (in a variety of ways) been a consistent part of the Burmese political tradition, public discussion of the appropriate boundaries of monastic conduct, whether with regard to politics or to any other worldly activity, will be an important element of the emerging democracy in Myanmar. It is in that spirit that I briefly look at some of the complexities of monastic political action here.<sup>25</sup>

Michael Charney’s insightful study of the group of monastic literati who helped to strengthen the Buddhist legitimation of the Konbaung dynasty in the late eighteenth century provides a concrete historical example of a type of monastic involvement in politics (2006). He details the ways in which a group of monks from the Lower Chindwin valley, led by Shin Nyanabhivamsa, used their proximity to the throne not only to promote their own monastic lineage, but to institutionalize a particular set of monastic practices as orthodoxy. Recognizing that their ability to implement their desired *sangha* reforms depended on the support and strength of the monarchy, they produced “new texts that strengthened the theoretical and symbolic foundations of the Kon-baung kingship,” emphasizing the *Mahasammatha* lineage (ibid., 71). They also revised and expanded the *Manugye Dhammathat* (the “Laws of Manu,” a legal code that was composed around 1756), creating “an authoritative text [that] supported, outlined, and expanded the legitimate role of the king, enhancing, at least in theory, the king’s place at the apex of society” (ibid., 85). Charney notes that, while monks had always served as advisors to kings, the work of this group of literati monks fundamentally transformed both the political orientation of the monarchy and the religious orientation of the *sangha*, marking a definite monastic political intervention.

In addition to the many historical instances of monastic political engagement, there are a number of monks in contemporary Myanmar who have positioned themselves as political actors. The most famous is Sitagu Sayadaw, who rose to international celebrity because of his leadership in distributing relief aid after Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. Sitagu, who was forced to temporarily leave the country because of a sermon in 1988 that was critical of the government, controls a vast empire of social service organizations, including hospitals, universities, monasteries, and meditation centers. In

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<sup>25</sup> Additionally, some monks have actively embraced the “political label.” The most prominent example was the Sri Lankan monk Walpola Rahula who insisted that monks, as “sons of the Buddha” who worked “for the benefit of the common man” ought to be regarded as “political *bhikkhus* (monks),” a term that he accepted with pride (quoted in Tambiah 1992, 27). In Laos, the Pathet Lao Minister of Education, Sports, and Religious Affairs stated in a 1976 speech that prohibitions on monastic participation in politics were “a deprivation of the rights of Buddhist monks” who were “potential cadres of the Lord Buddha who are fighting injustice in the world” (quoted in Stuart-Fox 1996, 102-3). Apart from the communist rhetoric, some of the monks who led the 2007 protests used similar reasoning to defend their political actions (see, for example, Bo Ottama (Sit) 2007).

recent years, having acquired prominent donors from both the military government and the democratic opposition, he has positioned himself as a mediator; in one instance, at the opening ceremony of a new monastic school in Yangon in early 2010, he preached to attendees from both sides about the need for unity in the political realm (Zaw Naung Lin and Thant Zin Oo 2011). Even though Sitagu enjoys relative freedom to speak about politics, other monks associated more closely with the opposition have not been so fortunate. U Pyinnya Thiha, also known as Shwe Nya Wa Sayadaw, was forced out of his Yangon monastery and officially declared “disobedient” by the *Sangha Maha Nayaka* Council after having given a *dhamma* talk at the Mandalay NLD headquarters and allowing the NLD to hold events in his monastery (Ba Kaung 2011).

U Thuzana is a Karen monk who was a disciple of the famous Thamanya Sayadaw, whose monastery in Karen state was a peaceful vegetarian oasis that remained free of the conflict and violence that plagued the rest of the region. Although U Thuzana instituted Thamanya Sayadaw’s rules for moral asceticism and abstention from politics in his own monastery at Myaing Gyi Ngu, his actual position regarding political activities and his role in politics in Karen state is much more complex. Gravers notes U Thuzana’s famous prediction that peace would come to the Karen state only when Buddhists there had built fifty pagodas, but also acknowledges the political role the monk has played as the spiritual leader of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) (1999, 96). This splinter group broke away from the Karen National Union (KNU) in 1994 and 1995, accusing the predominantly Christian leaders of the KNU of religious discrimination and although U Thuzana distanced himself from the violence that followed the split, he has continued to occupy a gray area as both spiritual and political advisor to the Buddhist Karen community.

U Pyinnya Thami, better known as the Taungale Sayadaw, is another Karen monk who appears to occupy more of a *lawki* space. Ashley South notes the many development programs that he has overseen in his region and also mentions his prominent role in organizing and supporting Karen candidates to run in the 2010 election, earning him a designation as a “democracy monk” (2011, 26). Despite widespread support, I interviewed a number of individuals who expressed concern with his conduct as a monk involved in politics. One man, a well-connected civil society actor, thought that, while his intentions seemed to be good, there was something unseemly about a monk who spent so much time on his cell phone and got so agitated when informed of election results.<sup>26</sup> Several Karen activists, Buddhists and Christians, were frustrated that the social conventions that require lay people to be

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<sup>26</sup> Personal interview #9 in Yangon; February 19, 2011.

deferential to monks were counterproductive in the context of political organizing since most people found it difficult or impossible to disagree with (let alone criticize) a monk.<sup>27</sup>

While at certain times monastic political engagement has appeared to be no different than that of lay people, monks have also utilized methods in which their elevated spiritual position has given moral weight to their political message. Most prominent among these *sangha*-specific political methods is the *thabeik hmauk* ((Pāli *pattam nikujjana kamma*), “turning over the alms bowl,” which I briefly described earlier.<sup>28</sup> Monks have, however, intervened in the political realm in other ways that are weighted with spiritual and moral meaning. In 1956, a group of hundreds of monks joined a protest of students and communists that was staged as a “Funeral of Oppression,” in response to a government edict that forced unions to dissolve (*The Nation* November 16, 1956). They marched with a coffin (meant to symbolize all of the oppressive measures the AFPFL government had enacted) through central Rangoon, eventually stopping so that the monks in attendance could conduct funeral rites.

The most recent example of monastic political involvement using methods specific to their vocation was the demonstrations in 2007, the so-called “Saffron Revolution.” I related a brief narrative of the monks’ actions in the Introduction and I return now to their decision to march and chant the *mettā* (loving-kindness) *sutta*. Zöllner reveals the monks’ unique contribution: “Whereas the civilians’ walks happened in the mundane sphere and were subject to the very worldly reaction of the authorities, the monks created a sacred space” (2009, 72). While chanting usually takes place in a monastery, the grounds of a pagoda, or a private home, in this case, the monks brought the ritual into public space, and “thus laid claim to the city as a space ruled by the Buddha’s law” (*ibid.*).

Equally important was their choice of chant. The Buddha initially taught his disciples how to chant *mettā* as a protective measure. Some monks had gone into a forest to meditate, but could not concentrate because they were scared of being attacked by wild animals. By focusing their mind and radiating indiscriminating loving-kindness out from their bodies in all directions, they calmed the

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<sup>27</sup> Personal interview #14 in Yangon; March 8, 2011, Personal interview #39 in Yangon; July 16, 2011. I also noted the challenges posed by these social conventions while attending community development workshops in Chiang Mai in 2011. When discussions in mixed groups (monks, nuns, and lay people) reached a point of disagreement, often a more senior monk would “pull rank” in order to assert his opinion, or the nuns and lay people would simply revert to the deferential positions that they had temporarily abandoned in order to create a more egalitarian working environment.

<sup>28</sup> For more detailed descriptions of this act, as well as historical examples of its use, see McCarthy (2008) and Zöllner (2009, 82ff). Interestingly, it seems that it was also possible for lay people to impose a similar penalty on monks. Dr. Maung Maung cites a speech that U Nu made to parliament in which he asked people to support the “restrained” and “duteous” monks, but for the unrestrained monks (presumably those involved in political action that opposed U Nu’s government), in addition to being subject to government punishment, “the people should also reject and not worship nor offer the four gifts to them” (Maung Maung 1963, 128).

creatures around them and were able to meditate in peace. In chanting the *mettā sutta*, the monks were choosing a method of public action that was acceptably within their purview as members of the religious order. Part of the purpose was to protect them from charges of acting “politically,” in ways that were inappropriate for monks.<sup>29</sup> But, in the classic Saul Alinsky model of political opposition, the monks also chose their tactics to emphasize and amplify an area of strength: the tangible power of their moral authority.<sup>30</sup> Later in this chapter I will examine Burmese attitudes toward individual moral practice as a type of political participation. Key to this logic is the belief that proper moral conduct will have effects on individual and collective circumstances. Unsurprisingly, many monks fervently believed that their chanting would have a tangible effect on the government and the political situation in Myanmar (Wai Moe 2008).

Some, however, saw their spiritual actions as merely the initial step. From this perspective, tangible political and social change would require individuals to use *mettā* to guide their actions in the world. While definitely not representative of the views of all monks in the country, the words of U Pyinnya Zawta, one of the organizers of the demonstrations, reflect the beliefs of many of the monks who participated: “‘We monks must be actively engaged in social issues,’ he said. ‘People in Burma often talk about *mettā* but this is not just a word to chant. It must also be practiced. Everyone in the world needs active *mettā*. Active *mettā* can bring peace to the whole world’” (Wai Moe 2008).<sup>31</sup>

The monks were also making a statement regarding the nature of their opposition to the regime. The *mettā* chant is one of non-discriminating loving-kindness, even to one’s enemies. In fact, we could say that the purpose of cultivating *mettā* is to break down any conceptual distinction between categories such as friend and enemy (in this way, it is also a *lawkouttara* practice, designed to reveal the inherent limitations of conceptual thought and the illusory boundaries of self and other). Even though they had criticized the military government for its negligence towards the population and for its violent actions towards monks, the *mettā* chant was an indication of the ultimate, mediating position of the *sangha* as a moral authority oriented toward the health of the *sāsana*. Their opposition was not towards individual members of the government, but for the purpose of ending injustice and suffering; the

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the Burmese government, as it had in response to previous monastic involvement in political demonstrations, accused those who marched of being “bogus” monks and justified disrobing and detaining thousands based on this claim (Lintner 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Alinsky, a famous community organizer and protest leader, advised dissidents to “never go outside the experience of your own people” (1971, 127).

<sup>31</sup> Sri Lankan monks also used similar reasoning to justify monastic participation in politics. The monk K. Pannasara argued in 1946 that, since politics included aspects of public welfare, monks had a duty to engage in order to support the common good (Jayawardena 1979, cited in Tambiah 1992, 18).

practice of sending *mettā* was ideally a contrast to more aggressive opposition and reinforced that position of moral authority.

Of course, we must balance this analysis with an admission that the demonstrations were far from a religious ceremony. Although they discouraged marchers from chanting political slogans, in many places the march began with a gathering in which monks denounced the government over a loudspeaker. While observers disagree whether the monks eventually allowed the laity to join their march or the laity joined without permission, the monks did initially request that lay people refrain from joining the demonstrations. On a more superficial note, even a brief perusal of photos and video of the events show a number of angry monks who, one must assume, were probably not meditating on non-discriminating loving-kindness. This is not to criticize the monks or dismiss the spiritual impact of their actions, but merely to acknowledge that, despite their hallowed moral position in society, most monks are themselves *pu htu zin*, bound by the same emotions and weaknesses as all human beings.

Monastic involvement with political issues, whether supporting government policy in electoral campaigns, as in the 1950s, or challenging government authority through mass ritual action, further blurs the line between *lawki* and *lawkouttara*. The moral authority that monks possess comes from a *lawkouttara* orientation. While individual monks can acquire more of this spiritual charisma through their pious or scholarly conduct, it adheres in some degree to every member of the order as a result of the fundamental change in their state that occurs when they take vows and put on their robes. The intention to become a monk and to dedicate oneself more fully to the *lawkouttara* path carries with it some level of moral achievement, regardless of the individual conduct of any given monk. Despite the artificial separation of monks from the laity (reinforced by many scholars, but also by monks and lay people who wish to emphasize and preserve the “purity” of the institution), the liminal position of monks and their necessary proximity to the lay community preserves them in a space between *lawki* and *lawkouttara* and thus, engaged in some fashion in “politics.”

### ***Parahita* (Social Work) as Political Participation**

Theravāda Buddhism has long been haunted by the criticism that its doctrine of liberation through individual effort promotes an inherently selfish attitude towards society.<sup>32</sup> Many colonial scholars and administrators leveled this claim, but it has also come from Mahāyāna Buddhists who emphasize the superiority of their branch in promoting compassion for others. Specifically, they have

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<sup>32</sup> The previously dominant classification system distinguished between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna (now commonly referred to as “Theravāda”) betrayed a preference for the “great vehicle” of the Mahāyāna as opposed to the derogatory “lesser vehicle” of the Hīnayāna.

argued that the *bodhisattva* (Pāli *bodhisatta*) ideal (in which a practitioner pledges to delay his or her own enlightenment in order to work for the liberation of all other beings) generates compassion (*karunā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*), while Theravāda practice represents a lower, ego-centered path.<sup>33</sup> Burmese Buddhist culture, however, has long had a tradition of social welfare engagement, usually expressed through the Pāli-derived term *parahita*, which refers to the good or welfare of others.<sup>34</sup> Historically this practice was localized, with communities taking responsibility for the well-being of their own members or of individuals and families that had fallen on hard times. Some Burmese Buddhists began to expand the concept around the turn of the twentieth century, forming larger groups and networks that channeled *parahita* work through Buddhist social organizations.

Alicia Turner has documented the wide variety of social activities conducted by Buddhist organizations in Burma during the colonial period, from organizing lay donations to the *sangha* that filled a gap created by the dissolution of the monarchy, to promoting and sponsoring Pāli examinations (2009, Chapter 1). Monks like the Ledi Sayadaw took the lead in establishing lay Buddhist associations across the country that took direct responsibility for the propagation of the *sāsana* through religious study groups that tackled subjects previously reserved for senior monks, such as the *abhidhamma* (Buddhist philosophy of existence) (Braun 2008). Turner explains the gradual shift in focus from the local to the national: “[These organizations] transformed from groups who would gather to take precepts together to organizations for study and debate; from organizing local festivals to organizing Pāli examinations and preaching tours for the entire province” (2009, 19).

Slowly some of these groups began to conceptualize their work in explicitly political and nationalist terms.<sup>35</sup> Many local and regional Buddhist groups joined rural *wunthanu* (nationalist association) networks, linked to the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), which was increasingly engaged in political issues. A history of the *wunthanu* revolution written by Thakin Ba Maung (1975) locates its origins in the creation of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), the

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<sup>33</sup> It is disappointing to note that this characterization of a hierarchy in traditions and practices continues, even among writers who claim a social justice orientation. For example, several pieces in a recent collection of essays on bringing a Buddhist perspective to (Western) political life included language that re-inscribed the hierarchy of Theravāda-Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna (a Tibetan practice) (McLeod 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Bur. ဝရဟိတ

<sup>35</sup> Turner (2009, 47ff) has offered an important corrective to the standard historical narrative of Burmese Buddhist organizational life in the first decades of the twentieth century as politically oriented. She argues that a 1920 pamphlet entitled *The History of Myanma Buddhist Associations* was written by the “winners” of the 1919 debate within the YMBA over whether the organization would take up political issues. This faction went on to found the GCBA and its version of history became the dominant one that was reproduced, obscuring the diversity of interests and objectives among Buddhist groups during that time period.

group that began as a religious and cultural welfare organization before eventually transforming into the GCBA as a result of an internal debate in 1919 over whether the group should involve itself in political issues (Schober 2007). Activities in support of the *sāsana*, including *parahita* donations, gradually acquired political implications as part of the work necessary to strengthen the nation and achieve independence.

Generally Theravāda Buddhists think of religious donations (*dāna*) as acts that support the *sāsana*, but that bring merit (*kutho*) only for the donating individual in the future.<sup>36</sup> Since the beginning of the twentieth century, however, a discourse has gradually emerged that values social donations (*parahita dāna*) as contributing to national development. As part of the state's Pyidawtha program, Nu appealed "to the strong Burmese tradition of charity (*ahlu*) which, in the past, has been applied largely to religious ends: in particular it has been the aspiration of every well-disposed and wealthy Burman to be a *paya-taga* (temple builder). Now, it is hoped to persuade the people that merit can be acquired through devoting their resources and their energies to the building of works of social benefit" (Tinker 1957, 129). Prominent individuals were suggesting that social donations (that is, those that did not go to materially supporting monks or to the direct propagation of the *sāsana*) could generate similar (or even greater) amounts of merit than religious donations.<sup>37</sup> Mendelson noted that "the whole nature of Burmese society might well be changed if Burmese changed their views about what actions constituted meritorious deeds" and connected this transition to the interaction of Buddhism and socialism in the philosophy of the country's leaders: "The whole atmosphere of the Buddhist Revival taken together with the socialist programs instituted by U Nu's government did perhaps suggest that Buddhism and socialism could be conjugated to the extent of making social service a part of the acquisition of merit" (1975, 310). The restrictions that the military government subsequently put on citizens' activities limited

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<sup>36</sup> The significant exception to this general rule is the common practice among Southeast Asian Buddhists of "sharing merit." Thought to compound the *kutho* that is generated—because it promotes selflessness in the redistribution of that merit—Burmese merit-making activities have the sharing of merit built into their ritual language. Keyes (1983) discusses other practices of sharing merit and the explanations that Southeast Asian Buddhists give for the practice as well as accounts that dispute the logical possibility of sharing merit based on the doctrine of *kan*.

