



Social Engagement of Sangha (monks) in Myanmar

Kushalsami (Researcher)

school of Buddhist studies and civilization

Gautam Buddha University

Greater Noida ,Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

The Buddha's first order, given five months after his enlightenment was to go out and reach the people, to proclaim the Dhamma, the way of life for the people. The Buddha taught that people could not find peace if they did not listen to the Dhamma. We encourage the other monks to search out this original intention of the Buddha. That means getting the monks out of the pagodas, teaching and reaching out to the people. We need to reflect carefully on the principles and laws of the Buddha that truly allow monks to do far more for the society within their daily lives. Some people believe that Buddhist monks should live only in the pagodas and pray eight to ten hours a day, rather than involve themselves in daily life. But monks have in fact been engaged for a long time, just in an unsystematic way. Monks have built schools and hospitals, but nobody realized that it was social engagement because the term wasn't there. The way forward is to let them do it in a more systematic way or to look for extensions of the activities that they can do. There are many types of social work. It includes any of various service designed to aid the poor and aged, to increase the welfare of children, to help improve the lives of people, group, and society, and to provide social services to those members of the community that need it. This article tends to explore the social engagement of Myanmar monks on social works through religion, education, economic and politic etc in modern time and also targeted Buddha's real attention that monks should do social welfare works for society and to point out what Myanmar monks do for social welfare.

Introduction

As I think it I set aside the argument that Sangha is the spiritual and religious leader, and therefore is not supposed to get involved in the secular affairs. Instead I will focus on the fact and present it objectively as much as I can. Because I assume that Sangha should do social work to the extent that can be permitted, and suitable to being *Sangha*. There have been many *Sangha* members who share not only the idea that *Sangha* should contribute in the social welfare, but who practically contribute in that. Sangha's contributions in this field are such as building hospitals, opening healthcare center with cheaper cost to the common and free for those who cannot afford medical expenses, forming organization for free service for funeral matters, helping HIV/AIDS patients and so on. So far as I know there is no dispute on carrying out these above mentioned social works. All of

these projects are led by the eminent and competent Sangha.

In actual fact, a social work for monks is not a strange job or thing because they do social work in their daily routine duties from early morning around 4:00 A.M to mid-night around 11 P.M such as paying homage to the Buddha, going alms round, radiating loving-kindness, chanting the paritta (protection), cleaning the monastery compound and preaching the dhamma to the lay people etc..

According to Pāli canon the Buddha called himself as a physician, a specialist and a surgeon. We can find out the concept of two aspects of medication and healing which are discernible in the life and in the teaching of the Buddha. He is a therapeutic doctor for spiritual sickness who prescribed as a great man to be followed for alleviation of spiritual suffering of the whole humankind. By following the footsteps of



the Buddha, many Myanmar monks had been done social works through the *dhamma* since the first arrival of Buddhism on the golden-land of Myanmar. In ancient time to present days Myanmar Buddhist monks had done social welfare works for the country and the people following the ways of *dhamma* which preached by the Buddha for the welfare of all beings since he was live. They are pioneer of the civilized people of Myanmar because they trained the laity from the teachings of the Buddha. Therefore, Mg Htin Aung makes a remark in his book that “*since the days of King Anawrahta (1044-77), Burmese monks had been the teachers of the laity, not only in religious learning, but also in secular learning. The first monks sent to the outlying parts of the kingdom by king Anawrahta and his primate Shin Arahan converted the people to the new faith, not only by preaching to them the essentials of Buddhism, but also by teaching them how to read and write. Even up to present day, the only Burmese word for “school” is Kyaung, which means “monastery”. Following the tradition started in Anawrahta’s time, the Monks remained the educators of the people, both young and old, until 1886*”.¹

