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Religious Examination in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism and religious examination play the most important role in Myanmar from the time of its kings up to date. Religious examination was conducted and patronized by the successive kings of the country. We would like to shed light on how the kings and spiritual leaders have been carried out the teachings of the Buddha last long by conducting religious examination into the community of the Sangha. The kings devoted their lives to preserve and promote Buddhism so we focus on the ways and means of the exams and awards given to the candidates by the successive kings.

Key Words : Buddhism, Religious institutions, Sangha

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism which became the religion of the people of Burma was a monastic religion. Monastic religion means the monks, Sangha was at the heart of Buddhist religion. We found two reasons why the Buddhist monks have occupied important place in Buddhism. The first one is that Buddhists traditionally believes that ordinary people which means lay persons are not able to attain salvation because there are more hurdles for them by living in a sensual world. As householders, their lives are so busy with family and social commitments that they can hardly make any real effort to purify their mind so as to eradicate desire. In contract, the lives of monks as mentioned in the scripture are free as an open space so they can devote their time and lives to achieve Enlightenment. Secondly, the profession of maintaining the Doctrine, the teachings of the Buddha, has given the Order, the Buddhist monks, in the history of Buddhist world. The monks have taken the duties to study and safeguard the Doctrine and the need for the preservation of the scripture requires of the monkhood.

The emphasis on scholarship in Buddhist monasticism was indeed a turning point in the history of Theravada Buddhism that study became more prominent than practice. Learning was the basic of the perpetuation for Buddha Sasana, the Dispensation of Buddhism.

Religious institutions:

Monastery has been spiritual institution in Burma and the kings of Burma saw it as their duties to use their power to protect the teachings of the Buddha. Royal attention was given to the maintenance of the unity of the monks and strict observation disciplinary rules, Vinaya by individual.

The Sangha received royal patronage not only because it was the spiritual focus of society but because it was also an educational institution. Providing education for society was the major means of recruitment into the Order. Ordination which means joining into monkhood was motivated by a desire for salvation. Study Buddhist scripture became the primary motivation in ancient time in Burma so monasteries were the main places to which people could send their children for education.

Education in those days meant the study of morality in principle as understood in the Buddhist religion. Parents sent their sons to a monastery to receive education. These boys were taught in reading and writing and some of

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students were residential while others came to classes only during the daytime. After one or two years those in residence were ordained. As a tradition in Burma, a body was normally initiated as a novice, samanera in Pali if he received ordination before he was twenty. A young man of twenty and above would be given a full ordination, upasampada in Pali. Many spent a few years in novice or monkhood studying and then left. This temporary ordination became a part of Burmese Buddhist culture.

Monastic education:

Joining into the Order means seeking education rather than salvation and it produced a curriculum for general education that took account of the needs of both the Order and society. In essence, this curriculum included lessons or texts on basic moral and monastic training as well as on vocational subjects current at the time. Occasionally secular arts and sciences were integrated into the monastic curriculum to fulfill the needs of the wider society. This type of curriculum was designed and modified by individual abbots to suit the needs of their students.

In ancient Burma there was some standardization of the curriculum even before the introduction of formal examinations. This can be deduced from the fact that some texts were more popular and widely used than others. Through a study of the biographies of leading monks in their early years during the Konbaung Dynasty, we come to know that the texts they studied and conclude that the following texts had been studied as a foundation syllabus from the thirteenth century onwards.

Those texts included a devotional formula which means the Buddha's eight victories (atmifcsif;&Spfyg; in Myanmar); the permission call (bk&m;&Sdcdk; in Myanmar) some selected discourses such as Lokanita (avmueDwd in Myanmar), Paritta (y&dwfMuD; in Myanmar) rules and regulations for Samanera (&Sifusifh0wfin Myanmar) the Jatakas, namakkaragathas (erum&*gxm in Myanmar), sambuddhegatha (orKa*gxm in Myanmar) and three further texts considered to be essential for the study of Tipitaka, the teachings of the Buddha. Those formulas were recited by every Burmese Buddhist when he or she paid homage to the Buddha and observed the five precepts. This tradition is still alive and in unique to the Buddhists of Burma.

Next, the student learnt the discourses called Mangala sutta and followed by Singalovadasutta. The learning of these discourses have been very significant because the first discourse teaches thirty-eight kinds of auspiciousness usually known as blessings. These blessings cover every aspect of Buddhist culture: education, family, vocation, moral and mental development. After studying this discourse, the students have to learn Singala discourse which the Buddha gave advice to a young boy, Singala by name, who took his father's dying wish literally and worshiped different directions every morning. The Buddha explained what was actually meant by worshipping different directions: the way to worship different directions was to fulfill one's duty and responsibility towards different people in society. This discourse was chosen to instill in the student a sense of duty and responsibility whatever the way of life he or she chose to lead.

Then, the student had to study the lessons on Lokanika composed by a minister, Caturangabhala by name during the Pagan dynasty and the text is an expanded version of a Sanskrit work and deals with prudential rules and principles of morality. The chanting of Paritta can ward off evil and bring blessings on appropriate occasion and it intended to train students to perform rituals and this tradition was popular in Burma because Buddhists believe that it not only dispelled evil but also brought fortune.