<sup>37</sup> There was, however, a counter-argument put forward by some monks. An Australian Buddhist in Burma named U Ohn Ghine spoke out strongly against monastic involvement in social service, arguing that the calling of a monk was to a higher type of work (cited in Mendelson 1975, 310). He also disputed the conceptualization of *parahita* as "social work." The Thai monk Buddhadasa, who has strongly supported lay participation in social welfare work, has made a similar distinction, arguing that monks should not participate directly in social work, but should provide "mental and spiritual development, progress, and safety" (quoted in Jackson 1989, 153).

this potential for much of the past fifty years, although monks and lay people have again begun to revalue social donations in contemporary Myanmar.<sup>38</sup>

One monk, a teacher at the Buddhist University in Yangon, told me that he believed the shift in popular attitudes toward social donations came through the efforts of the Mingun Sayadaw in the decades following independence.<sup>39</sup> Renowned primarily for his awe-inspiring memory (he had allegedly memorized the entire 16,000 pages of the *tipitaka*, the Theravāda scriptures), this monk was able to build a university and create a number of social service organizations in the area around his monastery as a result of donations. The monk I interviewed defined *parahita* as “social assistance,”<sup>40</sup> and attributed the gradual transformation in donation practices among Burmese Buddhists to monks putting more emphasis on these activities in their sermons and writings, after the example of Mingun Sayadaw. Indeed, in sermons given by Sitagu Sayadaw and Myitta Shin U Zawana that I attended in Yangon, both monks dedicated at least the first thirty minutes of their talks to sharing anecdotes from their own *parahita* activities, connecting the lessons to the broader themes of their sermons.<sup>41</sup>

Sitagu Sayadaw has directly attributed the lack of concern for social donations to the Theravāda form of Buddhism practiced in Myanmar. Accepting the characterization of the two schools of Buddhism that many scholars and practitioners have criticized, he ascribed a concern for compassion and social work to Mahāyāna Buddhism, whereas Theravāda was more focused on making merit through meditation. He said that “Meditating in a room with the doors shut won’t help the [cyclone] victims suffering over there. But most Burmese who traditionally believe in Theravāda don’t appreciate the need for compassionate action. That is why I am talking about it to people every day. It is essential to make social merit [*parahita*] stronger” (quoted in Kyaw Zwa Moe 2008). Sitagu Sayadaw is in fact at the

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<sup>38</sup> The Thai government also sponsored monk-led programs in the 1960s where, besides taking part in local community development projects, monks acted as domestic missionaries, attempting to convert members of the hill tribes to Buddhism as part of an overall program of integrating them into Thai society (Ishii 1986, 135-142). Keyes noted that the monks’ inability to communicate with the hill tribes resulted in superficial understandings of Buddhism that could actually become more threatening to the state as millennial movements (1971, 565). I would also point out that, while Thai attempts at national integration through Buddhist missionizing have by no means been uncontroversial, the significant non-Buddhist population in Myanmar would be very concerned with this sort of “development” program. Indeed, some scholars have demonstrated the ways in which the Burmese government’s “development” programs have been thinly veiled excuses for the imposition of Burman culture (Lambrecht 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Personal interview #34 in Yangon; July 6, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Bur. လူမှုရေးအကူအညီ

<sup>41</sup> Sitagu Sayadaw, public sermon given at Dawpone Myoneh Stadium (Yangon) on February 13, 2011; U Zawana, public sermon given at the Thirty-fourth Street *Taya Pwe* (Yangon) on February 1, 2011.

forefront of what appears to be a trend of increasing social donations among Buddhists in Myanmar.<sup>42</sup> Not only that, he seems to be attempting to transform (or at least, re-prioritize) certain Burmese Buddhist practices to emphasize the value of merit gained through social, rather than religious, donations.<sup>43</sup>

Guillaume Rozenberg has noted the important role of monks as conduits of *dāna*, whether religious or social (2010, Chapter 4). Because monks continue to exist as “fields of merit” (that is, lay people can gain merit by donating to monks), their voices have been among the most influential in transforming lay donation practices. One of the challenges of practices of *dāna* is that many people calculate the amount of merit generated according to the moral standing of the recipient. By this reasoning, giving to a monk would generate more merit than giving to an HIV-positive orphan.<sup>44</sup> Some Burmese Buddhists have directly challenged this logic, but a number of monks, recognizing the persistence of this interpretation, see value in positioning themselves as both recipients and distributors of donations. This model accomplishes several things. First, it strengthens the position of monks as moral exemplars in Buddhist society. Second, while acknowledging people’s beliefs regarding donation and merit, it creates a donation system that can address the needs of the most disadvantaged.<sup>45</sup> Most importantly, while helping to institutionalize these mediated social donation practices among the public, monks can preach about the moral benefits of *parahita* donations, providing justification for the continuation of these practices, even without monastic participation.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The Thai monk Buddhadasa more explicitly connected *lawki* social work to *lawkouttara* ends, saying “I try to point out that the social goods and acting for the benefit of society are prerequisites of traveling beyond to *nibbana* [*neikban*]” (quoted in Santikaro Bhikkhu 1996, 163). He has also challenged the belief that an ascetic lifestyle implies inactivity, reinterpreting “work” to mean productive activity in the world, guided by the Right View of the Buddhist Eightfold Noble Path (Jackson 1989, 50).

<sup>43</sup> Sitagu does not, however, discourage religious donations and is also active in creating and supporting organizations that explicitly promote the Buddhist *sasana*. At the February 13, 2011 rally/public sermon that I attended in Yangon, thousands of people donated to his Association for the Preservation of Theravāda Buddhism.

<sup>44</sup> One monk, a co-founder of a prominent orphanage and school in Mandalay, explained that he taught lay people that the benefit of a donation was proportional to the overall amount of need of the recipient and whether or not the donation addressed a real need (Personal interview #33 in Yangon; July 3 2011).

<sup>45</sup> The monk who teaches at the Buddhist university in Yangon expressed to me his belief that, without the organizing, distributional role played by prominent monks such as the Sitagu, Mingun, or Thamanya Hsayadaws, many Buddhists would not contribute to these important social causes (Personal interview #34 in Yangon; July 6, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Some Buddhists, however, continue to express concern regarding the institutionalization of *parahita* donation practices. Rozenberg notes that the survival of the material work of prominent monks is always difficult (2010, 155-6). The vast empire of monastic education and social service provision created by the Mingun Hsayadaw has virtually disintegrated in the almost two decades since his passing. Others have worried that a similar process will occur with the projects of Thamanya Hsayadaw (who died in 2003) and the work of Sitagu Hsayadaw after his death (Tosa 2009, 260).

One interview subject, a man in his mid-twenties who lived in a suburb of Yangon, told me that his family had been almost exclusively giving *parahita* donations for at least the past five years.<sup>47</sup> Influenced by the preaching of monks such as Sitagu Sayadaw and Myitta Shin U Zawana, he and his family joined with their friends and neighbors to go on almost weekly trips to hospitals, clinics, and orphanages in the area to make donations of medicine, money, and other materials. He explained that the merit that came from these *parahita* donations was greater because the recipients were in desperate need and were not receiving assistance from others, as the monks were. He viewed *parahita* donations not only as contributing to the development of the country, but as inherently political because they were tasks the government ought to be fulfilling, but wasn't. This reasoning is similar to that expressed by members of various NGOs that I interviewed in the Spring and Summer of 2011. Several Buddhist members of an organization that supports people living with HIV/AIDS suggested that *parahita* donations and activities have increased recently because the suffering of the people has increased dramatically under the military government.<sup>48</sup> They also believed that, while the actions of prominent monks had undoubtedly helped the transformation, the impetus for a change in donation practices had come from the public and was fostered by a growth in civil society organizations that presented their actions as compensating for the inattention or mismanagement of the government.

The former military government undoubtedly saw the rise of social service organizations led by both monks and lay people as a potential challenge to its political rule. Scholars have documented the ways in which the government attempted to assert its control over the projects of monks through offering religious titles and material support (Schober 1997, Kawanami 2009, Rozenberg 2010). Government restriction of citizen participation in relief work after Cyclone Nargis in 2008 was also an attempt to channel social services through the state, although their mismanagement of the process may have pushed more citizens toward working through more independent civil society organizations and also may have encouraged them to see their *parahita* activities as having political implications. A Burmese teacher taking part in a community development training in Chiang Mai flatly declared that *parahita* social work was undoubtedly political participation, although she knew that many people didn't see it that way.<sup>49</sup> This type of work, she said, was not the negative type of *nain ngan ye* ("politics") associated with elections and government corruption, it was an intervention into the cycle of cause and effect (*pañcca-samuppāda*). A weak economy came from a bad political system and resulted in low

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<sup>47</sup> Personal interview #30 in Yangon; June 29, 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Group interview #32 in Yangon; 1 July 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Group interview #12 in Chiang Mai; March 1, 2011.

standards of moral practice among the citizens, while improper moral practice ensured economic stagnation and disempowered people to work to change the government. Social work was an intervention that would produce effects that resonated in both directions of the multi-dimensional causal framework, raising moral standards in the community which would eventually result in a better government. All of these outcomes contributed to strengthening the *sāsana*.

While a number of Buddhists in Myanmar certainly frame their social work as being a form of political engagement, it is unclear whether this represents a trend of emerging “socially engaged” Buddhism in the country as Schober (2011) suggests. Even with support from prominent monks and societal icons, there is still limited data to gauge changes in people’s practices (including whether or not it extends beyond economically better-off urban populations) as well as the motivations for and perceptions of *parahita* work. The editors of a collection of essays on “engaged Buddhism” have described the movement as a shift from a *lokuttara* (Br. *lawkouttara*) to a *lokiya* (Br. *lawki*) definition of liberation (Queen and King 1996, ix). I would argue that, instead, the Burmese Buddhist engagement with social concerns reflects a deepening consideration of the complex inter-relationship between the *lawki* and *lawkouttara* realms. For some, *parahita* work has been an opportunity to participate in political transformation under restricted circumstances. In the short time that the government has begun to ease political limitations, civil society groups working on social issues have rapidly expanded their scope of operations. It is unclear what role *parahita* work will play in Myanmar’s democratic transition, but it remains an important part of alternate conceptions of political participation among Burmese Buddhists.

### **Individual Moral Practice as Political Participation**

There is another notion of political action among Buddhists in Myanmar that is not always conceptualized as political *participation*, but functions as such nonetheless. Burmese Buddhists have understood the success and development of a political community to depend to some degree on the moral conduct of its leaders and (more recently) its citizens. Some saw the latter as merely passive followers whose behavior was entirely dependent on that of the leadership, but others reasoned (particularly after the fall of the monarchy) that political independence brought with it conditions in which each person was not only responsible for the consequences of his or her own actions, but for the effects their actions had on the prosperity of the community as a whole. If individual and collective moral behavior can affect the circumstances of a group, it follows that actions undertaken to strengthen individual moral conduct can also be seen as a type of political engagement, designed to uplift the community as a whole.

Gustaaf Houtman attributed to U Hpo Hlaing “new ideas of law that see the individual as the ultimate self-responsible agent in society, capable of realizing *anattā* and attaining *nibbana* through *vipassanā*” (Houtman 1999, 89). While in some instances U Hpo Hlaing demarcated the *lawki* from the *lawkouttara*, he also recognized the need for morally conscious action by individuals at every level of society, from peasants all the way to the king. Houtman may have overstated the inclusiveness of U Hpo Hlaing’s perspective on the individual as a completely self-responsible agent, but many Burmese nationalists argued that political liberation—which would free the Burmese from colonial domination and allow them to be self-responsible agents—was a necessary condition for progress on the spiritual path. Similarly, effort put toward one’s individual moral improvement would also have tangible effects in the political realm.

At a moment of crisis in Burmese politics, during the communist and ethnic insurrections of 1949, some commentators attempted to keep the focus on the role of moral conduct in the country’s struggles. In an editorial on the deplorable state of affairs in Burma one year after independence, the editors of the English language newspaper *The Burman* suggested that both the source of and solution to the country’s problems could be found not in party politics, but in each individual. “Our country is enmeshed in a vicious ideological struggle and as such the issue must be decided by the finer qualities in every citizen of Burma. The actual battlefields are not only in Insein, Nyaunglebin, Mandalay, or Moulmein, but in our own hearts” (April 29, 1949b, 2). In more recent years, the monk Ashin Thittila has presented individual moral practice not merely as a complement to political participation, but as the only kind of political action that would lead to world peace and harmony. He insisted that, “For all the wheels to revolve in harmony the highest good in each must be developed; this is possible by the performance of daily duties with kindness, courtesy, and truthfulness” (1987, 55). Aung San Suu Kyi has also discussed both the challenge and the importance of individual moral practice for political actors. She remarked, “...isn’t there a saying that ‘it is far more difficult to conquer yourself than to conquer the rest of the world?’ So, I think the taming of one’s own passions, in the Buddhist way of thinking, is the chief way to greatness, no matter what the circumstances may be” (1997, 162).

In a 1948 radio broadcast, U Ba Lwin, the superintendent of a high school, turned peoples’ criticism of government back on themselves, saying “I feel that our own personal Government needs checking up first. Are we governed by greed, hatred, pride, suspicion, and ill-will?...Spiritual mobilization is the need of the hour” (Burma 1950, 76). Not only would attention to individual moral conduct contribute to the resolution of the country’s political problems, it would also lead to economic growth because “Moral recovery is essentially the forerunner of economic recovery” (ibid., 77). In a similar vein,

U Win, the Minister of National Planning, Culture and Religion gave a speech to the Burmese Parliament in 1952 in which he discussed how correct moral practice could overcome the defilements that usually underlay politics:

If today the whole...world is...following...the fire of Greed, the fire of Hate, the fire of Delusion, are not such fires and burning desires to consume countries arising because of man's craving for things, craving for armed strength? For this reason the Self is [after] things and is not content, and cannot be satisfied...In accordance with...Buddhist Law, happiness and delight [are] obtained only [by] Wisdom...If one cultivates meditative exercises, one can arrive even at the cool peace of Nirvana. (quoted in Sarkisyanz 1965, 204-5)

All of these observers saw proper moral conduct at the level of the individual as the only way to build a foundation for political reconciliation and prosperity.

Connecting moral practice to politics also renews the emphasis on characteristics of political actors or methods of political participation that are not commonly part of political discussions. One prominent Burmese monk whose books are widely read in Myanmar had a unique and creative perspective on the Ten Duties of the King as a list of expectations for a moral ruler. During an interview he mentioned the Ten Duties as a way to evaluate citizen participation in politics.<sup>50</sup> I asked how he could make this conceptual jump, since the dominant interpretation is as characteristics for an ideal *leader*, not citizens in general. The phrase in Burmese is *min* (king) *gyint* (conduct/practice) *taya* (laws/rules). Using a clever play on the Burmese words for “king” and “you” (which are homonyms) he explained that they were not simply rules for a king (*min*). They were also *min gyint taya* (meaning “rules of ideal conduct for you) which necessarily entails *nga gyint taya* (“rules of ideal conduct for me). His insightful pun is consistent with Burmese Buddhist efforts to expand traditional conceptions of politics to be relevant for a contemporary, participatory democratic system while still retaining continuity with respected ideas deeply rooted in Buddhism wisdom.

Aung San Suu Kyi reflected on her political philosophy after a 1996 trip to visit the prominent monk Thamanya Sayadaw, famous for creating a zone of peace in the midst of conflict in the Eastern Karen State. She remarked that, “Some have questioned the appropriateness of talking about such matters as *mettā* (loving kindness) and *thissa* (truth) in the political context. But politics is about people and what we had seen in Thamanya proved that love and truth can move people more strongly than any form of coercion” (1997, 16). The democracy icon has frequently talked about the role of *mettā* in guiding her resistance against the military government. I have already discussed the monks' choice to

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<sup>50</sup> Personal Interview #59 in Baltimore, MD; May 18 2012.

use a mass recitation of the *mettā sutta* as the primary tactic in their 2007 demonstrations. In fact, the authorities considered this to be a threatening enough action that, nearly two years after the demonstrations, they prevented a group of monks from a public recitation of the *sutta*, although ironically, the state-run *New Light of Myanmar* contained an article the same day that recounted the benefits of chanting it (Arkar Moe 2009).

Almost a year before Ne Win's military coup ended the brief parliamentary period in Burma, the anthropologist Winston King wrote: "Perhaps most Buddhists do not take literally, or fully believe in, the power of naked, defenseless good will to turn back physical onslaughts—of which so many instances are to be found in their own scriptures—but they do take most seriously the generally great effectiveness of mind over matter, benevolence over malevolence, and love over hatred" (King 1961, 162). King's appraisal is particularly interesting in the light of Aung San Suu Kyi's statements about *mettā* and the monks' chosen tactics during the September 2007 demonstrations.<sup>51</sup> A famous passage in the *Dhammapada*, a collection of sayings of the Buddha's, claims that "Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal."<sup>52</sup> Here we see Buddhists in Myanmar attempting to use this principle in envisioning alternate forms of participation and, more significantly, methods guided by Buddhist ethical ideals.

King also noted the ways in which some Burmese Buddhists, in the decade after independence, were attempting to replace stagnant, traditional interpretations of Buddhist concepts with what they called "activated" re-interpretations (1961). He gave the example of *upekkhā* (equanimity), which many people have understood as neutrality and which critics contended fostered resignation to existing oppressive conditions and inequalities. According to the re-interpretation of King's informants, "in exercising equanimity one should give himself to the public good, should fulfill his duties as head of a family, member of a community, or citizen of a nation, but detachedly, i.e. disinterestedly, without dangerous or fanatical emotionalism, without expecting personal reward or greatness, and with the public good supremely in mind" (ibid., 161). This was not only a new way of understanding one of the highest qualities in Theravāda Buddhism<sup>53</sup>; it was also an attempt at using Buddhist teachings to think about engaging in politics.

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<sup>51</sup> Zöllner also relates how many Buddhists in Burma believed that the moral superiority of the monks would balance the obvious material superiority of the military (2009, 100).

<sup>52</sup> Yamakavagga: Pairs, Verse 5. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.01.budd.html>

<sup>53</sup> *Upekkhā* (equanimity), along with *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *mudita* (sympathetic joy) is one of the four *brahma-viharas*, the highest states of mental cultivation.

Some Burmese Buddhists responded to pettiness and factionalism in electoral politics by turning to focus on their own moral conduct. Maung Maung (1980) claimed that the rapid increase in the lay practice of *vipassanā* meditation in the early twentieth century was a response to growing disappointment in the conduct of political leaders at the time.<sup>54</sup> Others, including some of the political activists from 1988, had limited options for political engagement once they were imprisoned after the protests. Aung San Suu Kyi explained the reasoning that compelled many of them to begin to focus on individual moral practice: “For example, a lot of [political prisoners from the NLD] meditate when they’re in prison, partly because they have the time, and partly because it’s a very sensible thing to do. That is to say that if you have no contact with the outside world, and you can’t do anything for it, then you do what you can with the world inside you in order to bring it under proper control” (1997, 162).<sup>55</sup> Juliane Schober adds that the increase in meditation practice among members of the democratic opposition was “partially a response to the government’s refusal to allow democracy advocates to organize public merit-making rituals or to seek ordination in the *sangha*” (2011, 109).

We should not forget that, even as this discourse regarding moral practice has opened up new avenues for political action in the context of repression, it has also continued to function both as a differentiating mechanism and as a disciplinary tool. Ingrid Jordt notes the irony of Burmese Buddhists using claimed or presumed meditational attainment to enhance their social status, comparing their progress on the path to enlightenment with their neighbors’ just as in any other worldly competition (2007). I have also discussed the ways in which the trope of “unity” functioned as an evaluative moral concept. Those who threaten unity do so because they are enslaved to selfish and individualistic desires and unable to see or work for the benefit of the community. Those who control the discourse on unity position themselves as morally superior; they see themselves as capable of overcoming their desires, even sacrificing individual interests, to realize a goal that will benefit all.

There is, then, a current within Burmese Buddhist political thought that envisions individual moral practice as related to politics in several ways. A number of commentators have extrapolated from Buddhist ideas about human nature, *kan*, selflessness, and moral worthiness to imply that political

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<sup>54</sup> Houtman saw in this trend a confirmation of his thesis that increased interest in *vipassanā* practice as the moral basis of a community implied the creation of a new nation on the basis of spiritual reform of the individual (1999, Chapter 21). While the political implications of a *vipassanā* perspective on politics are enticing, we should remember that very few Burmese Buddhists have explicitly made these connections and that the NLD discourse on *vipassanā* and politics seems to have receded since Houtman’s research in the 1990s.

<sup>55</sup> The conservative Thai monk Phra Kittiwuttho Bhikkhu encouraged Thais to engage in meditative practice as a way to influence political events and generate power: “It is generally accepted, both in the secular and religious spheres, that a mind which is still and in *samadhi* [concentration meditation] creates power, and mental power is the most important power capable of leading to success” (quoted in Jackson 1989, 47).

problems emerge from inherent human weaknesses and to argue that moral development ought to be a priority for individuals seeking to participate in politics. Most Burmese political thinkers have expressed this concern about political leaders, while at the same time lamenting the moral weaknesses and intellectual limitations of the general population, resulting in an overall persistent attitude of skepticism regarding the moral worthiness of the average individual to participate in politics effectively or ethically. Echoing a common theme throughout Burmese political history, they prescribe a greater attention to morality, usually achieved through religious education or strengthening and supporting the *sangha*.