Social works through dhamma

Many famous Sayardaws, such as Ledī sayardaw, Mahīse sayardaw, Moegote sayardaw, Mingone sayardaw, Mahāgandhāraon sayardaw Ashin janakābhivamsa, Sitagu sayardaw Dr. Nānissara, Dr.Nandamālābhivamsa, and Pa- auk tawya sayardaw etc., has been contributed social works through the preaching and teaching of *dhamma* for the others throughout their lives. Firstly I would like to mention about *Ledī sayardaw* (1846-1923) who was conferred the title of *Aggamahāpaṇḍita* by the government of India in 1911 and later who also got the degree of D. Litt from the University of Rangoon as honor on him. He was a great teacher and perhaps the outstanding Buddhist figure of this

era. Just following the footsteps of Buddha, he travelled in many parts of Myanmar for the purpose of propagating the Buddha’s teachings. When he arrived at towns and villages he preached various discourses on the *dhamma* and delivered *Abhidhamma* classes and established meditation centers.² A genealogy of Ledī sayardaw’s influence up to the present day and stretching into the West will allow us to see his far-reaching impact. Following his methods of insight meditation, there are many great disciples who promoted the Buddha’s *sāsanā* such as Saya Thetgyi, U Ba Khin, and U Goenka etc.

And another famous Sayardaw was Mahāsī sayardaw who made his great contribution through his teaching and preaching to promote Buddhism in Burma and as well as in abroad. The venerable Mahāsī sayardaw was born in 1904, on Friday 29th July. At the historic sixth Buddhist Council, Mahāsī sayardaw co-operated as one of the final Editors of the Canonical texts and was the questioner (*Pucchaka*) in the sessions of the council. Mahāsī sayardaw also was a famous scholarly writer, produce more than seventy writings and translation from Pāli. Especially the manual of Vipassanā meditation (two volumes) was his greatest work. Under the guidance of Mahāsī sayardaw, nowadays subsidiary Mahāsī meditation centers had grown to more than 300 all over the country and abroad. The total number of meditators trained at all these centers had passed the figure of 700,000.³

And then again I want to introduce here another celebrated monk in Myanmar and abroad for his great influence and impact on Burmese Buddhists from his time onwards. This famous monk was Ashin Janakābhivamsa ⁴ of Mahāgandhāyon monastery of Amarapura in Mandalay division.

He managed to publish 50 of them before he passed away. He wrote in his life as social work such as “Abhidhamma in daily life” and “the last



ten months of the Buddha” for lay people. The social works of Ashin Janakābhivamsa that comes through the Dhamma; both of preach and teach, can be seen in implicit admonitions on his book of “the aphorisms of the Venerable Ashin Janakābhivamsa”. This is how Buddhist monks work social-works through the dhamma for the people and country.

Social works through social services

Here I want to express the works of social-works that was done by monks in Myanmar at present day. Especially, in this matter I would like to mention about one famous and pioneer Sayadaw who firstly do social works for the people and the country in Myanmar as a Buddhist religious leader. It is him Sitagu Sayadaw Dr. Nyannissara, my respected master. By making these perfections (Pāramī) as a basic platform, Sītagu Sayadaw, Dr. Nyannissara founded the Sītagu Missionary Association, a non-profit charitable organization which only depends on private donation for its several projects at the sītagu monastery, Sagaing Hills in 1978.

The three main aims and objectives of Sītagu Missionary Association are as follows;

- 1 To work for personal welfare through self development and cultivation of knowledge
- 2 To work for the welfare of relatives, friends and associations
- 3 To work for the welfare of all human beings.⁵

Under these three main aims, there are four main projects. They are:

- 1 Sītagu Water donation project (from 1981 to present)
- 2 Sītagu Āyudāna hospital projects (from 1989 to present) and Sītagu hospitals project of Cakkhudāna and Ārogyadāna around the country
- 3 Sītagu international Buddhist Academy projects (from 1996 to present)
- 4 Social welfare service projects for natural disasters⁶

The Principal Sayadaw Dr. Nyannissara is the most responsible one for all kind of projects sponsored by Sītagu Missionary Association.

(1) Sītagu Water Donation Project

The Sītagu water donation project started in 1980 to relieve water shortages experienced by the monasteries and nunneries for long years in this area. Thus, the water supply system was started to work in 1985 and five water pumps delivered more than 300, 000 gallons for approximately one hundred monasteries. But in the beginning, the water supply system covered only 12 miles and there were seven water reservoirs. After 22 year past, thirteen water reservoirs has been built that supplied with water from the Irrawaddy River by means of eleven water pumps of thirty horse power each. The pumps are housed in three water pump stations and the entire network is connected by over 250, 000 feet or more than 47 miles of water pipe. *According to a 2008 census, fifteen thousand residents of Sagaing Hills would benefit from a constant supply of safe running water.*⁷