Burmese Buddhists have also responded to their disappointment with electoral politics and the machinations of government or to overwhelming government-imposed impediments to popular participation by withdrawing from politics to focus on individual moral practice, often through *vipassanā* meditation. In some cases, this withdrawal has been voluntary, while in others it has been the result of imprisonment. The reasoning in both cases, however, is the same: the logic of *kan* dictates that proper moral conduct of an individual can have fruitful results at a collective level. That is, even though one might not be doing “politics,” one’s moral practice can affect the political situation of the community. This reasoning has also dictated political strategy and tactics, informing, for example, the decision of the monks who protested in 2007 to chant the *mettā sutta* rather than political slogans. In this closing section I draw insights from a comparative study of Chinese and Western political thought to illuminate some of the strengths and weaknesses of Burmese notions of individual moral practice as political participation.

### **Individual Practice as Political Participation: A Comparative Perspective**

In a 2008 article, political theorist Leigh Jenco presented the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese intellectual Zhang Shizhao as developing a theory on the individual foundations of effective political action. She argued that, without a previously existing participatory political community, Zhang was compelled to turn inward in his search to reconcile the disjuncture between the ideal political community and the actually existing state of his time. He argued that individual moral development was the path to becoming a self-aware person, the ideal political actor. For Zhang, it was individual, not collective, action that was the primary resource for transforming a shared political environment. Jenco claims that Zhang saw the role of the self-aware individual as a “moral juncture” between normative and actual rule, finding value in Zhang’s theory of individual action, despite the fact that he has often been dismissed as a thinker with more authoritarian leanings. Zhang envisioned citizens as playing the role of the former class of literati, as self-aware interpreters, who, through an inwardly-focused interpretation process, could be recognized as political actors. In this way, she says, “The people come

to occupy the normative position capable of legitimizing political rule; at the same time, however, each individual acts to mediate and criticize the normative whole toward which his or her capacities are oriented” (2008, 229).

We can see some similarities to the ways in which Burmese Buddhists have conceived of individual moral conduct as political action, connected through the logic of *kan*. The former Burmese Supreme Court judge U Chan Htoon said in a speech that, “mastery of the external world is not in the external world but in ourselves” (1958, 31).<sup>56</sup> The Buddha also told his disciples that all of his teachings regarding the path to liberation were contained within the human body. Here he meant that *lawki* and *lawkouttara* were not separate “planes” of existence, but rather distinct perspectives on existence, the fundamental characteristics of which remained consistent. The route to change, then, was in transforming one’s perspective on the world through concentrated moral practice. Buddhist moral practice, then, is inherently individualistic, a seeming paradox of the path to liberation and the source of claims that the religion (especially in its Theravāda incarnation) is “selfish.” The monk Ashin Thittila remarked that, “...the true Buddhist feels compelled to rely on himself and on his own efforts, and therefore he has confidence in his power and sense of responsibility” (1987, 33).

Returning to Zhang’s prioritization of individual action, Jenco does identify potential limitations. Drawing on Hannah Pitkin’s critical appraisal of the gap between theorists and actors, Jenco acknowledges that the danger of Zhang’s self-aware methodology is that others are not recognized as fellow actors, but as others to be *acted on*. The risk of turning inward is that it atomizes the individual, separating her from her fellow potential citizens and widening the gap between that individual and the (emergent) political community. In revisioning the moment of foundation, Pitkin sees it as necessarily being a collective, collaborative, public effort, if politics is to be a process of the mutual recognition of citizens. Jenco concludes that Zhang’s theoretical position was more appropriate to his historical context, when, in thinking about creating a participatory political community, he had no cultural models of collective action from which to draw. However, she also argues that Zhang’s work serves to remind us that thinking collectively is not the only way to act in the world since in some cases collective action could simply replicate historical injustices. Additionally, Zhang shifts the potential political actor’s

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<sup>56</sup> The Thai activist Sulak Sivaraksa expressed a similar sentiment, however, he believed that, while an inward orientation was necessary to develop the proper perspective on the external world, the inward turn ought to be motivated by a concern for justice in the world. “We should adjust our inner condition, which should be calm and mindful, to be aware of the unjust external world. It is wrong to try to adjust the external world without training one’s mind to be neutral and selfless. It is also wrong to be calm and detached without a proper concern to bring about better social conditions for all who share our planet as well as those who live in the same universe (1988, 75-6).

attention from others to herself, that is, to focus on her own responsibility as an individual to the greater community.

The shortcoming that Jenco uses Pitkin to identify in Zhang's approach is certainly a risk in turning away from collective action to instead concentrate on individual transformation. The Burmese Buddhist emphasis on individual moral development, however, consists of a fundamentally different kind of practice, one which I argue guards against the atomization that Pitkin fears. The ultimate purpose of *vipassanā* meditation is the direct apprehension of reality, unmediated by concepts or cognition. That is, the meditator aims to develop a *lawkouttara* perspective on the conditions of her existence, to see them as *anicca* (impermanent), *dukkha* (unsatisfactory), and *anattā* (devoid of essence and beyond her control).<sup>57</sup> One of the most basic, yet most challenging aspects of this meditation practice is to recognize that what we consider to be our "self" is nothing more than a mental construct, generated by the most fundamental of our desires, for continued, permanent existence. The overcoming of self thus entails the realization that what we take to be real, physical boundaries between ourselves and others are nothing more than conceptual distinctions. *Vipassanā* meditation reveals the inherent one-ness of existence and, by removing conceptual thought and replacing it with a *lawkouttara* perspective, it eliminates the artificial barriers between the self and others.

Of course, my description here is idealized and represents a stage on the path to enlightenment that is much further than most practitioners' experience. However, the insight that comes from *vipassanā* practice is progressive and transformative at every stage. Therefore, we can see *vipassanā* as a type of individual moral practice that, instead of further separating the individual from her community, actually compels the mutual recognition of others as fellow citizens and subjects, bridging the gap between theorist (the individual) and actor (the member of a political community). Jenco explains that, for Zhang, the only source of the ideally unbounded self is the individual self; the challenge is that Zhang's methods might risk further separation. The Buddhist moral practice of *vipassanā* meditation is specifically designed to bring an unbounded self into existence through a radical epistemological and ontological reorientation of perspective. It transforms the political world by altering the practitioner's focus away from the self and towards the community. For Burmese Buddhists, this has been a particularly important avenue of political engagement when the government has limited opportunities

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<sup>57</sup> In her description of the phenomenology of *vipassanā* meditation, Ingrid Jordt describes this state as an "irrevocable epistemic break with former ways of perceiving and knowing the world, simultaneously resulting in an ontological reconstruction or transformation of being" (2007, 61).

for participation, but I would argue that, according to the Buddhist logic of cause and effect, it constitutes an effective method of political participation under any circumstances.

There is an additional area of concern regarding the consideration of individual *vipassanā* practice as a path to inclusive, community-building politics. Although *vipassanā* practice is ideally intended to weaken the ego and promote selflessness, the reality is that this meditation is being conducted by flawed human beings, *pu htu zin*, in the Burmese conception of human nature. I have already described the ways in which some *vipassanā* practitioners use their achievements to contribute to the discourse of the “true Buddhist,” reinforcing a hierarchy of moral distinctions. Ingrid Jordt also reveals some of the complex social maneuvering that occurs in meditation centers and within *vipassanā* communities (2007). Meditators sometimes assert their presumed spiritual achievements to gain status in society. The use of a moral position attained through meditation practice to either perpetuate hierarchy or enhance one’s own social standing appears to be inconsistent with my description of the ideals of *vipassanā*. However, from a Buddhist perspective, human moral limitations are an inevitable aspect of existence. This does not detract from the potential political benefits of *vipassanā* meditation, but should alert us to continued awareness of the challenges that even communities of moral practice face in combating human inclinations towards ego and power.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained the ways in which Burmese Buddhist political thinkers have envisioned politics as a moral practice, yet the discourse contains a significant disconnect, something that I believe the current generation of political leaders and citizens will have to address. Although the tradition consistently presents politics as a quintessentially moral undertaking, all of the responses to enhancing the moral level of political conduct are related to areas that are removed from electoral or legislative politics; some suggest more attention to religious education, while others turn to meditation practice. On the one hand, this could be seen as a strength, as an example of an expanded understanding of politics. The universality of the law of cause and effect provides Burmese Buddhists with a worldview in which actions in one area are inescapably connected to effects in another, with moral conduct as the constant. However, individuals in this Burmese Buddhist tradition of political thought have given virtually no attention to the specific ways in which electoral and legislative processes

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<sup>58</sup> An additional point of consideration is the challenge of access to *vipassanā* training as well as the free time necessary to devote to meditation. Burmese Buddhists value *vipassanā* as an incomparable spiritual practice, yet most lament that they do not have sufficient time to spend in meditation. While for many this may simply be an excuse, we should recognize the ways in which socio-economic conditions can limit individuals’ opportunities to engage in the practice.

and practices themselves can be conceived of as moral practice. That is, the dominant view of politics remains of a flawed, worldly, yet instrumental practice. Its value is in creating the conditions necessary for correct moral practice, but Burmese Buddhists have not necessarily envisioned it as a morally productive or beneficial activity itself. I do not intend this observation to be a criticism. Myanmar's experience with electoral politics has been limited and carried out under the most trying of circumstances, especially during the decade after independence. Additionally, the restrictions on political expression imposed by the military for most of the past fifty years have precluded any meaningful public discussion of the possible moral benefits of political participation. However, it appears that this will be a critical area of consideration for Burmese Buddhist political philosophy as it continues to engage with questions of democratic politics and popular participation.

Koenig provides insight into one of the fundamental challenges facing a participatory democratic system in a Buddhist context: "The ultimate source of sovereignty in Burmese political theory could never have resided in the people because the people were by definition immoral. The consecration oath of Burmese kings was actually a pledge of loyalty to *dhamma*, wherein lay the ultimate source of authority. The legitimacy of the state was rooted in the enforcement of the moral law in society" (1990, 71). While the possibility of enlightenment existed for everyone, the dominance of our baser instincts necessitated a political system where people were ruled as subjects and moral conduct was enforced through both law and tradition, as in the classical monarchical model. Political power could not be situated in such a fundamentally flawed place as "the people."

Even during the parliamentary period in Burma, political leaders expressed skepticism as to the moral and intellectual abilities of the masses of citizens to participate in politics without being manipulated or swayed by narrow, individualistic concerns. While their criticisms may have simply been intended to delegitimize their political opposition, the claims they made drew strength from their consistency with Burmese Buddhist views of human nature. For the past fifty years the military imposed a form of guardianship, claiming that, while democracy was the goal, the people were not yet ready to practice it responsibly, being influenced by moral defilements to act against national unity and development.

Several Burmese political figures have obviously challenged this view, with Aung San Suu Kyi writing forcefully to "explode the twin myths of [Burmese] unfitnes for political responsibility and the unsuitability of democracy for their society" (1991, 167). However, doubts about the capacity of the Burmese for political participation have been expressed by Burmese political actors themselves, often articulated in Buddhist terms, making them more challenging to overcome. More difficult than this,

however, is the lacuna within contemporary Burmese Buddhist political thought regarding the position of the people as participants in the process of self-government. The logic of *kan* posits a political actor that is both subject and object; that is, each individual not only creates her own *kan*, she is also inescapably affected by her past *kan*. Political actors in Myanmar will have to engage directly with the inherent tension in this dual subjectivity that alternately sees both possibility and futility in human nature. At the same time, theorizing and practicing democracy in Myanmar will require creative engagement with the *lawki/lawkouttara* divide, not only contesting prevailing views of politics as “dirty,” but also developing a *lawkouttara*-oriented justification for the *lawki* practice of politics in order to cultivate the positive, productive aspects of political participation.<sup>59</sup> I explore some of these possibilities and challenges in the following chapter where I look at conceptions of democracy among members of the government, the democratic opposition, and the monks.

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<sup>59</sup> Burmese Buddhists interested in addressing this subject might look to some of the work of Thai “reform” Buddhists, who, as Peter Jackson has observed, are drawing from “*Nibbanic* Buddhism” (what I have called the *lawkouttara* orientation) to develop a “potent expression of contemporary social and political aspirations” (1989, 125).

## CHAPTER 5: SOLDIERS, ACTIVISTS, AND MONKS: “DEMOCRACY” IN CONTEMPORARY MYANMAR

After two and half decades of military rule, “democracy” was the rallying cry of Burmese citizens as they marched in 1988 to protest abuses and mismanagement by the government. The military government brutally suppressed that uprising, but democracy has remained at the center of calls for change since that time. Opposition figures sustained their struggle for a democratic regime through sometimes harsh repression and, after elections in November 2010 and the installment of a new quasi-civilian government in March 2011 it began to seem as if the military government’s widely dismissed “Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy” might eventually result in a democratic Myanmar. While many observers inside and outside of the country have remained skeptical of the scope, speed and durability of recent reforms, it is difficult to deny that Myanmar has begun a transition in a democratic direction.

What is less clear is what various groups and actors have in mind when they speak of “democracy.” Political discourse in the first half of the twentieth century was lively and political figures espoused different conceptions of democracy, drawing from Buddhist teachings, Marxism and liberalism. In contrast, during the almost fifty years of military rule, the authorities severely curtailed public discourse and debate in the country; until 2011 Burmese people had limited opportunities and outlets to discuss their ideas about democratic politics. Those who have talked about democracy have often drawn from Western models, emphasizing freedom, participation and the protection of basic human rights. However, they have also crafted their arguments using Buddhist concepts and values, attempting to cast democratic practice as an inherent part of Buddhist teachings. Even those who have explicitly espoused a more secular democracy have done so in ways that are consistent with the logic and reasoning of the Theravāda moral universe.

In this chapter, I examine understandings of democracy among three groups: the former military government, the democratic opposition and other activists, and monks. The boundaries separating these groups are not always clear and there is considerable difference of opinion within them as well. For example, in the first group I include not only the leaders of the former military government but also the leaders of the current quasi-civilian government since most of them are only recently removed from their former military positions and many played a role in designing the framework for Myanmar’s transition to democracy. Some of the individuals whose views I look at as part of the second group may

not necessarily see themselves as activists; some are members of civil society and others might just consider themselves to be citizens. The separation of “government” and “opposition” has also become somewhat anachronistic, as several members of the latter group have technically joined the former as elected MPs; I do, however, think that this is still a useful categorization. Although monks were at the forefront of the 2007 protests, I group them separately because of their unique social position in Burmese society.

At the end of each section I sum up a few themes that emerge from each group and at the end of the chapter I analyze them collectively, noting a number of common elements. While each group’s ideas about democracy contain some elements that correspond with liberal notions, there are also aspects that do not appear to be completely compatible with liberal democracy. The military/government perspective retains a strong inclination toward guardianship that emerges from a tradition of skepticism regarding citizen capacity. I look at that in comparison with similar combinations of democracy and guardianship from other political traditions. All of the views that I examine here value discipline and unity as essential elements of democratic practice; as moral concepts, these could limit freedom in certain ways. Monastic and activist perspectives on the relationship between democracy and “truth” also complicate the view of democracy as a universal practice. At the same time, these Burmese ideas potentially provide an important corrective to the atomizing tendencies of liberal individualism. Before turning to Burmese notions of democracy, I look at some examples of scholarship on democracy in non-Western contexts that inform this chapter.

### **Studying “Democracy” Around the World**

Academic scholars have mostly dismissed the “Asian values” arguments of the 1990s as thinly veiled excuses for continued authoritarian practices.<sup>1</sup> Often lost in this dismissal, however, has been the valid insight that, while the specific arguments of “Asian values” proponents may have been overly generalized mis-characterizations of “Asian” culture, religious and cultural values continue to shape people’s conceptions of politics and the resonance that particular models of governance have with their worldviews. Initially, some scholars tried to identify and categorize Asian values, such as patrimonialism, personalism, and a deference to authority, to show how they combined to form an “Asian-style democracy” (Neher 1994). Others contested that categorization, arguing that these regimes did not

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<sup>1</sup> Former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was one of the most ardent advocates of this position, arguing that Asian cultural traditions (most prominently Confucianism) generated a set of values specific to Asian countries that were in conflict with some values of the West (see, for example, Zakaria and Lee Kuan Yew 1994). See Sen (1997) for a strong rejection of the Asian values argument, including the problematic specification of “Asian” and “Western” as well as the argument that “Asian values” are also present in Western cultures.

deserve the label of “democracy” since they had simply failed to fully transition to democracy (Hood 1998). There are good reasons to be skeptical of general labels such as “Asian-style democracy” since, even within Myanmar, people have expressed a broad range of interpretations of politics. In developing this chapter, I draw on the work of scholars who challenge the idea of a unitary or universal conception of democracy while still recognizing that shared cultural or religious values do inform people’s political views and can lead to unique understandings of democratic practice.

Ann Frechette has studied the gradual process of democratization among Tibetans in exile, claiming that their path to democracy has been characterized more by “muddling through” than by a linear trajectory (2007). Younger Tibetans have regularly pushed for more representation and voice in the government-in-exile’s political affairs and the Dalai Lama has generally supported their demands, gradually delegating power to others and finally removing himself from a position of political authority in May 2011. Other Tibetans, particularly those with some measure of power in the government-in-exile, have resisted attempts at expanding participation and representation, citing the importance of unity and order, particularly for a weak political entity in a precarious position on the world stage. This is an ideological debate that is not unlike the clash between the military and the opposition that I describe in this chapter. It represents different approaches to democracy, based on different ordering of values, although I will demonstrate that in the Burmese case, unity and order are common themes for all three groups that I discuss in this chapter. In addition, it is important to note that Tibetans have interpreted democracy within the context of their own Buddhist tradition, advocating what Frechette calls “enlightened governance” or “government headed by religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama” (2007, 99).

Michelle Browsers also looks at a range of interpretations of both civil society and democracy in her study of Arab countries (2006). She challenges those who assert Arab exceptionalism, arguing that Arab Muslims have been very engaged with discussions of democracy, albeit not necessarily as a political concept imported whole cloth from the West.<sup>2</sup> Browsers focuses on the transformative possibilities of moments of “transculturation,” those times when “distinct cultures reciprocally impact each other—though not usually from equal positions of power—to produce not a single syncretic culture but rather heterogeneity” (12-13). As I do with concepts of liberation and political participation, she tracks different conceptions of civil society among liberal, Islamist, and socialist Arab communities, recognizing that the different interpretations are drawn together through a “common store of concepts”

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<sup>2</sup> The argument of Arab (or Muslim) exceptionalism stated that Islamic Arab states would remain the exception to a global trend of democratization due to an authoritarian political culture, an imbalanced state-society relationship, or the lack of concepts central to democracy within Arab and Islamic political thought.

(91). She concludes that these moments of transculturation can lead to new ways of imagining concepts that are understood and deployed within different cultural contexts. I see the same possibilities in the discourse on “democracy” in contemporary Myanmar. Differently positioned groups struggle to define the boundaries, content, and implementation of the concept but they do so in ways that are consistent with the logic of the Theravāda moral universe.

Frederic Schaffer’s study of conceptions of democracy in Senegal highlights different interpretations based on the subject’s position in relation to power (1998). Members of the ruling party see democracy (or the more commonly used Wolof word *demokaraasi*) as the right of political parties to organize and, after an electoral victory, to control the government. Unsurprisingly, opposition parties’ understanding of the concept focuses more on fair rules of electoral competition and the possibility of electoral turnover. In addition, popular ideas of democracy have been shaped by its association with indigenous concepts including *fal* and *folli* (communality and harmony) and *nguur*, which implies a broad distribution of material benefits. In noting the ways in which *demokaraasi* appears to be a distinct concept from democracy, Schaffer suggests that Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances allows us to acknowledge the similarity between the terms while recognizing that there may be variations in both conceptualization and implementation, depending on the context.<sup>3</sup>

What is central to all of these analyses of democracy in non-Western contexts is that groups and individuals are struggling to define and implement democracy in ways that are consistent with their own political experiences and their own worldview (Frechette 2007). However, consistency within a worldview does not imply unity of belief or interpretation. Just as different conceptions of democracy exist within the Western political tradition, different groups in Myanmar are developing their own ideas of what democracy means. They have done this at the confluence of several factors, including encounters with Western conceptions of democracy, exposure to non-Western ideas about democracy, reflections on their own political experiences, and finally, engagement with their Buddhist beliefs and practices, which provide the moral context for thinking about politics.

My intention in this chapter is not to evaluate whether or not any of these conceptions of democracy are truly “democratic.” Beyond the challenge of articulating acceptable evaluative criteria, I believe that an equally important task is creating space for alternate conceptions of democracy or alternate iterations of democratic values that arise from different worldviews and do not necessarily find exact matches in Western democratic theory and practice. I try to examine these competing notions

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<sup>3</sup> Frechette (2007) also makes use of Wittgenstein’s family resemblance theory when arguing against a singular path to or outcome of democracy.

of democracy on their own terms and to demonstrate that, while there are important differences, they share a conceptual vocabulary that comes in part from the positioning of these actors within the moral worldview of the Theravāda universe. They also represent various voices in the discourse of democracy in contemporary Myanmar, making their elucidation an essential element in understanding the debates that will arise *in the country* during its current transitional period.

### **The Military’s “Disciplined Democracy”**

When the military took power through the caretaker government in 1958, its leaders used the opportunity to focus on combating insurgency, attempting to bypass the infighting that had divided the parliament. After returning power to U Nu’s civilian government in 1960, the military usurped it forcefully in 1962, citing fears of secession by non-Burman ethnic groups. One of the issues that had exacerbated ethnic conflict was disagreement over a proposed amendment to the constitution that would make Buddhism the national religion. With religion as one of the central factors in this divisive conflict, it is not surprising that once the military took power in 1962 the leaders of the newly created Revolutionary Council stressed the importance of a secular state.<sup>4</sup> However, as decades of failed socialist economic policies began to erode the legitimacy of the military government, its leaders re-embraced certain Buddhist symbolic practices, both as a way to appease and control the population and to attend to their personal religious goals, most particularly enhancing their own merit.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from this return to an explicit use of Buddhist political rhetoric and governing practices, I argue that even during the allegedly “secular” period, the Buddhist beliefs of military leaders and traditional Burmese ideas on political authority shaped the political philosophy and values of the military government. The emphasis on discipline and order as prerequisites for political participation, the need for a central power to maintain that order, and the insistence on unity as necessary for political progress and development, are positions of the military government that are consistent with the logic of the

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<sup>4</sup> Their insistence on a secular state was more of a rebuttal of U Nu’s use of Buddhist teachings in his political rhetoric than a rejection of Buddhist doctrine as a guiding force. The ideology of the military regime, expressed in *The Burmese Way to Socialism* (Revolutionary Council 1962), *The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment* (Burma 1964), and U Chit Hlaing’s *Lawka Amyin (Man’s Worldview)* (Badgley and Aye Kyaw 2009), continued to be based on a Buddhist understanding of the universe as governed by particular moral laws.

<sup>5</sup> Tin Maung Maung Than (1988) has written about the shift in policy to try to bring the *sangha* under more direct government control in the 1980s. Juliane Schober (1997) also examined an example of government attempts to use traditional Buddhist practices to enhance its legitimacy among the population by parading a relic of the Buddha’s tooth across the country, allowing people to gain *kutho* (merit) by paying respect to it. While many opponents of the military regime have assumed that its leaders were acting cynically, using Buddhist practices to co-opt the loyalty of the population, we cannot dismiss the possibility that they are sincere in their practice. Indeed, the combination of meritorious Buddhist acts (*kutho*) with demeritorious acts of political violence (*akutho*) is a common pattern among political authorities in the Burmese tradition, as I explained in Chapter 2.

Theravāda moral universe. Not only that, these notions have continued to shape the conceptions of democracy that the military government professed.

The phrase that the former military government (and subsequently the quasi-civilian government) used to describe their preferred system is usually translated into English as “discipline-flourishing democracy” and occasionally “disciplined democracy.”<sup>6</sup> In Burmese, it is a democracy in which discipline (*si kan*) is completely fulfilled (*pye wa*). The official term also includes the phrase *pazi-zoun*, which means “multi-party democracy.” This is an important clarification, as it distinguishes the contemporary system from the one-party system under the former BSPP government and indicates an acceptance of democracy as including competition for elected office facilitated through multiple parties.

Discipline-flourishing democracy is the end goal of the seven point “Road Map to Democracy” that has been the government’s step-by-step plan to transition from complete military rule. On August 30, 2003, former General Khin Nyunt (then Prime Minister) laid out the steps that the government would take in this guided process. These steps included convening the National Convention to write a constitution, ratifying the constitution, holding elections to form a *hluttaw* (parliament), and following the legislation of the *hluttaw* in order to build a modern, developed, disciplined democracy. The rhetoric of the former military government, expressed in editorials and speeches, frequently contrasted the dangerous, divisive elements of “Western-style” democracy with “discipline-flourishing democracy,” a system that was not only culturally appropriate for the Burmese context, but would guard against the disruptions and excesses of the parliamentary period and allow for a stable, gradual transition.<sup>7</sup>

After almost two decades of a stop-and-start constitutional convention that was eventually boycotted by most of the democratic opposition, the government announced that the constitution was ready for a vote. In the months leading up to the vote to ratify the constitution in 2008, state-run news media printed daily messages urging citizens to do their patriotic duty and vote “yes” on the constitution. They also attempted to influence perceptions of what “true” democracy was and how it could be achieved. One message that ran daily in newspapers read “Democracy cannot be achieved through anarchy. Democracy cannot be achieved through unrest/agitation. Democracy can be achieved

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<sup>6</sup> In Burmese, the common phrase is စည်းကမ်းပြည့်ဝသော ပါတီစုံဒီမိုကရေစီ.

<sup>7</sup> Conservative political figures in Thailand have also emphasized the concepts of discipline and unity (which I examined in Chapter 2 and in more detail below). King Bhumibol stressed the importance of discipline in keeping order in society when he reaffirmed his support for the military after it harshly repressed student demonstrations in 1973 (Hewison 1997, 64-5).

through the constitution.”<sup>8</sup> The Burmese word for anarchy recalls pre-colonial Buddhist conceptions of political legitimacy; *min me zayait* literally means “living without a king.” Many other scholars have noted the ways in which various governments in Myanmar have acted in accordance with the expectations for a Buddhist monarch, constructing religious buildings and supporting members of the *sangha* in an attempt to demonstrate their legitimacy to the population.<sup>9</sup> While there are undoubtedly monarchical hints in this slogan, the important emphasis is on the need for a strong ruler to govern and control the actions of the citizens.

At the same time, many elements of the regime’s Road Map correspond to widely accepted components of democracy. The constitution must be the legal basis of the government and must be ratified through a vote. Members of various political parties will contest the subsequent elections and the result will be a parliament of people’s representatives. It is unclear whether the military regime embraced democratic governance for its own sake, or whether they saw it as an inevitable transition that they had to accept. Either way, the result has been a political process with the trappings of democracy, yet strong guidance by the military. The similarity to the “guided democracy” of Sukarno’s Indonesia or of what some scholars have more recently called “managed democracy” is striking.<sup>10</sup> Military leaders’ claims regarding the legitimacy of their guardian role referred to the purity of their intentions (non-disintegration of the Union, as opposed to personal gain) and drew on the moral implications of the Burmese concept of national unity.

Many of the editorials written in the state-controlled media contain references to the disorder and conflicts that plagued the parliamentary government after independence in 1948. The government’s narrative tells of the “evil consequences” and “instability” caused by both internal armed conflicts and disputes between political parties.<sup>11</sup> According to its own conception of history, the military government had to take control to ensure stability and prevent disintegration. Even if most Burmese are skeptical of the military’s version of this narrative, it resonates with a critical relationship that anchored the traditional Burmese Buddhist conception of politics: a strong political authority is a

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<sup>8</sup> Bur. မင်းမဲ့စရိုက်ဖြင့် ဒီမိုကရေစီမရနိုင်။ ဆူပူမှုဖြင့် ဒီမိုကရေစီမရနိုင်။ အခြေခံဥပဒေဖြင့်သာ ဒီမိုကရေစီ ရနိုင်သည်။ The official version in the English edition of the *New Light of Myanmar* was slightly different, translating *hsu pu hmu* as “violence,” whereas a closer translation would be “unrest.”

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Schober 1997 and Jordt 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Lev (1966) conducted a detailed study of the guided democracy period in Indonesia. McFaul and Lipman (2001) used the term “managed democracy” to describe politics in Russia under Putin and Sheldon Wolin (2008) has more recently used it to describe what he saw as an American democracy that had been sublimated to a corporate or economic model of democracy.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, “Why did Myanmar people unanimously vote for State constitution?” *New Light of Myanmar*, 17 June, 2008.

necessary component of a thriving *sāsana* (Buddhist community). While Burmese commentators have interpreted the *Cakkavatti Sutta* as having taught that immoral political leadership can adversely affect the moral standing of the entire Buddhist community, the common interpretation of the *Aggañña Sutta* is that the lack of any political authority can be just as destabilizing, if not more so.<sup>12</sup> The military conception of disciplined democracy arises from the fear of political disorder, which emerged during the parliamentary period (1948-58 and 1960-62) and provided members of the military with their view of themselves as the only institution capable of holding the country together (Callahan 2003). While they appear to recognize the need for a transition to democracy, the potential divisiveness of democracy must be mediated by a group capable of transcending potential disunity (the military) that can also impose discipline on the citizenry.

The military's narrative of how to develop a lasting democracy is also consistent with the Burmese perspective on popular political participation that is skeptical of the ability of the average person (*pu htu zin*, a word that denotes a human being with all of his moral imperfections) to participate in politics and wary of the results when it occurs. The rhetoric of the military government drew on the common claim from "Asian values" proponents that citizens of their countries were not yet ready for full democratic rights. That is, citizens did not yet have the moral grounding to move beyond their own selfish interests and participate in a potentially divisive democratic process in a unified way that would benefit the country as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

In an editorial entitled "Let's nurture the sapling of democracy," Kyaw Min Lu criticized the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) for their assumption of a mandate from the 1990 elections (2008a).<sup>14</sup> He stated, "In the run-up to the 1990 election, political parties were mushrooming. The number of political parties stood at 235, and that implied that the people were not mature enough in the party politics without any political experiences." Political commentators in Myanmar since U Hpo Hlaing in the late nineteenth century and U Ba Khaing in the early twentieth have expressed concern about an excess of parties leading to disunity and conflict. Here, the military government was asserting its claim that, while democracy might be the right of the people, it could lead to divisions and chaos when misunderstood. Democracy could only be a beneficial system when the people were mature

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapters 2 and 3 for a more detailed explanation of these arguments.

<sup>13</sup> Jordt cites a 1991 book published by the Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the *Sāsana* that posited the moral guidance from the *Mangala Sutta* as a set of rules designed for the "making of a nation of good citizens, and the building of an ideal state" (2007, 104-5).

<sup>14</sup> The articles I cite in this section all come from government controlled media. In many cases the names are pseudonyms, but given the strict level of censorship in Myanmar we can assume that they reflect the government's position.

enough to work within its boundaries, that is, when the citizens were already unified in purpose and goals.

The editorial reinforced this idea as it went on to warn readers of the dangers of not practicing democracy “correctly.”<sup>15</sup> Again, the failures of the parliamentary period were “not because of democracy, but because of those who implemented democracy, and those who were desperate to come to power with egotism, attachment to the party concerned, and selfishness, and those who bore jealousy and disturbed others” (Kyaw Min Lu 2008b). Furthermore, the discipline required to “correctly” practice democracy could only come because of the guidance from the allegedly non-political *tatmadaw* (military). Another editorial recalled the “evil consequences” of separating the leadership of the *tatmadaw* from the messy and potentially destructive practice of democracy, reminding readers that, “In the period of the parliamentary democracy in which the Tatmadaw did not participate in the politics, the Union was on the edge of collapse” (New Light of Myanmar 2008b). Within a more participatory framework of democracy, the need for “disciplined” participation implies that most citizens were not and are still not morally equipped to take part in the correct manner without continued guidance. The strongest indicator of this moral immaturity from the military’s perspective was continued political opposition to the state.<sup>16</sup>

The nominally civilian government that took power in 2011 has also situated itself within an acknowledged political tradition of restoring moral purity with its focus on “clean government.” In his inaugural speech on March 31, 2011, President Thein Sein pledged to fight corruption and strive for good and clean government. Given his military background and prominent role as Prime Minister in the former military government, many outside observers were skeptical of either his commitment to reform or his ability to actually make changes in a corrupt and secretive system.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the speech sparked a flurry of media discussion of the principles and practice of clean government, particularly

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<sup>15</sup> The discourse of “correct” and “incorrect” democratic practice is also common to other Theravāda countries. In a 2006 sermon to a group of soldiers in southern Thailand, a monk explained that Thais did not use democracy in the correct way. Instead of acknowledging the validity of laws that determined what was correct and incorrect, Thais simply took what they personally liked to be correct and what they did not like to be incorrect. This mis-use of democracy had plunged the country into chaos (Transcription of December 28, 2006 sermon by Thammaiyut Abbot to Ingkayut Camp, Pattani Province; thanks to Michael Jerryson for sharing this reference). This monk is accusing Thais of practicing a selfish and over-individualized version of democracy, contrary to the ideals of a Buddhist conception of democracy, which would celebrate selflessness and removing the focus from the individual.

<sup>16</sup> While the military government labeled any opposition as opposition to “the state,” much of the democratic opposition as well as many of the ethnic resistance movements would probably clarify that their opposition was to a *military-controlled* state.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Zarni (2011) and New York Times (2011).

noticeable because it occurred before the more open press conditions that developed later in 2011.<sup>18</sup> I also noticed an increase in references to the topic of “clean government” in my interviews and conversations in the months following the President’s announcement.<sup>19</sup> While tangible reforms were slow to follow, the President did initiate an anti-poverty campaign and the military began to investigate and purge several top commanders, allegedly for corruption (The Irrawaddy 2001). Many of those in the activist and civil society communities also viewed the focus on clean government as possibly opening up avenues for reform, even as they acknowledged the challenges in changing an entrenched system (Soe Than Lynn 2011).

The new government’s statements in this regard were consistent with the actions of former governments and kings upon assuming power. Burmese monarchs commonly marked the beginning of their reign with rituals of purification, of both the *sangha* (community of monks) and the royal administration. Koenig has noted that this role was consistent with the “reformer” role of a Buddhist king as exemplified in the *Cakkavatti Sutta* (1990, 72ff). An ideal king was expected to restore the moral balance in society, by ridding the *sangha* of incorrect practices and beliefs, but also by changing the practices of the state, and by extension, the citizenry. In addition to resonating with the historical tradition, the democratic context also provided Myanmar’s new political authorities with an opportunity to disconnect themselves from the practices of the former military government and establish their own legitimacy based on “correct” moral practices of government.

This analysis of military views suggests a conception of democracy as “rule-following,” similar in some ways to Schumpeter’s classical definition of an “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (1942, 269). To the degree that the Burmese military has embraced democratic decision-making, it has acknowledged that the right to participate is “every citizen’s primary right and duty” (A

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<sup>18</sup> *The Voice* journal, which was one of the first to begin testing the new government’s more hands-off censorship position, was particularly active on the topic of “clean government,” publishing dozens of articles and editorials in the months following the President’s speech.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps most interesting was the way in which some citizens used the phrase almost as a weapon in responding to the daily instances of corruption they encountered. In July 2011 I accompanied some Burmese friends to visit one of their relatives in a hospital in Yangon. Although we arrived just within the period when visiting was supposed to be free, the guards at the door demanded we pay a fee. My friends, furious at what they saw as evidence of systemic corruption (and no doubt emboldened by my presence as a foreigner) proceeded to berate the guards. This event was rare enough, but I realized that as they argued with the guards in Burmese, they repeatedly used the English phrase “clean government.” This was both an indication of the use of the phrase to challenge corrupt practices, but also the power it carried as a marker of proper political conduct. My friends’ conception of clean government, they explained later, was rooted in the Buddha’s teachings about selfless moral conduct, and how that provided the basis for correct political action.

Retired Government Employee 2008, 10).<sup>20</sup> At the same time it has emphasized the need for the process to be orderly and controlled, reflecting both Buddhist beliefs on the purpose of political authority as well as the military's own intense fear of the disintegration of the political community. The emphasis on unity reinforces the narrative of skepticism towards the moral ability of individuals to participate in democratic politics in the "correct" manner, their inability to follow the rules of democracy in a disciplined manner. This suggests that the military also conceives of democratic participation as a privilege, a claim that is supported by their closely managed transition process. From the government perspective, the "rules" are not merely democratic procedures of justice or fair play. Disciplined democratic conduct requires (or maybe permits?) participation, but participation guided by a devotion to unity above all else. And, as we have seen, unity is a reflection of correct moral conduct, one's ability to think and act beyond one's own selfish interests. In this way, democratic "rule-following" establishes standards that are not simply based on compliance with procedures and outcomes, but also on the ideal moral conduct of citizens.

Even as there are reasons to be encouraged by the new civilian government's embrace of some reforms and a more open political process, we should remember that its notion of democracy remains somewhat limited. Scholars have contested Schumpeter's definition and argued that an increase in mere "electoralism" does not necessarily entail an increase in "democracy" (Schaffer 1998). The new government has enacted reforms, released prisoners, and responded to popular demands in a few high profile cases, but it has also engineered a democratic transition that ensures a strong central (military) leadership will remain. I revisit this idea below when I consider both the government and monastic views of democracy as containing elements of guardianship.

### **Liberal Democracy or Moral Democracy?: Activist and Opposition Views**

The next group whose views I examine are the activists of the democratic opposition. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the most well-known and she has spoken as well as written at length about the Buddhist roots of her commitment to democracy. I also draw from interviews with democracy advocates and members of civil society organizations both inside and outside of the country. Additionally, I look at the activities of many of these groups and the ways in which they interpret their community development work as part of a broader understanding of democratic change.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been the most prominent of the voices calling for democracy in Myanmar. Her status as the daughter of the country's independence hero General Aung San gave her almost

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<sup>20</sup> Bur. နိုင်ငံသားတိုင်း မူလအခွင့်အရေးဖြစ်သလို တာဝန်လဲဖြစ်ပါပေတယ်။

instant credibility with much of the Burmese public as soon as she decided to become involved in the demonstrations of 1988. Although the military government consistently attempted to portray her as either under the influence of foreign elements or as a foreigner herself, she proved to be very skilled at situating her ideas about democracy and human rights within a Theravadin-influenced Burmese discourse on politics and communicating them to Burmese audiences.

Aung San Suu Kyi usually discusses democracy in a way that is consistent with Western liberal democracy.<sup>21</sup> Human rights, free and fair elections, and a number of other freedoms figure prominently in her speeches. Since the beginning of her political involvement she has spoken out strongly against what she calls the “twin myths of [Burmese] unfitness for political responsibility and the unsuitability of democracy for their society” (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 167). Although Burmese people had very little experience of democracy in the past, she asserted that it appealed to their “common-sense notions of what was due to a civilized society” (168). In her view, democracy is completely compatible with Buddhism since the former is an “integrated social and ideological system based on respect for the individual” and the latter “places the greatest value on man” (173-4).