(2) Sītagu Āyudāna hospital projects (from 1989 to present) and Sītagu hospitals project of Cakkhudāna and Ārogyadāna around the country

“The Buddha said; Monks, whosoever wants to take care of me, he should take care of the sick”. This is the social work directed by the Buddha for all kind of noble person concerning with take care of the sick. In order to follow and observe the instruction of the Buddha, and reach the goal of taking care of the sick, the Āyudāna hospital project was started at Sagaing Hills in 1985. The aim of founding the Āyudāna hospital is two kinds. They are :

- 1 Primarily to serve monks and nuns, unaffordable patients, blind children and patients of geriatric homes.
- 2 And also to serve people regardless of caste, race, colour and religions etc ⁸



The Āyudāna hospital had opened in 1989. There is also Eye Care Unit linking out-patient department with modern diagnostic facilities and well-equipped eye operation theatre. Nowadays the hospital is capable for one-hundred and fifty beds. There are over one-hundred people such as doctors, Nurses, assistant nurse and technician etc., who do service as a man power.⁹ Moreover, Sītagu Eye Out-reach team does their work usually based on the Sītagu Cakkhudāna and Ārogyadāna Hospitals in fourteen states and divisions. There are 22 the Sītagu Cakkhudāna and Ārogyadāna Hospitals, which was running sponsored by the Sītagu Sayadaw, and which Eye out-reach team does Eye cure program in fourteen states and divisions at sixteen different locations.

(3) Sītagu international Buddhist Academy projects (from 1996 to present)

To be fulfill the goal of monks and nuns of Myanmar, Sītagu Sayadaw established the third project, Sītagu International Buddhist Academy (Sagaing) in 1994 and it was held opening ceremony in 1996.¹⁰ The aims of this university are to promote the moral and knowledge of junior monks who lose interest in their study after finishing Dhammācariya degree, to replace the old dhamma university that disappeared in the past, to get an international study level of Buddhism for our own people and to try hard to develop the age of moral and mental renaissance. The Sītagu International Buddhist Academy gives the following Diploma and degrees of BA, MA, and Ph. D, for the students: 2 years courses of Diploma in English, Diploma in Pāli, Diploma in Buddha Dhamma, Diploma in Sanskrit, Diploma in Mahāyāna studies, Diploma in comparative studies of religions and so on, and 3 years course of B.A degree in Buddhism, 3 years course of M.A degree in Buddhism, 3 to 5 years of Ph. D degree in Buddhism. And then Sītagu Sayadaw established Sītagu International Buddhist Academy (Yangon) and Sītagu International Buddhist Academy (Mandalay) in

2007 and in 2009. These two Buddhist Academy were also conferred the Dip and B.A degrees on many students respectively.¹¹ Sītagu Sayadaw hope that in future for the sustainability of Sītagu mission, the devotees who keep moral integrity and intellectual abilities should be organized to participate in the missionary works as volunteers and benefactors. They will execute the aims and projects initiated by Sītagu Missionary Association.

(4) Social welfare service projects for natural disasters

Furthermore Sītagu Sayadaw and his Sītagu Missionary Association also have been held in many Natural disasters since he founded his Association. Especially Sītagu Sayadaw and his Sītagu Missionary Association were got very famous reputation around the world when he gave a helping hand in Cyclone Nargis disaster. Sītagu Sayadaw was opened a rescue campaign at Sītagu Dhamma Vihāra in Kun Thee Chaung village, Bokalay town-ship, putting Yangon Missionary Center as it's headquarter. Many donors such as Myanmar associations, Mahāyāna associations, Chistian associations, musical association, other non-government associations and individual associations were involved in the donations campaign. The Itemized and estimated value in Kyats of donations, contributions for Nargis victims from Sītagu Sayadaw and his Sītagu Missionary Association were as follows :

- 60, 000 rice-bags were contributed to 1500 villages and it is equivalent to 900, 000, 000 Kyats
- 500 trucks which loaded with clothing, food, purified drinking water, medication, and cooking utensils were conveyed and it is equivalent to 460, 000, 0000 Kyats
- Corrugated zinc sheets of 245, 800 were donated for roofing of destroyed monasteries and it is equivalent to 757, 064, 000 Kyats