Aung San Suu Kyi has often explained democracy in Buddhist terms, transposing the Ten Duties of the King from a guide for monarchs to a set of expectations for a modern democratic government. In speaking of the second duty, *thila* (morality), she has emphasized the causal links between the conduct of the ruler and the prosperity of the nation. Depending on one’s interpretation, the causal arrows can point in different directions. For example, Ledi Sayadaw suggested that it was the lapse in moral conduct among the Burmese people as a whole that had resulted in their subservient position under colonial rule. Others have suggested that the doctrine of *kan* implies that people get the government they deserve. Aung San Suu Kyi followed the reasoning of the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, claiming that “The root of a nation’s misfortune has to be sought in the moral failings of the government” (1991, 171). She insisted that a lack of moral purity in the political authority, whether monarchical or democratic, would set the tone for the conduct of the rest of the people. Additionally, under a political structure characterized by immorality, moral acts would be discouraged, if not actively punished, making the practice of the moral life even more difficult for citizens (182).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For the most part her speeches in English and in Burmese use similar language and concepts. The primary difference is that when she speaks or writes in English she appears to make more of an effort at linking her ideas to common concepts or thinkers in the Western political tradition. She uses many of the same basic terms (e.g. “human rights”) in Burmese but directs her comments to Burmese audiences more specifically to Burmese situations or local conditions.

<sup>22</sup> Surprisingly, the Cambodian Communist Saloth Sar, who would later go on to lead the Khmer Rouge’s murderous regime as Pol Pot, expressed similar sentiments in his early writings. In 1952 he wrote that a “democratic regime

Even though she has blamed the deterioration of morality on the government's violations of human rights, she has also suggested that efforts to promote democracy will be inhibited by a lack of moral conduct among citizens. In a speech on March 13, 1989 she explained to listeners that as people gradually lost their rights, their moral conduct correspondingly declined. The Burmese people would not be able to achieve their primary goal of democracy if they did not attend to and improve their morality, although this process would also be easier if the government would grant its citizens basic rights (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995, 155-6).

She has not, however, absolved individuals completely from their political responsibilities. In a speech on the topic of solidarity among ethnic groups, she touched on "the real meaning of democracy" (1991, 229). She considered why the BSPP (the socialist government that ruled from 1962-1988) was able to last so long if it was so inept. "I think that the BSPP gained control of the government because the citizens failed to carry out the duties of citizenship" (230). Democracy requires active participation of its citizens and Aung San Suu Kyi has conceptualized this participation as a moral duty. In describing that duty as working for the national interest, rather than more narrow interests, she alludes to the Buddhist virtue of selflessness.<sup>23</sup> Buddhists in Burma sometimes explain political greed as being motivated by *atta seiti*, a mind focused only on selfish personal gain.<sup>24</sup> Here *atta* is the "self" that is found to be illusory in the Buddhist idea of *anattā*. Thus, correct democratic practice begins with moral cultivation based on *anattā*, the understanding that there is no essential "self." At other times she has expressed a pragmatic, even utilitarian view of democracy. In a statement on May 26, 1998, she said, "We want to work for democracy not because democracy is some kind of magic word, or some kind of magic state, but because we believe this is the only way we can resolve the social, economic and political problems of our country" (Blum et al 2010, 98). From this point of view, democratic participation is valuable because of the assumption that it will result in a more inclusive political process and better decisions by the government. She has also advocated for democracy on the grounds that it supports freedom more than any other political system. In her first public speech on August 26, 1988 in front of the famous Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, she borrowed her father's words: "Democracy is the only ideology which is consistent with freedom" (1991, 200).

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will bring back the Buddhist moralism because our great leader Buddha was the first to have taught (democracy)" (quoted in Harris 2005, 160-61).

<sup>23</sup> Here we can see resonance with the idea of unity as a moral concept in which an individual moves beyond his own selfish interests.

<sup>24</sup> Bur. အတ္တစိတ်

Her conception of democracy is similar to many other activists in its focus on freedom. Josef Silverstein has suggested that “implicit in her writings and speeches is the idea that freedom is a universal idea” but I would argue that the Buddhist roots of her conception of freedom actually qualify the presumed universality of the liberal understanding of freedom (1996, 225). In another essay, she suggested that “rulers must observe the teachings of the Buddha. Central to these teachings are the concepts of truth, righteousness and loving kindness” (1991, 177). A democratic politics based on Buddhist truth and righteousness would be one that is rooted in the proper moral conduct of its citizens. Aung San Suu Kyi’s conception of democracy is one in which freedom is bounded not by arbitrary laws or authoritarian dictates, but by each individual’s commitment to correct moral practice.

This view is reinforced by a speech that she made on May 27, 1999. Talking to a group of supporters and explaining why the NLD insisted that the government recognize the results of the elections in 1990, she strongly denounced disloyalty (Blum et al 2010, 102). She acknowledged that according to democracy, each citizen can exercise particular rights, including voting and the right to free speech. However, she immediately qualified this statement, claiming that if one were to act disloyally in exercising those rights, he should be considered a “traitor,” a “renegade,” and “faithless.” One intention of this speech was undoubtedly to reassure those who had stood alongside the NLD through over a decade of political repression and to cajole and warn those who might be thinking of abandoning the party. But her language also suggests that she sees a moral underpinning to basic democratic practices and a morally “correct” way to engage in activities such as voting, forming and supporting parties, and publicly expressing opinions.

A related understanding of freedom in a democratic context addresses the question of what individuals are freeing themselves from. One of Aung San Suu Kyi’s most well-known English language essays was entitled “Freedom From Fear” and in it she wrote optimistically of a future in which the citizens of Myanmar would no longer be in thrall to fear, either the fear of being subjected to abusive power or the fear among those who exercise that power of losing it. However, closely connected to this democratic change is her call for a “revolution of the spirit,” a necessary component of the process that will prepare the citizens of Myanmar for democratic practice. There are structural elements that oppose this change, as she acknowledges when she says that “Without a revolution of the spirit, the forces which produced the iniquities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration” (1991, 183). However, behind these structural elements are

the qualities that emerge when people ignore their moral practice, namely “desire, ill will, ignorance and fear” (183).<sup>25</sup>

She underscores this understanding of the moral foundation necessary for democratic practice in the following sentences. “Free men are the oppressed who go on trying and who in the process make themselves fit to bear the responsibilities and to uphold the disciplines which will maintain a free society...A people who would build a nation in which strong, democratic institutions are firmly established as a guarantee against state-induced power must first learn to liberate their own minds from apathy and fear” (183). First, we should note her usage of the dual sense of freedom/liberation, from oppression and from mental defilements. Also important, however, is her insistence that each one must purify and liberate his or her mind *before* they can be considered ready for participation in “strong, democratic institutions.” Once again, a correct understanding of democratic values and practices rests on a foundation of correct moral practice. This conception of democracy is strengthened when we turn to examine two related ideas that her conception of democracy shares with the military’s understanding.

Departing somewhat from common liberal understandings of democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi has frequently cited unity (*nyi nyut chin*) and discipline (*si kan*) as two of the most important components of democracy.<sup>26</sup> She mentioned unity over a dozen times in her first speech at Shwedagon and discipline almost as often, reminding listeners that her father also stressed the need for the people to be disciplined (1991, 203). She asserted that in order “to achieve democracy the people should be united...If the people are disunited, no ideology or form of government can bring much benefit to the country” (200). Similarly, “if there is no discipline, no system can succeed” (200).

Of course, discipline was necessary for the opposition movement. It faced a well organized (not to mention well armed) military government. But her other statements about the relationship between democracy, truth, and righteousness make it clear that here discipline (*si kan*) refers not only to proper conduct but more specifically to proper *moral* conduct (*thila*). The discipline necessary for proper democratic participation is that which suppresses egoism, desire, ill-will, ignorance, and fear. These are, unsurprisingly, the qualities targeted for eradication through the practice of *thila*. The ideas of unity (*nyi nyut chin*) and discipline (*si kan/thila*) provide a common grounding for the democratic perspectives of both Aung San Suu Kyi and the military.

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<sup>25</sup> These are the four *agati* (corruptions/biases/hindrances) that we have encountered in previous chapters.

<sup>26</sup> Bur. ညီညွတ်ခြင်း and စည်းကမ်း.

Another important set of voices in the democratic opposition belongs to the 88 Generation students. Members of this group were among the leaders of the student protests in 1988 and many were imprisoned on and off for over a decade. Some, including Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, two of the most prominent members of the group, were released briefly in 2007 only to be swiftly re-arrested as a result of their anti-government activism in the months before the monastic protests in September 2007. Both of them were among the many political prisoners that Thein Sein’s government unexpectedly released on January 13, 2012 and they once again added their voices to those calling for more concrete democratic reforms. In an interview just after his release, Min Ko Naing returned to themes he first talked about in speeches in 1988 and which align exactly with Aung San Suu Kyi’s understanding of democracy. “It is very important to have discipline and unity. We have to show that we deserve democracy” (The Voice 2012).<sup>27</sup> Again, both discipline and unity are prerequisites for correct democratic practice and both are rooted in correct moral practice.

Bo Gyi is a Burmese democracy activist who lives in Thailand and works with the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP). In an interview he discussed his own view of democracy, which he believes extends beyond politics.<sup>28</sup> He noted that imprisonment brought together people from many different backgrounds and the conditions made disagreements inevitable. However, their vulnerable position as prisoners meant that if arguments escalated they would be punished and might not survive. Gradually they developed skills in negotiation and compromise, what he calls “practices (*a-lay a-gyin*) of democracy.”<sup>29</sup> While these skills would obviously be a part of democratic politics, he also saw their value in other spheres, a democratic orientation toward daily interactions.<sup>30</sup> He went on to explain that he and his fellow prisoners’ practice of democracy matured because of their religious practice (*batha taya lay gyin*).<sup>31</sup> For Bo Gyi, the ability to act in a democratic way, whether in politics or in prison, originated in personal moral practice.

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<sup>27</sup> Bur. စည်းကမ်းရှိဖို့နဲ့ ညီညွတ်ဖို့ အလွန်အရေးကြီးတယ်။ ဒီမိုကရေစီနဲ့ ထိုက်တန်ကြောင်း ပြသဖို့ လိုတယ်။

<sup>28</sup> Personal Interview #47 in Mae Sot; July 26, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Bur. အလေ့အကျင့်. Interestingly, this is the same term that Badgley (1965) found villagers used to refer to their own local political practices rather than the more common word for politics, *nain ngan ye*.

<sup>30</sup> We can compare this expanded view of democracy (which I also find in the sermons and writings of some monks later in this chapter) with John Dewey’s notion of “democracy as a way of life” (Dewey 1937). A potential point of disagreement might be between Dewey’s belief that democracy itself was a source of moral values that was experimental and non-absolutist, whereas Buddhist moral values would seem to be absolute. However, a Buddhist perspective might also draw inspiration from the “experimental” attitude expressed by the Buddha in the *Kālāma Sutta*.

<sup>31</sup> Bur. ဘာသာတရားလေ့ကျင့်

Other activists have developed similar views of democracy that extend beyond elections and rights. Some have identified what they see as inherently undemocratic traditions or practices in Burmese culture and have called for the democratization of other spheres as a way to foster a democratic spirit among the population. Individuals inside and outside of the country identified education as an area ripe for democratization. Bo Gyi thought that even monastery schools, usually bastions of hierarchy, should begin to incorporate collective decision-making.<sup>32</sup> One monk from a prominent teaching monastery in Mandalay talked excitedly about a “child-centered approach” to teaching, a buzz word among NGO workers in the country.<sup>33</sup> The massive community rebuilding projects that followed the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 also provided opportunities for implementing democratic decision-making processes at local levels.

### **Democracy and *Dhamma*: The Role of Monks in Developing a Buddhist Interpretation of Democracy**

My argument in this dissertation has been that the Theravāda moral universe has provided an important conceptual framework within which Buddhists in Myanmar think about politics. Even though very few monks in Myanmar speak explicitly about politics or democracy, in their sermons, teachings, and writings they regularly reinforce this conception of a moral universe and its application to every aspect of human existence. This is a role that monks have consistently played within Buddhist communities and the *sangha* in Myanmar is no exception. The spread of VCD and DVD technology and the increased availability of printed materials have made monks’ messages ubiquitous throughout the country. And, although many Buddhists in Myanmar also focus on “higher teachings” such as the *abhidhamma* (Theravāda Buddhist philosophy) and *vipassanā* (insight) meditation when compared with other Theravāda countries, most monks’ sermons and writings retain a focus on everyday morality and how the Buddha’s teachings can help people to make sense of the circumstances and events in their lives.

The role of monks in connecting Buddhism with democracy has become more prominent since the 2010 elections because, unlike the parliamentary era (1948-62) or the period following the 1988 protests, neither government officials nor opposition figures have talked in detail about the Buddhist roots of democratic practice. The electoral campaigns of November 2010 and April 2012 featured few references to Buddhism or to the Buddhist practice of candidates. Even Aung San Suu Kyi’s statements since 2010 have focused more on particular policy prescriptions rather than the ways in which Buddhist

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<sup>32</sup> Personal Interview #47 in Mae Sot; July 26, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Personal Interview #33 in Yangon; July 3, 2011.

values inform her conception of democracy (although those values are still implicit in much of her rhetoric). In the absence of other political figures from the government or the opposition explicitly discussing the role of Buddhist beliefs and values in the realm of politics, the actions of monks in reinforcing the moral nature of political action take on even more significance. I see monks as having both indirect and direct effects on perceptions of politics in Myanmar, particularly with reference to conceptions of democracy.

We have already seen how monks have explained both individual and collective success in business, politics and social affairs as the result of correct moral action. At the end of the nineteenth century the Ledi Sayadaw attributed the Burmese defeat and humiliation at the hands of the British, at least in part, to the failure of Burmese Buddhists to uphold the precepts and protect morality in their communities (Braun 2008, 75ff). He suggested that certain morally appropriate behavioral changes (such as refraining from eating beef) would reorient Burmese Buddhists on the correct moral path, which was a necessary first step to political independence. Contemporary monks have reiterated the connections between moral action and collective circumstances, as evidenced by this quote from a sermon of the Twante Sayadaw. “If you know cause and effect then you know that doing something bad creates a bad result and you won’t do it anymore...if the cause is not good, the effect won’t be good; the effect will only be good if the cause [action] is good.”<sup>34</sup> Beyond simply acting in morally praiseworthy ways, this monk emphasized the necessity of a particular epistemological perspective, a mind that sees the world as functioning according to cause and effect.

Other monks avoid preaching about politics but write about religious topics that either have multiple interpretations or contain resonance with previous discussions of Buddhism and politics in Myanmar. For example, Sayadaw U Zawtika’s widely read book, *Lut Lat Thaw Seit (A Free Mind)*, contains virtually no mention of politics (2006). He writes of freedom from greed, anger, and ignorance (*lawba, dawtha, and mawha*) and of the benefits in one’s daily life of cultivating this type of freedom through correct moral action. The topic, however, recalls discussions during the colonial period that linked spiritual/moral freedom with material/political freedom; some argued that political independence was a necessary condition for the optimal circumstances of correct moral practice while others suggested that political emancipation could never be realized without the correct moral

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<sup>34</sup> Public sermon given at the Thirty-fourth Street *Taya Pwe* on January 31, 2011; Bur. အကြောင်းအကျိုးတွေသာ သိလာပြီဆိုရင် မကောင်းတာလုပ်ရင် မကောင်းကျိုးရမယ်ဆိုပြီးတော့ မလုပ်တော့ဘူး။...အကြောင်းမကောင်းရင် အကျိုးမကောင်းဘူး။ အကြောင်းကောင်းမှ အကျိုးကောင်းမယ်။

orientation.<sup>35</sup> U Zawtika's discussion of multiple meanings of freedom also evokes the National League for Democracy (NLD) narrative of spiritual freedom through meditation practice despite physical incarceration (Houtman 1999).

The popular monk Ashin Seikeinda wrote a weekly column in *The Voice* journal (published in Yangon and online) through much of 2011. Although he avoided explicit reference to politics in the column, his presence as an author in a media outlet explicitly oriented towards politics (*The Voice* journal has a reputation among Burmese readers as focusing heavily on political issues) reinforced the relevance of Buddhist teachings to political activities. It functioned as a reminder to readers of the moral context in which they should interpret the political content of the journal. This is by no means a new or unique practice. The English language daily *The Burman*, published in the country from the mid-1940s through the 1950s, added a weekly Buddhist Supplement to its publication in 1955. After the appearance of this supplement, the newspaper's editorials also began to engage more with Buddhist topics, occasionally incorporating them directly into analysis of political and social affairs. These examples point to ways in which monks are continuing their role as moral guides of the Buddhist community by disseminating the Buddha's teachings in a number of forums and reinforcing the relevance of proper moral conduct to every aspect of a Burmese Buddhist's daily life. In addition to this, there are also some monks whose engagement with politics is more explicit.

U Nyanissara, also known as Sitagu Sayadaw, is unquestionably the most well-known monk in Myanmar today. He oversees a wide network of development projects, including hospitals, clinics, and a Buddhist university based in Sagaing. Sitagu Sayadaw took part in the 1988 protests as a monk. It was then that he gave a famous sermon, criticizing the government for not acting in accordance with the *min gyin taya hse ba*, the Ten Duties of the King.<sup>36</sup> His interpretation of this aspect of the Buddha's teachings was similar to Aung San Suu Kyi's, in that he re-imagined the duties as expectations of a legitimate political authority and criticized the military government for failing to live up to them. When the government cracked down on the protests, he left the country, going to study in the United States. Since his return in the mid-1990s, he has successfully navigated the dangerous waters of Burmese politics, maintaining close ties to prominent members of the military and refusing to let monks leave his monastery to participate in the 2007 protests, while also speaking out against government repression and mismanagement, especially in the period following Cyclone Nargis.

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<sup>35</sup> See the discussion of this subject in Chapter 3 for more detail.

<sup>36</sup> Bur. မင်းကျင့်တရားဆယ်ပါး

Because of his status in the country and his connections across political divides, at times Sitagu Sayadaw has played a mediating role, particularly between the government and the NLD. In June 2011, he used the occasion of the opening of the Yangon branch of his Sitagu Buddhist Academy to preach to attendees from both groups about the need for unity in order to have a thriving democracy, a common theme among many of the individuals in this chapter (Zaw Naung Lin and Thant Zin Oo 2011). In a speech to the UN on May 16, 2011, he shifted his focus from the ten duties of the king to the ten perfections (*paramis*) as necessary qualities for political leadership (Sitagu Sayadaw 2011). In discussing *thila* (moral discipline), he noted how most interactions between national leaders are devoid of *thila* and instead are based on ego and selfishness (*atta*). He reminded the audience of the Buddha's teaching that perfection in morality is the root of success and perfection in any other field.

The Venerable Rewata Dhamma was another Burmese monk who used his moral authority to act as an international advocate for Buddhist values and to criticize the military government. In November 1989 he gave a speech in New York City in which he also cited the ten duties of the king as the evaluative criteria for a political regime, whether monarchical or democratic. His interpretation, however, differed from those offered by most other members of the democratic opposition in that he wished to minimize the focus on individual rights of citizens and reorient democratic practice toward duties, of a government to its citizens and of citizens to each other. "The ten "duties of the king" quoted at the beginning of this address are an example of the Buddhist approach to rights and responsibilities, which is to emphasize duties or responsibilities rather than codified rights set out in international or domestic law" (Rewata Dhamma 1989, 4). This reinterpretation is consistent with the method utilized by the Buddha in his teachings on the duties of the householder or the *Mingala Sutta*, which Buddhists in Myanmar regard as providing guidance as to the duties one owes to relatives or those worthy of respect. While Ven. Rewata Dhamma does not provide details of what an emphasis on duties or responsibilities might entail, we might imagine a different set of institutions than are common in rights-based liberal democracy.

Another group of monks that has been more explicit about their interest in politics is the small faction that was one of the primary organizing forces behind the 2007 "Saffron Revolution." Although responsibility and credit for the coordination of monks marching in cities and towns across the country must go beyond any single group, and should include networks of monks, lay supporters, and activists, as well as the often overlooked efforts of the *thila-shin* (nuns), one of the most prominent groups claiming to speak for the monks was the All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA). According to their own

documents, the ABMA was formed on September 9, 2007 by six monks.<sup>37</sup> The founding group included U Gambira, who was jailed in 2007 and released in early 2012 and Ashin Issariya (a.k.a. King Zero), who escaped to Thailand after the protests and has remained a prominent critic of the Burmese government and advocate for democracy.<sup>38</sup> Both before and after the protests, Ashin Issariya led a group of monks and lay people who published and distributed pamphlets and journals that contained poems and articles on topics including human rights, the role of the *sangha* in Burmese society, and democracy. These articles provide another range of perspectives on democracy from a monastic point of view.<sup>39</sup>

It is clear from the nature of the articles in these publications that Ashin Issariya and the other contributors advocate an understanding of *kan* that emphasizes the possibility of change, rather than the inevitability of experiencing the effects of past actions.<sup>40</sup> The author of one article declares that people can create their world as they desire it. “People are creatures who create their own conditions through their own actions (*kan kyama*)<sup>41</sup>, who want to be free, and who have a strong desire to be free. People have a nature and ability that opposes repression and control. That nature is democracy/democratic” (Hti La Aung 2007, 38).<sup>42</sup> The author interprets freedom within the context of the Buddhist doctrine of cause and effect, emphasizing people’s ability to change their circumstances; this appears to be a challenge to the common conception of *anattā* as no control. From this point of view, democracy is valuable as a political system because it enables and supports human efforts to create their world freely, as they desire it.

<sup>37</sup> This information is in a self-published pamphlet that includes a narrative of the founding and activities of the group as well as their communications leading up to the protests.

<sup>38</sup> While the pen name “King Zero” may appear to be inappropriately grandiose for a monk who is a democratic activist, the name has very different implications in Burmese. On the one hand, it expresses the desire to have no king or authoritarian ruler. In a deeper sense, the word *thounya*, besides meaning “zero,” can also indicate negation, so the name has symbolic power in that it attempts to negate the power of an absolute ruler. King Zero’s pen name is squarely within a long Burmese tradition of aliases that seek to symbolically undermine the authority and standing of an opponent. One of the most prominent contemporary examples is the 88 Generation Students activist Min Ko Naing, whose name means “Conqueror of Kings” (Clymer 2003).

<sup>39</sup> According to Ashin Issariya, the articles in these journals were written by him and several other monks. They used a number of different pseudonyms, so none of the names in the following section refer to real individuals.

<sup>40</sup> Ashin Issariya told me that he grew up believing in the fatalistic view of *kan* and *parami*, but after attending university he started to think that this interpretation was wrong, so he began preaching about it, trying to change other peoples’ perspectives (Interview in Mae Sot, July 24, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> This phrase can mean “destiny,” but here it more explicitly refers to the general process of cause and effect based on *kan*.

<sup>42</sup> Bur. လူဆိုသည်မှာ ကိုယ့်ကံကြမ္မာကို ကိုယ့်ခံစားမှုနဲ့ ကိုယ်တိုင် ဖန်တီးလိုသော၊ လွတ်လပ်ချင်သော၊ လွတ်လပ်ချင်သည့်ဆန္ဒပြင်းစွာရှိသော သတ္တဝါဖြစ်သည်လို့ ဆိုကြတာကိုကြားဖူးပါတယ်။ သို့ဆိုလျှင် ဖိနှိပ်မှု၊ ချုပ်ချယ်မှုတို့ကို မလိုလားသော၊ ဆန့်ကျင်တတ်သော သဘောသည် လူ၏ ပင်ကိုယ်သတ္တိပင်ဖြစ်သည်။ ထိုသည်ပင်ဒီမိုကရေစီဖြစ်ပါသည်။

Like Aung San Suu Kyi, these writers consider and strongly reject claims that democracy is not compatible with either Buddhism or Burmese culture. They respond to concerns that, as a political system that originated in the West, democracy might not conform with the Buddha's teachings or, even worse, would destroy traditional Burmese culture. One author states that, "Without exception, democracy includes people's dignity, people's worth, and purity of mind/spirit, things that are all included under the teachings of the Buddha" (Hti La Aung 2007, 40).<sup>43</sup> In fact, an interesting facet of his definition of democracy is that it would "protect traditional religion" (ibid.).<sup>44</sup> Another article discusses the differences between Christian and Buddhist conceptions of human rights. Since Buddhists do not believe in a creator god, the claim that "all men are created equal" is not sufficient to anchor democracy and equality from a Buddhist perspective. Instead, this author uses the *mettā sutta* and its insistence on cultivating feelings of non-discriminating *mettā* (loving-kindness) towards all living beings to derive a practical obligation for valuing and preserving human rights (Ashin Laba 2008, 30).

The authors of these journals also argue that the Buddha's teachings contain the essence of democracy, a common claim among many Burmese writers. "Democracy is not something that only just appeared. The Buddha had already preached about it twenty-five hundred years ago. In the Buddha's teachings, he thoroughly discussed human rights...The Buddha's doctrine (*taya*) is in accordance with democracy" (Sanda Shin 2009, 16).<sup>45</sup> This writer situates democratic values within the *Kālāma Sutta*, a teaching that many democratic activists in Myanmar revere, and which Aung San also championed.<sup>46</sup> In this *sutta*, the leaders of the Kālāma people were confronted by many different doctrines and were confused as to which was actually correct. The Buddha advised them not to accept something as truth merely because of tradition or because their parents or teachers told them it was true, or even because the Buddha himself preached it. They should examine it and only when they themselves have determined that it is true, should they accept it as truth.<sup>47</sup> The author concludes that the Buddha never

<sup>43</sup> Bur. လူ့သိက္ခာ၊ လူ့တန်ဖိုးနှင့် စိတ်ထားဖြူစင်ရိုးသားမှု ရှိရမယ်ဆိုသော ဘုရားရှင်တို့၏ အဆုံးအမအောက်၌ ဒီမိုကရေစီသည် ခြွင်းချက်မရှိ အကျုံးဝင်ပါသည်။

<sup>44</sup> Bur. မိရိုးဖလာဓလေ့ထုံးစံကို စောင့်ထိန်းခြင်း

<sup>45</sup> Bur. ဒီမိုကရေစီဆိုတာ အခုပေါ်လာတာမဟုတ်ပါဘူး။ လွန်ခဲ့တဲ့ နှစ်ပေါင်းနှစ်ထောင်ငါးရာကျော်ကတည်းက မြတ်ဗုဒ္ဓကဟောခဲ့ပြီးသားလေ။ မြတ်ဗုဒ္ဓရဲ့ တရားတော်တွေမှာ လူ့အခွင့်အရေးတွေကို အပြည့်အဝ ဟောထားပြီးသား။...မြတ်ဗုဒ္ဓရဲ့ တရားတော်တွေဟာ ဒီမိုကရေစီ နည်းလမ်းကျတဲ့ တရားတော်တွေပါပဲ။

<sup>46</sup> Sayadaw U Zawtika also takes this text as the starting point for his book *Lut Lat thaw Seit (A Free Mind)*.

<sup>47</sup> While some people interpret this *sutta* as a call to challenge tradition, one young man from a suburb of Yangon, active in his local Buddhist youth organization, told me that it needs to be understood in the proper context. That is, the Buddha gave this advice to people who were confronted with many different doctrines and needed a

forced his disciples to believe or act a certain way; Buddhism is a religion of free choice. Similarly, democracy is a political system of free choice and the Buddha espoused this basic principle of democracy long ago.

Even though many of the articles describe democracy in terms reminiscent of liberalism (for example, claiming that human rights are an inalienable birthright of all people<sup>48</sup>) one author also understands democratic practice as characterized by *si kan* (discipline), the same word used by both the military and Aung San Suu Kyi, and a qualifier that liberals might strongly oppose (Hit La Aung 2007, 40). Hti La Aung lists a number of qualities and practices that embody democracy and *si kan* is complemented by morality, which reinforces the central place of correct moral action in politics, even in a democracy.<sup>49</sup> The rest of the list includes equality<sup>50</sup>, unity, citizenship, protecting traditional religion, courage, cultivating the six qualities of a leader<sup>51</sup>, and enthusiasm.

Unity is a recurring theme in many of the articles in these journals, just as it is a quality valued by both the military government and members of the opposition. In another article entitled “Let’s Unite,” the author connects unity to correct moral practice and control of one’s actions. “In a united people we will see that the conduct of their body and mind is honest, their moral conduct (*ko gyint thila taya*) is good, and the strength of their mental qualities is great” (Shin Nan Gaung 2007, 16).<sup>52</sup> This is reminiscent of the Buddha’s advice to the Vajjians regarding national strength through unity and proper conduct. It also recalls Ledi Sayadaw’s letter about moral conduct and its collective effects. The author goes on to state that, “unity needs control/restraint (*htein chouk*) through proper moral conduct and an even mind,” reminding readers that, like everything else in the world, unity in politics begins with correct understanding and practice of the Buddha’s teachings (16).<sup>53</sup>

Apart from Sitagu Sayadaw, who occupies a special place because of his prestige and connections in high places, and monks who publish and distribute political pamphlets underground, one of the monks in Myanmar who has occasionally connected Buddhist messages explicitly to politics is the

method to avoid being confused. Since Burmese Buddhists already had the teachings of the Buddha to follow, they should turn instead to the *Mingala Sutta*, which advises obedience to parents and elders.

<sup>48</sup> Shin Daza 2007, 10. Bur. လူ့အခွင့်အရေးဆိုတာ လူသားတိုင်းမှာ မွေးရာပါ ပိုင်ဆိုင်ပြီးသား အရာပါ။

<sup>49</sup> The author of the article translates “ကိုယ်ကျင့်တရားကောင်းမွန်ခြင်း” as “morality” although I would translate it as “correct moral practice.”

<sup>50</sup> I would argue that the word he uses (“တရားမျှတမှုရှိခြင်း”) means “fairness/justice” more than “equality.”

<sup>51</sup> These qualities (*neyaka goun*) are patience, alertness, industry, sound judgment, mercy, vision.

<sup>52</sup> Bur. ညီညွတ်သူတို့မှာ ကိုယ်၊ စိတ်အမှုအရာတို့ ရိုးဖြောင့်မှုရှိခြင်း၊ ကိုယ်ကျင့်သီလတရားကောင်းခြင်း၊ ပညာဂုဏ်ကြီးမားခြင်းတို့ ပြည့်စုံနေသည်ကို တွေ့ရမည်ဖြစ်သည်။

<sup>53</sup> Bur. ...ညီညွတ်ခြင်းသည် မျှတသော အသိဉာဏ်၊ ကိုယ်ကျင့်တရားတို့ဖြင့် ထိန်းချုပ်ခြင်းတို့ လိုအပ်မည်။

Twante Sayadaw, Ashin Eindaga. I was initially struck by his remarks about politics (and specifically, about democracy) at a public sermon that I attended in downtown Yangon on January 31, 2011. It is important to note that Ashin Eindaga gave this sermon over a month before the civilian government took office and several months before the government began the process of easing restrictions on political discourse later in 2011.

In the sermon, entitled “Will you continue on or will you retreat?” Ashin Eindaga began by discussing the concept of *taya*.<sup>54</sup> *Taya* carries several meanings, dependent on context. It can refer to fairness, justice, or equality; to moral principles or moral truth; to a natural law or the nature of things; or to the specific law of the Buddha, *dhamma*. In this case, I understood him to be using the word *taya* to encompass all of these definitions to some degree, an interpretation I confirmed with several people who also listened to the sermon. His use of the word was consistent with monastic usage in sermons and consistent with the way that a layperson would understand it. *Taya* can carry multiple meanings because the last definition, *dhamma*, or the teachings of the Buddha, includes the previous elements. According to Theravādin teachings, the *dhamma* that the Buddha professed reflects natural law, applies equally to all beings, and provides humans with guidelines of proper moral conduct.

Ashin Eindaga told the audience that he was going to give them *taya hsay*, or *taya* medicine, which was the best medicine of all. *Taya* is related to everything and everyone can possess *taya* because everyone has to breathe.<sup>55</sup> He continued to describe aspects of *taya*, following a sort of call and response pattern that many monks use in their sermons. Sometimes he asked direct questions of the audience, sometimes he enlisted their help in providing the complement to sets of pairs, and sometimes he paused in the middle of a sentence to let the audience repeat a word or phrase that was an important component of the lesson.

After a brief section in which he told the audience that proper moral conduct was open to practitioners of any religion, his sermon turned directly to the political: “Democracy is Buddha’s doctrine. It is truly Buddha’s doctrine.”<sup>56</sup> Immediately after making this striking claim, he distanced himself from it, telling listeners that this was something Sitagu Sayadaw had already discussed in his sermon about *min gyint taya seh ba*, the ten duties of the king. In this case, merely mentioning Sitagu Sayadaw’s name provided Ashin Eindaga a sort of protection. He wasn’t preaching anything new, nor was he broaching a topic outside of the acceptable boundaries for monks. If one of the most prominent

<sup>54</sup> Bur. ရှေ့ဆက်တက်မှာလား နောက်ပြန်ဆုတ်မှာလား

<sup>55</sup> This was an indirect reference to the Theravāda Buddhist method of meditation through following the breath, which focuses the mind to allow a meditator to experience the direct truth of the present moment.

<sup>56</sup> Bur. ဒီမိုကရေစီဆိုတာ ဘုရားရဲ့မူ...တကယ်တော့ဗုဒ္ဓရဲ့မူ။

monks in the country had discussed this issue there should be no problem with him repeating the idea. (In my subsequent research many other Burmese people, both monks and lay people, confirmed that monks occasionally used Sitagu Sayadaw's name almost as a charm to allow them to say controversial things without drawing negative government attention to themselves.)

Ashin Eindaga went on to say, "If you have *taya*, you will have democracy...Democracy means acting in accordance with *taya*, having laws. If society is fully endowed with *thila* (morality), won't it also be fully endowed with democracy?"<sup>57</sup> This statement represents a particularly Buddhist interpretation of democracy. *Taya* is a requirement for democracy. *Taya* is also a quintessentially moral concept, something Ashin Eindaga reinforces in the second sentence when he mentions *thila*, which I translate here as "morality."<sup>58</sup> *Taya* can not only mean truth, it refers to the Buddhist truth of *dhamma*, a particular understanding of cause and effect (*kan*). By asserting that democracy means acting in accordance with *taya*, Ashin Eindaga reinforces the view that Buddhist moral teachings are not only relevant in the political realm, they are an essential element of a Burmese Buddhist understanding of democracy.<sup>59</sup>

Besides the moral dimension of the concepts of *thila* and *taya*, we should also note the explicit statement related to a more mundane form of *taya*. Ashin Eindaga follows up his definition of democracy as acting in accordance with *taya*, by clarifying that democracy also means having laws (*taya upade*). First, we can note the point of overlap with conceptions of democracy as "rule-following," something implied in the regular invocations of "discipline." Democracy is a system of governance structured by laws, with the expectation that citizens will follow those laws. However, Ashin Eindaga adds an additional element, implying that democratic laws must also be rooted in *taya*, Buddhist truth or *dhamma*. Recall that Aung San Suu Kyi also accorded "truth" a central place in her own conception of democracy.

To add an additional layer of complexity to the analysis, in between these statements about democracy, Ashin Eindaga reminded his audience that, "I'm not preaching about *nain ngan ye*

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<sup>57</sup> Bur. တရားရှိရင် ဒီမိုကရေစီရမယ်။...ဒီမိုကရေစီဆိုတာ တရားနှင့်အညီ လုပ်နေကြတာလေ။ ဥပဒေတရားတွေရှိတာကို။ သီလနဲ့ ပြည့်စုံပြီးဆိုရင် ဒီမိုကရေစီမပြည့်စုံဘူးလား။

<sup>58</sup> *Thila* can mean morality in general or it can refer to specific sets of moral precepts that the Buddha prescribed for lay people, meditators, and monks.

<sup>59</sup> *Taya* can also mean "law" in general, but in the context of a monk's sermon, I believe that it is safe to interpret it according to its Buddhist meanings. In the following sentence, Ashin Eindaga uses the phrase *upade taya*, which unmistakably refers to law in its worldly, legal sense, and supports my broader interpretation of his previous usage of *taya*.

(politics).”<sup>60</sup> When I recounted the sermon after the fact, no Burmese listener was surprised at this statement. Since monks are forbidden from taking part in politics, he had to say this to protect himself, even though he did previously cloak himself in the protection of Sitagu Sayadaw. However, to most non-Burmese ears this would sound like a direct contradiction, or at the very least, a disingenuous statement. How can a commentary on democracy not be political? Here I would like to suggest a different way of interpreting this part of his sermon.

We can infer from Ashin Eindaga’s sermon and from the ways in which others in Myanmar use the word, that their understanding of democracy is not confined to a political context. If democracy means, in the words of this monk, “acting in accordance with *dhamma*,” then it is nothing more than living one’s life according to the Buddha’s teachings. He can argue that this discussion of democracy is not “politics” because he and other Burmese have appropriated the word “democracy” to imply ideal conduct and interaction with others in any sphere.<sup>61</sup> And, like the monks who wrote the journal articles above, he can justify discussing democracy as a monk, since admonishing listeners about ideal moral conduct is a duty that falls squarely within the purview of the Buddhist monk.

Returning to the realm of politics, this broader understanding of democracy might refer to a political system that promotes the free choice and action of every individual. Democratic political participation ideally allows all citizens to create the conditions of their own lives, through their own *kan* (actions). From this point of view, authoritarianism in any form—whether a monarchy, a colonial administration, or a military dictatorship—would be inconsistent with free human action, the doctrine of the Buddha. This “free” action is, however, constrained by its basis in moral practice. That is, democratic freedom also means acting in accordance with the moral truths of Buddhism, as exemplified through the precepts, the *paramis*, and the ten duties of the king.

However, “free human action” is also limited in another important way. The “truth” of *taya* is that everything that exists is characterized by *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* (impermanence, dissatisfaction, and lack of control). Furthermore, acting in accordance with *dhamma* means recognizing that, while *kan* is not deterministic, one’s past actions always condition the possibilities of the present.<sup>62</sup> Ashin Eindaga’s definition of democracy implies an acceptance of the paradox that

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<sup>60</sup> Bur. နိုင်ငံရေးဟောတာလည်းမဟုတ်ဘူး။

<sup>61</sup> The Thai monk Buddhadasa was even more explicit in his attempts to reclaim and reinterpret democracy. He said that “there is no need to make democracy into something political, which is a complicated and troublesome business” (quoted in Santikaro Bhikkhu 1996, 164).

<sup>62</sup> One is reminded of Marx’s statement in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (1994, 188). The

freedom is, on the one hand, facilitated by institutions that encourage humans to create the conditions of their own future yet, on the other hand, constrained by knowledge of *anattā* as the truth that we do not retain ultimate control over the circumstances of our lives. The insight of this Burmese Buddhist conception of democracy is that, while a democratic political system encourages participation and free human action, it does not necessarily account for the corresponding commitment to acting in accordance with Buddhist *dhamma*. That is a lifelong, holistic process that requires an individual to bring every aspect of her life in line with the truth and it begins, as with most other processes described in this dissertation, with correct moral practice.