- Cash 100, 000 Kyats (US\$100) was contributed to each of 2264 monasteries and it is equivalent to 226, 400, 000 Kyats
- 252, 200, 000 Kyats were donated for the maintenance and repair fare to drinking water factory at Kadonkani
- 581, 624, 850 Kyats were contributed to 12 local hospitals for medical supply
- 100, 000, 000 Kyats were donated for reconstruction of 170 pagodas and restoration of golden umbrellas which destroyed by Cyclone Nargis around the Hainggyi Island
- 150, 000, 000 Kyats were contributed to help teaching aid including classroom computers for 6 state high schools
- 930, 000, 000 Kyats were contributed for construction of one high school, three middle schools and seventeen new primary schools
- 100, 000, 000 Kyats were donated for the construction of one new monastery
- The total contribution of money to charity for victims of Nargis Cyclone was 859, 728, 8850 Kyats.¹²

In addition, Sītagu Missionary Association headed by Sītagu Sayadaw contributed 210 million Kyats to support the monasteries those had been destroyed by Tahlay earthquake, Eastern Shan State in March, 2011. Sītagu Sayadaw contributed different kind of charity for the victims of Giri Storm in Rakkhine State. And also his Missionary Association donated 200 million Kyats to build cyclone shelters in Rakkhine State in April, 2011. Sītagu Sayadaw also helped the victims of natural disasters in Japan, Pakistan and Thailand by sending the cash donation in U.S dollars. This is about Sītagu Sayadaw who assumed as a pioneer of social work in the Theravāda Buddhism.

Monks and Social works

Nowadays, the modern Sangha Order in Myanmar could maintain to find another way to contribute their endeavour in helping the nation. It is through education that they are able to make their contributions. In other word, this is

modern education other one. In carrying this contribution some Sangha members set up what we call in Myanmar Phonedawgyithin-Panyaryay Kyaung, Buddhist Monastic School. The Buddhist monastic school system in Myanmar is an old education system with a very long history, dated back to the 11th century King Anawratha period. To prove this fact U Kaung reveals that “while all lowland Theravada Buddhist states are believed to have had schools operating through the monasteries, among those of the Irrawaddy river basin the Burman–managed schooling is the best documented. Burman monastic schooling may have begun around the eleventh century of the Christian era, though evidence suggests that its origins lay with a Mon-dominated kingdom of some centuries earlier.”¹³ The Buddhist monastic schools helped to give Burma a rate of literacy considerably above those of other East Asian countries in the early 1900s. In 1931, 56% of males over the age of five and 16.5% of females were literate — approximately four times as high as those reported for India at the same time.¹⁴

Nowadays, the monastic schools assist in providing basic education needs of the country especially for children from needy families and orphans — filling the significant gap in the education system. The primary school children of Burma attend the Buddhist monasteries to acquire literacy and numeracy skills as well as knowledge of the Lord Buddha's teachings. Thus, the schools provide curriculum education and ethics and moral foundation. Their role as principal education providers may have ceased for many years, but their contribution is still significant in 21st century Burma.

There is one famous Buddhist monastery in Mandalay headed by eminent Buddhist monk named Nayaka. This School was named Phaung Daw Oo Buddhist Monastic School. *Phaung Daw Oo* was founded on May 5, 1993 with 10 teachers and 394 students. Principal U *Nayaka's* main focus was to provide for students



from poor families who would not normally be able to attend school. Now, *Phaung Daw Oo* Monastic High School is well-known both in Myanmar and abroad. The school's guiding vision is to promote outstanding students who can become future leaders in society and to provide for students so they can pursue their studies absolutely free of charge. According to record, in the 2015/2016 academic year, there were 5727 high school students, 1281 middle students, and 841 primary students, respectively. In the 2004-2005 academic years, there were nearly 1190 monastic schools, providing primary and secondary education to more than 100,000 Myanmar children.

In different parts of the country ranging from the mega cities to the remote villages, there are many monastic education schools operated by *Sangha* Order. They opened these schools for the needs and poor families, and to fulfill in the blank of the country for the sake of others, not for themselves. By doing these activities which given above, I mean the contribution of the *Sangha* through religion, political, social and education for modern society of Myanmar, the *Sangha* not only propagate the Buddha's *Sāsana* but they also uplift the country, Myanmar. This is how Buddhist *Sangha* had managed social engagement with their great desire, effort and patient for the people regardless of religion, race and sex in Myanmar.

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