### **Comparing Views on Democracy**

There are a number of differences among the conceptions of democracy I have examined in this chapter. In practice, the military's "discipline-flourishing democracy" appears to be a form of guardianship cloaked in a democratic veneer. I look at this below, finding similarities with other versions of democracy in Southeast Asia and also noting the ways in which it is consistent with a particular interpretation of Theravāda moral logic. Despite this difference, however, the similarities between the three groups' ideas about democracy are perhaps more striking. Of interest here are the common themes of *nyi nyut chin* (unity) and *si kan* (discipline), which I also examine below.

### **On Democracy and Guardianship**

The military's strict rule over the country from 1962-2011, followed by a closely managed transition to "disciplined democracy" suggests that its conception of democracy may be closer to guardianship, the rule (by consent) of experts. Although the activist and monastic positions I have examined here generally argue against guardianship as limiting free human action, their descriptions of political action according to *dhamma* (the Buddha's teachings) and *taya* (Buddhist truth) should push us to evaluate the complexities of this view of democracy in more detail. While many posit democracy as directly opposed to guardianship, alternative conceptions of democracy (mostly developed in non-Western contexts) have challenged this dichotomy, providing an instructive comparison with Burmese views.

Robert Dahl examines several versions of guardianship in *Democracy and its Critics* (1989, Chapter 4). Plato's preferred form of political authority was the rule of philosopher-kings, those whose understanding of politics and ability to transcend individual interests allowed them to selflessly make the best decisions for the entire community. For Lenin, the members of the vanguard party were the

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difference, however, is that according to Buddhist doctrine the circumstances "from the past" are actually the result of an individual's own actions in the past.

only ones able to grasp the revolutionary imperative of communism; their guidance was necessary to lead the masses who had been psychologically conditioned under capitalism. And in B.F. Skinner's "utopia" of *Walden Two*, it is the behavioral psychologist's understanding of human nature that makes him the most qualified to lead the community. In all of these cases, some particular skill or ability sets an individual or group of individuals apart from the rest and justifies their rule over others. While this might seem antithetical to democracy, a number of political figures have tried to make the case that the two could be compatible (or could at least co-exist) given the logic of particular belief systems.

Outside of the Western tradition, this perspective is approximated most closely within Confucianism. The Confucian ideal of *ren* can be translated as human-ness, and it is essentially a relational concept, situating people within a web of (hierarchical) relationships and bearing particular commitments to others (Ackerly 2005). However, it is also understood as "humane-ness," that is, a set of qualities or attributes to be developed by individuals, and in this sense it has been a somewhat more restricted concept. Many have argued (see, for example, some of the studies in Bell 1995) that only certain people have the capacity to cultivate *ren*, since it requires an ability to engage in abstract philosophy similar to what Plato describes for his ideal rulers. Recognizing that the ability to engage in correct decision-making may not be distributed equally among the population, the Chinese Confucian scholar Jiang Qing has suggested that the moral capacity of political decision-makers be measured and evaluated, advocating a sort of moral meritocracy that combines elements of guardianship with (limited) democratic participation (cited in Bell 2010b, 26).

The process of democratization among the Tibetan government-in-exile has also displayed a creative fusion of elements of guardianship and democracy. Ann Frechette has discussed the importance that many Tibetans place on the role of the "enlightened mind" in political decision-making (2007). Historically in Tibet, the Dalai Lama was both a spiritual and political leader. As a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva (future Buddha) of compassion, the Dalai Lama would be uniquely suited to make selfless political decisions that would contribute to the security and development of the community. His political authority followed from his moral authority, which was itself the result of his proximity to spiritual and moral perfection.<sup>63</sup> Frechette acknowledges the potential for authoritarian rule in this model, which is similar in many ways to the Buddhist justifications that Burmese monarchs constructed for their own rule. She sees the process of democratization among Tibetans as a continuous

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<sup>63</sup> Tibetan Buddhism is part of the Mahāyāna tradition rather than the Theravāda tradition of Myanmar. However, their conception of "enlightened governance" is consistent with the logic of the Theravāda moral worldview.

dialectical exchange between the centralizing movement of “enlightened” governance and the centripetal pull of democratic participation.

All the same, there have been times in the brief history of the government-in-exile when the principle of enlightened governance has been democratically affirmed. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Tibetans experimented with different models of selecting their leaders, sometimes opting for the expansion of elections, and other times returning to a format in which the Dalai Lama appointed representatives. Although the Dalai Lama officially removed himself from political power in May 2011, the debate has continued over the appropriate political role of an individual who many, if not most, Tibetans believe to be morally superior to themselves.

A closer example would be the political thought of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a popular yet controversial Thai monk. Although he is a Theravāda monk, Buddhadasa has also incorporated elements of Mahāyāna doctrine into his philosophy and it is partly this that makes him so inspirational and transformative to some Thai Buddhists yet threatening and heretical to others. In an essay defending what he called “dictatorial dhammic socialism,” Buddhadasa distinguished between dhammic (moral) political actions and adhammic (immoral) ones (1989). He was critical of liberal democracy because he believed it simply provides an unrestrained freedom to citizens and leaders act immorally. He praised dictatorship as a useful method if employed in a way that compels people to act for their own benefit and argued that most individuals are not capable of making good decisions for themselves or others precisely because they are blinded by defilements (*kilesa*) and cannot see the truth of things according to *dhamma*.

From Buddhadasa’s perspective, if we know that a certain course of action is correct and beneficial, we should accept a situation in which we would be forced to take that course of action. This is the necessary path to morally correct behavior and we will benefit from being coerced if our greed and ignorance in a given moment prevents us from acting properly.<sup>64</sup> In the essay, Buddhadasa extolled the ten virtues of the king (which both Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Sitagu Sayadaw have attempted to interpret in a democratic way), asking rhetorically who could object to a monarch that exemplified these qualities? Based on his understanding of both *dhamma* and human nature, he strongly rejects the democratic argument that everyone is equally qualified to govern, but also recognizes the inherent dangers in authoritarian rule by a less than perfect monarch. His ultimate conclusion is that the proper “dictator” of human actions should be the *dhamma* itself. While consistent with Theravāda moral logic,

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<sup>64</sup> The similarity of Buddhadasa’s argument to Rousseau’s claims in *The Social Contract* regarding individuals being “forced to be free” is striking and a topic that I intend to explore in more detail in future research.

this conclusion raises more questions that Buddhadasa leaves unanswered, questions that are relevant for a discussion of democracy. If human beings are all flawed and ignorant, who is qualified to interpret *dhamma*? Buddhadasa also mentions the example of a consensus-based assembly in the Buddhist *suttas*,<sup>65</sup> but gives no guidance as to how *dhamma* could be institutionalized as the guide of society, leaving us with another unsettled mix of democracy and guardianship.

It seems clear that the Burmese military's version of democracy includes a strong guardianship element. For six decades their rhetoric has reinforced the narrative of the *tatmadaw* (Armed Forces) as the saviors of the nation. And, despite ample evidence to the contrary, they have continued to portray military leaders as the only ones capable of making impartial decisions for the benefit of the entire nation. While Aung San Suu Kyi and other democratic activists situate proper, moral democratic practice in selflessness (the root of unity and discipline), military leaders would claim that the *tatmadaw* already embodies these qualities, giving that institution a particular type of Buddhist democratic legitimacy. Guardianship is also written into the quasi-democratic 2008 constitution of Myanmar. Twenty-five percent of the seats in the parliament are reserved for members of the military, presumably because those members will not be influenced by partisan politics, and other provisions provide for the continued role of the military in the governance of the country.

It also seems clear that the conceptions of democracy espoused by the activists and the monks, despite some differences, are consistent in their rejection of guardianship in favor of universal rights to political participation. However, I argue that their common Theravāda moral conceptual framework also allows for some ambiguity regarding political participation and individuals' worthiness for political rule. The Theravāda Buddhist ambivalence toward the capacity of *pu htu zin* (ordinary people enslaved to desire) to participate in ruling themselves and others follows the same logic of the Tibetan idea of enlightened governance and of Buddhadasa in his defense of "dictatorial *dhammic* socialism." And while the *dhammaraja* (righteous king) model of an enlightened monarch seems far removed from contemporary Burmese understandings of democracy, the parliamentary period in Burma offers instructive lessons on the possible manifestations of Buddhist beliefs in a democratic political context.

### **Unity, Discipline, and Democracy**

The concept of unity (*nyi nyut chin*) has been a central theme in Burmese Buddhist political thought and what sets this conception of unity apart from others (which might focus instead on the strategic or emotional importance of unity and solidarity) is that it is also an indicator of correct moral

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<sup>65</sup> This is the government of the Vajjians, ruled by the Licchavi princes that U Hpo Hlaing discussed in detail.

practice.<sup>66</sup> The views I have examined in this chapter take unity as devotion to a common purpose and loyalty to a group or community. At its root, this perspective on unity requires subsuming one's own interests for the benefit of the whole, something that encapsulates the Buddhist practice of rejecting *atta* (ego). Correct moral practice on the Buddhist path begins with the recognition that *dukkha* originates from ignorance of the fundamental characteristic of *anattā* and develops into desire focused on fulfilling one's own misguided cravings. Disunity is the result of a group of individuals committed only to their own benefit; it is a result of moral failure. This helps to explain why all of the perspectives examined here see unity as a prerequisite to democracy. Democracy may be a more just way to manage conflict, but even democracy will be unsuccessful without the foundation of correct moral practice among its citizens.

The focus on group unity and away from the individual seems to conflict with Aung San Suu Kyi's commitment to liberal democracy and the rhetoric of human rights that come from other activists and from some of the monks. We think of a liberal democracy as one in which the individual is the fundamental unit and the state is charged with the protection of individual rights. Communitarian democracy, by contrast, would rely on the state to protect the integrity of the group. The view of democracy espoused by both the activists and most of the monks (and by the government if it continues its reforms) embraces a liberal democratic model inasmuch as the individual is the focus of human rights protections. However, I argue that their emphasis on unity and discipline as moral concepts is also a way of countering the individualistic bent of liberal democracy. As a complement to a state structure that protects individuals (and, given Myanmar's political history, we can assume that most citizens' primary concern is protection *from* the state), the morally grounded expectation of unity orients a citizen's democratic practice away from individualism and towards a more inclusive, community orientation. From a Theravāda Buddhist perspective, this could be a way of managing the tendency toward egoistic actions that is a constant possibility in liberal democracy.

All three groups at times present a conception of democracy as "rule-following." The military's idea of disciplined democracy and its closely managed transition do not leave much room for alternative interpretations, with their repeated insistence on the importance of *si kan* (discipline) among the population. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's conception of "rule-following" is more multi-faceted. Like the military, she emphasizes discipline and unity as necessary elements of democratic practice, both within her party and among the population as a whole. She also insists on the importance of *thila* (individual

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<sup>66</sup> I would characterize the Tibetan emphasis on unity, described by Frechette (2007) as based more on pragmatic, strategic factors than on a moral conception of the term.

moral practice) in helping one discern *taya* (*dhamma*/truth), another necessary component for political decision-making. Ashin Eindaga's claim that "if you have *taya* you will have democracy" indicates the need for rule-following among a democratic citizenry, both in terms of obeying laws and in terms of following moral precepts.

We should also understand the connection between *si kan* (discipline), *taya* (*dhamma*/truth), *nyi nyut chin* (unity), and political success and prosperity within the context of the doctrine of *kan*. *Si kan* and *nyi nyut chin* are not merely worldly qualities; they are moral concepts that reflect "right action" within the political sphere. Just as individual moral discipline (*thila*) produces benefits in the future, acting individually and collectively according to *si kan*, *taya*, and *nyi nyut chin* produces good results for the group and reflects moral worthiness. From a Theravāda Buddhist perspective, these are integral components of any political system, although specific interpretations of the concepts vary, especially when placed within a democratic context. We can assume that Ashin Eindaga's idea of acting in accordance with *taya* differs from the former military government's official term for law and order which translates directly as "quiet-crouched-crushed-flattened" (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 176).<sup>67</sup>

There is also, however, a fundamental ambiguity in this perspective linking democracy with *taya*. Most conceptions of democracy—to the degree that they incorporate attention to "truth" at all—would conceptualize truth as procedural, and even in this case, might call it by a different name, such as "right." On the one hand, the truth of Buddhism seems to be more specific and bounded than a procedural idea about what is "right." But even if we do assume some flexibility of interpretation of *taya*, who has the authority to interpret? Buddhadasa's view of political participation left us with the question of who arbitrates according to *dhamma*. In this case we must determine who can decide if a government is acting in accordance with *taya*.<sup>68</sup>

Monks might be the obvious first choice and this is a role that monks have regularly played in Buddhist polities. They have advised kings as to which course of action is *dhamma* (in accordance with the Buddha's teachings) and which is *adhamma* (contrary to the Buddha's teachings). However, as we have seen, the legitimacy of monks' moral authority rests on their general separation from politics, so this might not be an acceptable solution in practice and would obviously not be feasible in a secular

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<sup>67</sup> Bur. ငြိမ်ဝပ်ပိပြား

<sup>68</sup> In his discussion of contemporary Thai interpretations of the *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, Peter Jackson notes that while conservatives generally continue to emphasize the just nature of the law of *kamma* (*kan*), reformists focus on righteousness (a concept that we could equate with *taya*, or following the *dhamma*) as criteria for evaluating political actions (2002, 168-9). The reformist camp (which includes Buddhadasa) is still left with the vexing question of determining who has the authority to interpret and judge the "righteousness" of political actions.

state. During the parliamentary period (1948-58 and 1960-62) many Buddhist politicians touted their own religious credentials, implying their suitability to be in positions of political authority acting in accordance with *taya*. However, many Buddhists in Myanmar today look back at politicians' actions during that period with disgust, seeing it as a manipulation of religion. Finally, although many Buddhists speak of *dhamma* and *taya* as universal truth, non-Buddhists would be justifiably concerned that a democracy based on *taya* would be biased towards a Buddhist ethical system. If *taya* is a yardstick for evaluating the democratic nature of a government, is it possible, from a Buddhist perspective, to have a secular interpretation of the concept?<sup>69</sup>

Although many of the monks and laypeople who advocate for democracy in Myanmar might reject the form of guardianship that I described above as being in line with the military's conception, the qualification of acting in accordance with *taya* presents challenges for Burmese Buddhist democrats. As a moral concept, *taya* might be more challenging to implement than other principles of justice. When examined in the context of general human ignorance of the nature of reality, we arrive once again at a justified skepticism of the ability of most people to act in accordance with *taya*. This is one of the primary tensions within Burmese Buddhist conceptions of democracy, and it is one that citizens of Myanmar will have to address as part of the current political transition.

## Conclusion

In contrast to the politics of the nationalist movement and the post-independence parliamentary period, the post-military transition to democracy in Myanmar has been surprisingly bereft of Buddhist rhetoric among its most prominent elected officials and opposition politicians. That does not mean, however, that Buddhism is gone from today's "secular" political sphere, any more than it was absent from the political reasoning of the "secular" AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League). The Buddhist moral universe still provides many people in Myanmar a framework for thinking about politics and using this framework to analyze the statements of contemporary political figures reveals the complexity of their views on democracy. Some monks, however, have been more explicit in describing a Buddhist conception of democracy as a moral political practice and their sermons have continued to reinforce the moral basis of social and political action.

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<sup>69</sup> Looking at contemporary Thai politics, David Ambuel has suggested that the erosion of traditional conceptions of authority has not necessarily led to a rejection of personalized authority but rather to doubts regarding the legitimacy and competence of authority figures more generally (2006). The persistence of public contestation in Thailand over what it means to be a "good person" in the political sphere suggests that these sorts of debates may begin to re-emerge in Myanmar as well.

In this chapter, I have examined a number of Burmese Buddhist understandings of democracy, situating them within the Theravāda moral worldview. What emerge are ideas that in some cases are compatible with the liberal democracy that many activists seek to implement but at some points diverge from or even directly challenge that tradition. Echoing a common interpretation from Myanmar's independence period, some monks and activists see democracy as the freedom to act as one wishes, to create one's own *kan*. Yet unity and discipline, as moral concepts, seem to impose limits on that freedom, since many Burmese Buddhists also see practices of citizenship as being rooted in correct moral practice. Burmese political figures have developed a range of different interpretations of the concepts of "freedom" and "liberation," mostly predicated on the answer to the question: freedom *from what*? Freedom from tyranny, authoritarianism, and oppressive government control is obviously central to the liberal democratic tradition. However, achieving freedom from moral defilements, either individually or collectively might actually involve limiting certain types of freedom that appear essential in a liberal democracy.

The Burmese perspective on individual moral practice as a form of political participation also contains creative possibilities for orienting citizens toward cooperative collective decision-making processes, facilitated by the "self-diminishing" characteristics of Theravāda moral practice. In a similar way, a democratic practice of citizenship rooted in Theravāda moral practice could provide a critical corrective to the atomizing individualism that threatens liberalism. But the role of *taya* (*dhamma* or truth) complicates Burmese Buddhist ideas about democracy even further. On the one hand, an understanding of democracy that expands beyond politics corresponds with feminist and other conceptions that celebrate the benefits of applying democratic values to everyday interactions. This empowering critical narrative could be valuable in a country like Myanmar that is emerging from decades of oppressive military rule. On the other hand, if democracy consists of acting in accordance with the "truth" of Buddhist *dhamma*, how are we to interpret this practically and in the context of a secular government in a multi-religious country such as Myanmar?

The views expressed by members of these three groups represent part of a public discussion of democracy that is only gradually emerging as political space continues to open up in Myanmar. The military and government perspectives remain relevant as these groups continue to hold most of the legislative and executive power in the country. The activist and opposition views, however, enjoy widespread support among the population and among many outside observers, although there is reason to be skeptical of their unproblematic compatibility with liberal forms of democracy. The monastic perspectives are particularly important because they refocus discussions of democracy on the moral

basis of politics in an era where political figures have been surprisingly silent on the religious roots of their political ideologies. This democratic discourse will continue to develop, with many of its participants reasoning about democratic politics from within the logical framework of the Theravāda moral universe.

## CONCLUSION

When I conducted my language study and field research in Myanmar (2007-08 and 2011), my working hypothesis based on an extensive literature review was that contemporary political discourse in the country contained themes in common with the Burmese Buddhist tradition of political thought from the late pre-colonial to parliamentary periods. Yet, I encountered very few respondents who were at all familiar with this tradition. Based on previous conversations with people familiar with Myanmar and the literature, I knew that activists from the 1988 and 2007 demonstration had formed underground reading groups and book exchanges but there was little evidence that these groups were spreading knowledge from the Burmese Buddhist tradition.<sup>1</sup> It appeared that the former military governments' educational policies and restrictions on speech and the press had created a gap in what had been a diverse and creative tradition of Burmese Buddhist political thought. Very few of my respondents or other people I met had read the work of the thinkers who figure prominently in this dissertation.<sup>2</sup> Among younger generations (those who were young children or not yet born in 1988), individuals such as U Hpo Hlaing and Thakin Kodaw Hmaing were little more than vague historical figures to most. Aung San Suu Kyi's essays on the Buddhist roots of her political thinking appeared to be one of the few connections to the tradition of thought that I had studied in preparation for fieldwork and her use of the tradition is notable because she spent much of her life outside of Myanmar, where access to these materials is easier, prior to entering politics.

I found that the current generations of Burmese Buddhists have had virtually no access to the tradition of political thought that constitutes much of this dissertation and their own intellectual history. As I conducted fieldwork, I wondered if Buddhists in Myanmar would have an opportunity to reconnect with this tradition and if they would find it intellectually stimulating or useful for confronting the political challenges they faced. Were there connections between the concerns of the various leftist groups that led the independence struggle and those of the growing network of organizations and individuals advocating for democracy in Myanmar today? Would the Buddhist critiques of capitalism

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<sup>1</sup> Many activists have discussed the work of Gene Sharp as being influential in their political thinking. Sharp wrote his (1994) book *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* in response to a request from Burmese activists for a handbook for their democracy struggles.

<sup>2</sup> One veteran student activist from the 1988 protests who fled to Thailand related to me the revelatory experience of reading a book of Aung San's political writings given to him by a Western researcher.

that many put forward in the 1950s be useful for a current generation of activists concerned with economic inequality, environmental degradation, and the suppression of labor and land rights?

As I listened to monk's sermons and talked with people about topics unrelated to politics, I began to realize that Burmese Buddhists were using a common moral language to discuss their lives and make sense of the situations they encountered; I had encountered the same language in my previous research among those traditional texts. This was the critical point of continuity, despite almost total detachment from the historical tradition. Most people in contemporary Myanmar were unfamiliar with U Hpo Hlaing's argument that meeting in assemblies would help ministers to overcome their individual moral deficiencies or Aung San's creative appropriation of the *Mahasammata* myth to develop a critique of private property, but the moral concepts these thinkers used to navigate the political realm were the same as those I was hearing in my interviews and in daily conversations.

Most of the writings that make up the intellectual tradition of Burmese Buddhist political thought have been virtually unavailable in Myanmar since the military coup in 1962. Copies of books from the 1930s-60s are mostly in private collections or in libraries that are difficult to access. Even the works of Aung San, the hero of Burmese independence, were tucked away in used bookshops as the former military regime disassociated from him in an attempt to counter Aung San Suu Kyi's claims to his political heritage.<sup>3</sup> Only recently have these texts become more widely available and Yangon was experiencing a boom in Aung San-related publications just as I was finishing my research in August 2011. Faster and more reliable internet access has meant that Burmese people can more easily find information on any topic, including politics. Gradually people are translating more works of political thought into Burmese, just as the members of the *Nagani* Book Club did almost eighty years ago. Scholars and other experts are also using these technological advances to expand opportunities for Burmese people to engage with their own political tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars of Thailand have noted a diverse range of Buddhist movements and philosophies that have characterized the Thai political realm since the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Despite the military regime's increased support of institutionalized Buddhism since the 1980s, controls on free speech (especially with regard to Buddhist teachings) have inhibited the development of a similarly diverse discourse in Myanmar. Ingrid Jordt's (2007) study of the mass meditation movement reveals different methods of teaching and practice within the Burmese meditation community, which could generate divergent

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<sup>3</sup> This was the process that Houtman (1999) described as "Aung San amnesia."

<sup>4</sup> The Myanmar Literature Project, which has undertaken partial translations and scholarly assessments of the works of the *Nagani* Book Club is a wonderful example.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example Ambuel (2006) and Jackson (1989 & 1997).

orientations to politics and development. Previous scholars noted the importance of sects (*gaings*) within the *sangha* as indicators of political orientation, but those differences appear to be muted today (Mendelson 1975). Burmese monks have been increasingly involved in social work (*parahita*) and development projects, and some have been vocal supporters of the democratic opposition. Up to this point, there do not appear to be definable movements centered on particular individuals or ideologies. However, it is reasonable to expect that, if the current government continues to lift restrictions on freedom of speech and expression, definable movements will begin to emerge.

One area ripe for Buddhist engagement will be environmental politics. The gradual political opening that Myanmar has experienced since mid-2011 has been matched by a marked increase in economic development. While Chinese and Thai companies have been investing in hydropower, natural gas production, and the extraction of other natural resources since the mid-1990s, the easing of US and European sanctions since the beginning of 2012 looks as if it will generate even more rapid economic growth. Along with growth will come increased pollution, environmental degradation and disputes over land ownership and occupation. Activists in the country have organized campaigns to draw attention to these issues and to demand that the government take action to protect local communities and the environment. Buddhists in Myanmar are gradually beginning to express their critical perspectives on development through Buddhist terms and values.<sup>6</sup> It remains to be seen whether this will develop into a Buddhist oriented movement similar to that led by Phra Pajak Khuttajitto in Thailand, which challenged government development policies, advocated for more sustainable practices, and even ritually “ordained” trees to protect them from loggers (Jackson 1997, 92).

If reforms continue in a democratic direction, scholars, activists, citizens and monks will feel safer expressing their opinions publicly and we can expect to see a more diverse public discourse on democracy emerge in the country. While Burmese will no doubt engage with the political traditions of other cultures (as their predecessors did), they will also likely incorporate Buddhist ideas into their discussions of important but contentious topics such as human rights. They might draw inspiration from Thai scholars and monks who, for the past two decades, have vigorously debated the relevance of the human rights doctrine and its compatibility with Buddhist doctrine (Seeger 2010). Monks, scholars and possibly political figures will also have an opportunity to engage more critically with some of the topics I explored in Chapters 4 and 5 such as the potential *lawkouttara* effects of political practice and the relationship between democracy, discipline and *taya*.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Sitagu Sayadaw (2011) and Dominic Nardi’s (2006) review of Buddhist environmentalism in Myanmar.

Buddhist monks have been, and continue to be, the primary conduits of the moral framework that I have argued continues to shape Burmese Buddhist thinking on politics. As recently as twenty years ago, people's daily interactions with monks consisted of donating food and, while books on Buddhism were available, lay people usually only had the opportunity to listen to monks' sermons a few times a year. Today, inexpensive books and pamphlets written by monks are widely available and street corner vendors hawk VCDs and DVDs of monastic sermons that lay people watch repeatedly, discuss and share among their friends. Media that reinforce the Theravāda moral universe are more widely available than ever and this availability has coincided with the growth of a thriving lay meditation community.<sup>7</sup> Monks have always presented Buddhism as providing a guide for the laity's daily conduct and, as some monks begin to speak more publicly about Buddhism and politics, they strengthen the argument that the Buddha's moral teachings can provide a framework for thinking about the proper conduct of both citizens and leaders in a democratic context.

Despite the persistence of this moral worldview within the *sangha*, we can reasonably question its relevance for other segments of the Buddhist population in Myanmar. The complete absence of Buddhist rhetoric from candidates in the November 2010 election and from the newly elected government after March 2011 was notable, particularly in contrast to elections in the 1930s-60s. Where were the Buddhist conceptual frameworks that anchored U Ottama's opposition to colonialism and U Nu's socialist *pyidawtha* (pleasant country) plan? The monks who led the demonstrations in 2007 had spoken of democracy in Buddhist terms from their place of moral authority but now the discourse seemed almost entirely secular. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) declined to contest the 2010 elections but once they decided to participate in the April 2012 contests, her campaign speeches were full of policy recommendations rather than references to the Ten Duties of a King.

The current secular discourse among political leaders should push us to consider the possibility that the Theravāda moral worldview is no longer a relevant political framework for at least some Buddhists in Myanmar. For example, a belief in the strict separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* matters represents one strand of the tradition of Burmese Buddhist political thought and there are definitely those who argue that, as a *lawkouttara*-oriented practice, Buddhism is unrelated to politics. While in some cases their usage of "politics" implies "electoral politics," it is also possible that Buddhist rhetoric and reasoning will remain absent from the public realm of Burmese politics. People might draw general ethical principles from their religious beliefs to guide their personal conduct, but they would no longer

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<sup>7</sup> While the new media that I have described are more widely available to people regardless of socio-economic status or geographical location, it is important to acknowledge that the lay meditation movement remains largely urban and upper-middle class.

view politics as subject to the logic of the moral-causal framework that I have described. The current political opening in Myanmar has been too brief to draw any conclusions but the persistence of secular political discourse disconnected from the moral reasoning of Buddhism might lead us to question the influence of the Theravāda worldview.

While this is an important possibility to consider, I argue that the current “secular” political discourse in the country does not represent an erosion or disappearance of the Theravāda moral framework. The recent transition in a democratic direction is tenuous and by no means institutionalized or irreversible. In this uncertain context, it is reasonable that political figures would be hesitant to use religious language to talk about politics because it could be seen as divisive. In my interviews, many people used Buddhist ideas to discuss politics with me but thought that public officials and political candidates, in an effort to be more inclusive, should not use Buddhist rhetoric. Others point to the heated debates in the late 1950s and 1960s over a constitutional amendment to make Buddhism the national religion as one of the reasons for the military coup in 1962. The 2012 conflicts between Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State indicate that fears of religious tensions and its effect on Myanmar’s transition are not misplaced. The 2007 monk demonstrations have also led some people to be cautious about bringing religion into the political sphere because of the potential for the military or the government to perceive it as a threat.

The experiences of other Theravāda countries are also instructive in thinking about the public role Buddhism might continue to play in politics in Myanmar, despite its absence from the rhetoric of political officials. After Sri Lanka won its independence in 1948, references to Buddhism among government figures and official attention directed towards Buddhist issues virtually disappeared (Bartholomeusz 1999, 180). However, monks and citizen groups continued to discuss Buddhist concerns and to agitate for more concerted government attention. The publication of the 1956 book *The Betrayal of Buddhism* (written by monastic and lay authors) asserted the historical relationship between Buddhism, the state and the Sinhala people and demanded that the government increase its activities to protect the *sāsana*. What followed was the re-emergence of explicitly Buddhist political parties led by monks and laity who have continued to debate and challenge notions of “secular constitutionalism” in the strongly Buddhist country (ibid.). The current secular discourse on electoral politics in Myanmar may simply be a point in a dynamic process in which Buddhist rhetoric emerges and recedes among government officials, yet retains its influence on the political perspectives of most citizens.

Peter Jackson has claimed that in contemporary Thailand, “Buddhist concepts and arguments no longer constitute the core of Thai discourses on the right to govern,” but political figures still employ

Buddhism through ritual and rhetoric to elicit emotional responses and to garner legitimacy for their political positions, including those critical of the government (1997, 85). Somboon Suksamran has also argued that Buddhism continues to provide legitimacy to political leaders and is “an important socio-psychological element contributing to national stability and integration” (1993, 2). Beginning in the 1980s, leaders of the former military government in Myanmar increased their public displays of merit-making and televisions and newspapers were filled with images of uniformed generals donating materials to prominent monks or dedicating new pagodas (Schober 1997). It is likely that, even if public figures do not employ the Buddhist political rhetoric of U Nu, the image of a “good Buddhist leader” will remain a compelling source of legitimacy.

I suggested in Chapter 5 that monks had essentially been the “guardians” of the moral framework, continuing to teach its tenets and insist on its relevance even when it was absent from the political discourse. While we might see the Buddhist moral framework temporarily recede from political discourse, the role of the *sangha* as its protector suggests that, as long as the *sangha* continues to exist, the moral-causal logic of the Theravāda worldview will continue to influence the perspectives of Buddhists in Myanmar. This worldview is a deeply held element of the dominant religious culture in the country. There will be differences of interpretation within it and the worldview itself will likely transform in response to internal and external factors, yet it will remain relevant as a lens for making sense of the world.

In this dissertation, I have argued that the Theravāda view of the universe as governed by moral causal laws has been the primary lens through which Buddhists in Myanmar have thought about and engaged with the political realm. This moral worldview persisted despite the erosion of other elements of the pre-colonial cosmology (such as the arrangement of the physical universe and the absolute moral superiority of the king) and has shaped Buddhist views on the nature of politics, the appropriate ends of politics, practices of political participation, and democracy. Burmese Buddhists have creatively interpreted the concepts that make up this moral framework, arguing for its compatibility with a wide range of political and economic ideologies. Even without explicitly Buddhist rhetoric, I have argued that this moral worldview still inhabits ostensibly “secular” political discourses in the country, perpetuated especially by the *sangha*. As Myanmar experiences an uncertain democratic opening, the Theravāda moral universe will continue to provide Buddhists with a framework for making sense of and critically evaluating politics.

## APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF BUDDHIST AND BURMESE TERMS

**Abhidhamma**- Along with the *suttas* and the *vinaya*, one of the three groupings of the *Tipitaka*, the Pāli scriptures; philosophical discussion of the characteristics of phenomena.

**Agati**- Bias, partiality, corruption; the four *agati* are desire, anger, fear, and ignorance.

**Aggañña Sutta**- Buddhist text from the *Digha Nikaya*; tells the story of human moral decline due to unrestrained craving and the subsequent installation of an authority figure to provide adjudication on conflicts; many Burmese Buddhists have interpreted it as providing legitimation for political authority, while others have seen it as evidence of the Buddha's endorsement of democratic elections.

**Anade**- A Burmese word that indicates a feeling of reluctance on the part of someone to inconvenience or impose on another.

**Anattā** (Bur. *anatta*)- The common English translation is “no self,” although a more common Burmese understanding is “no control”; refers to the belief that what we commonly call the “self” is merely a collection of physical and mental processes that follow immediately after one another, creating the illusion of coherence; along with *dukkha* and *anicca*, one of the three characteristics of existence according to Buddhist teachings.

**Anicca** (Bur. *aneitsa*)- Impermanence; along with *dukkha* and *anattā*, one of the three characteristics of existence according to Buddhist teachings.

**Aw-ga-tha**- Daily supplication of Burmese Buddhists affirming faith in the Buddha, *dhamma*, and *sangha*, and asking for protection from harm.

**Bhāvanā**- meditation; can also refer to moral practice more generally.

**Bodhisatta**- future Buddha; in the Theravāda tradition, the next Buddha will be Maitreya.

**Brahmavihāras** (Bur. *byama-so-taya*)- The four sublime attitudes: *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *mudita*, and *upekkhā*

**Cakkavatti** (Bur. *setkyawadi* or *setkya min*)- Universal monarch; common figure in Theravāda tradition who will usher in the golden age of the future Buddha

**Cetanā** (Bur. *sedana*)- Intention; the driving force behind any action that generates a future effect.

**Dāna** (Bur. *dana*)-Charity, generosity, donation.

**Dhamma** (Bur. *dama*)-Buddhist doctrine; the Buddha's teachings.

**Dosa** (Bur. *dawtha*)-Anger.

**Dukkha** (Bur. *doukkha*)- Literally “suffering”; refers more broadly to the condition of ignorance of the inherent characteristics of impermanence and no-self; unpleasant experiences are *dukkha* but so are pleasant experiences because they will not last yet we cling to them.

**Hīnayāna**- Pejorative term for Theravāda Buddhism, literally “lesser vehicle.”

**Hpoun** (Bur.)- Power, wealth, or social standing earned through great meritorious deeds in the past.

**Kadaw-kan** (Bur.)- Daily Buddhist ritual to honor the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *sangha*.

**Kālāma Sutta**- Teaching of the Buddha in which he advised the Kalama people not to rely on tradition or accept any doctrine until they had tested and considered it themselves; often cited to indicate the inquisitive and open nature of Buddhist teachings.

**Kan** (Pāli *kamma*)- Literally “action”; also used to refer to the results of an action.

**Karuṇā**- Compassion; along with *mettā*, *mudita*, and *upekkhā*, one of the four *brahmavihāras*.

**Kilesa** (Bur. *kiletha*)- Mental/moral defilements; the common list of ten is greed, anger, ignorance, pride, wrong belief, doubt, sloth, restlessness of mind, not being ashamed of doing wrong, not being scared of doing wrong.

**Kutho** (Pāli *kusala*)- Wholesome action; merit acquired through good acts; opposite of *akutho/akusala*.

**Lawka neikban**- Worldly nirvana; initially used by meditation teachers to indicate the possibility of enlightenment in the present existence; adopted by Burmese leftists to indicate the perfect socialist or communist state that they intended to build.

**Lawki/lawka** (Pāli *lokiya*)- The material world.

**Lawkouttara** (Pāli *lokuttara*)- A perspective on existence from the point of view of Buddhist ultimate truth; takes the world and everything in it to be impermanent, unsatisfactory and without self/essence.

**Lobha** (Bur. *lawba*)-Greed.

**Mahasammatha** (Bur. *Maha Thamada*)- From the *Aggañña Sutta*; was chosen by people to instill order after a time of moral decline by acting as judge for the community; Burmese royal chronicles treat him as the “first king.”

**Mahāyāna**- School of Buddhism practiced predominantly in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and Vietnam.

**Mettā** (Bur. *myitta*)- Non-discriminating loving-kindness; along with *karuṇā*, *mudita*, and *upekkhā*, one of the four *brahmavihāras*.

**Min gyint taya hsay ba** (Bur.)- The Ten Duties of the King (charity, morality, altruism, honesty, gentleness, self-control, non-anger, non-violence, patience, non-opposition).

**Miyopala** (Bur.)- Traditional; used by Burmese to indicate a Buddhist who was born into the religion or who has not studied Buddhist doctrine; often has a pejorative usage.

**Moha** (Bur. *mawha*)- Ignorance.

**Mudita**- Sympathetic joy; along with *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *upekkhā*, one of the four *brahmavihāras*.

**Neikban** (Pāli *nibbāna*)- Enlightenment; the state in which all desire and suffering are completely extinguished.

**Paññā** (Bur. *pyinya*)- Knowledge.

**Parahita** (Bur.)- Welfare of others; social work.

**Pāramī** (Bur. *parami*)- In everyday usage, “aptitude”; in Buddhism, one of ten virtues that the Buddha perfected before his enlightenment (charity, morality, renunciation, knowledge, effort, honesty, forbearance, loving-kindness, equanimity and resolution).

**Paṭicca-samuppāda** (Bur. *padeitsa thamoutpa*)- Dependent origination; conditioned arising; Buddhist teaching of cause and effect in which continued existence and suffering originate from ignorance.

**Pu-htu-zin** (Pāli *puthujjana*)- Ordinary human enslaved to desire and craving.

**Rajadhammasangaha**- Text written by the Burmese Minister U Hpo Hlaing for King Thibaw in 1878; advice for an ideal king.

**Samādhi** (Bur. *thamadi*)- Concentration.

**Sangha** (Bur. *thanga*)- The community of monks.

**Samsāra** (Bur. *thanthaya*)- The continuous round of rebirth for those who have not yet liberated themselves from ignorance and suffering.

**Sāsana** (Bur. *thathana*)- The Buddhist teachings along with the entire community of practitioners.

**Sayadaw** (Bur.)- Honorific for a Burmese monk; usually the head of a monastery.

**Sutta** (Bur. *thouk*)- Along with the vinaya and the abhidhamma, one of the three groupings of the *Tipitaka*, the Pāli scriptures; discourses of the Buddha.

**Taṇhā** (Bur. *tanha*)- Desire, craving.

**Taya** (Bur.)- Truth, law, justice, *dhamma* (the Buddha’s teachings).

**Thabeik Hmauk** (Pāli *pattam nikujjana kamma*)- Literally “turning over the almsbowl”; form of public religious punishment in which Buddhist monks refuse to accept donations from select lay people, depriving them of the opportunity to make merit; also the general Burmese term for a strike or boycott.

**Theravāda**- School of Buddhism practiced predominantly in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand; literally “Teachings of the Elders.”

**Thila** (Pāli *sīla*)- Morality.

**Thitsa** (Bur.)- Truth.

**Tipitaka**- Three baskets; the Pāli scriptures made up of the *suttas*, the *vinaya*, and the *abhidhamma*.

**Upekkhā**- Equanimity; along with *mettā*, *karuṇā*, and *mudita*, one of the four *brahmavihāras*.

**Vinaya** (Bur. *wini*)- Along with the *suttas* and the *abhidhamma*, one of the three groupings of the *Tipitaka*, the Pāli scriptures; set of rules for monks.

**Vipassanā**- insight; *vipassanā* meditation focuses the mind on the present moment to provide insight into the nature of things as they really are (the qualities of impermanence, dissatisfaction, and no-self); there is a growing movement of lay *vipassanā* meditators in Myanmar.

**Wunthanu**- nationalist; *wunthanu athins* (nationalist organizations) were rural networks that organized for mutual assistance and to demonstrate against British colonial rule.

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