The Jataka stories were also a part of the syllabus in the monasteries and the Jataka as a whole began to inspire more moral debate from the beginning of the Konbaung Dynasty. The Jataka became accessible to lay personsonly in the early nineteenth century. The above stated texts are the foundation course which was aimed only at the moral and spiritual development of the students.

Another type of curriculum for those who wanted to devote their lives stayed in the monastery as monks and committed to the religious life. This second kind of curriculum was specialized, focusing entirely on the Pitaka; Dhamma and Vinaya. The objective of this curriculum was to preserve the teachings of the Buddha.

Students usually studied a text several times until they mastered it and this method can be called as informal study for it had no standardized curriculum and another method of study was a formal one which is termed form study simply because it offered qualifications through assessment conducted regularly under the patronage of monarch and Buddhist monks. The formal study seems more practical for an institution to train the members

which values mastery of the great texts.

Religious examination:

We can trace that formal examination commenced in the seventeenth century in Burma in the reign of King Thalun (1629-1648) and it was introduced by the king himself with the intention of choosing the candidates of novice-hood (&Sifavmif;) and monkhood (yZif;avmif;) for ordination. The king has become to be seen as one of the great righteous kings in Burma. The examinations were purely an academic rather thana spiritual measure.

Thus, the candidates who had been ordained in simple ceremonies had temporarily to leave their robes because all the candidates for the examinations were required to be candidates for ordination as well. It means the novices and monks disrobed just before the examinations and were re-ordained immediately afterwards. This must have been how the terms 'excellent for novice or monk' pathama shin long (yxr&Sifavmif;) and pathamapazinlaung (yxryZif;avmif;) candidates for royal examination came into existence.

Tharlun's successors seem to have come to use the examination as a means of gaining merit. A royal order issued in March 1674 by Minyekyawdin (1673-1698), a year after he came to the throne, reads: "Do meritorious deeds such as holding annual examinations and ordinations of monks and novices as usual."

Bodawpaya (1782-1819) came to the throne in 1782 and the Sangha was strong when he ascended the throne. There were five thousand monks and novices in the Capital, Ava, alone. The king took several measures to attract the candidates to enter formal examinations. They were called Pathamasartawpyan, (yxrpmawmfjyef) excellent candidate for royal examination and the term later came to be known by its abbreviated form Pathamapyan(yxrjyef).

The first of the measures was to appoint twelve examiners and those twelve venerable monks were to examine only one candidate at a time. The king said that the examinations are the affairs of the Sasana. He pointed out that formal examinations were 'the affair' and 'business of Sasana'. The second measure was designed to popularize the formation education by rewarding the candidates for entering the examination. The system of rewarding successful candidates with materials and positions in the hierarchy was intended to benefit both teacher and pupil not only in this life but also in the next.

The rewards the king bestowed upon the candidates for the monkhood or pazinlaung levels (yxrqifhyZif;avmif;). On their way to the exam hall, all candidates were dressed in royal costume, wearing jewels and rings; anyone who entered for the preliminary pazinlaung level had thirteen people to carry him on a palanquin and to bring royal requisites associated with his status. In addition, the parents of the candidates for the preliminary level of pazinlaung were exempted from royal service. At the intermediate pazinlaunglevel (;wdmqifhyZif;avmif;)., not only the parents but also the brothers and sisters of the candidate were exempted from royal service and the candidate had twenty people to carry him and his belongings. For the higher pazinlaung level(wwd,qifhyZif;avmif;)., there were thirty attendants to carry him and his personal belongings while seven generations of his relatives were elevated to royal status and given titles. A successful candidate would receive royal patronage for his ordination. After his ordination, he received certain allowances from the palace: a monthly food ration and a pair of robes annually.

The candidates for shin laung (&Sifavmif;) levels or the candidates for royal sponsored novice-hood, were honored with the same royal status just before they sat for the examinations. At the preliminary level, the candidates had seven attendants to carry them and their belongings on their way to the examination hall while at the intermediate and the higher levels the candidates had ten and thirteen people respectively to attend them. But only the higher shin laung candidate's parents were exempt from royal service.

Bodawpaya extended the examination system by introducing four more levels because he reasoned that people were born with different levels of intelligence and should not be made to compete by the same criteria as that would not be fair to the less intelligent. This was to make the Pathamapyan appealing not only to the higher intelligent but also to the average and below. With the introduction of the preliminary, intermediate and higher level each level of the Pathamapyan under Bodawpaya was extended into three by using the words ayok(t,kwf), alat (tvwf) and amyat (tjrwf)which means lower, medium and higher class respectively. In the time of King Mindon (1853-1878) the levels of the examination were reformed into the terms ange(ti,f), alat (tvwf) and akyi (tMuD;) which means junior, middle and senior respectively.

Although encountering the difficult political situation, King Mindon (1853-1878) made an enormous effort into promoting monastic education by reforming the formal

examination namely the Vinaya and Pathamapyan examinations. He transformed Vinaya examination from a basic into a specialized pursuit. Although the old syllabus of the Vinaya examinations introduced by Bodawpaya continued to be taught during the time of King Mindon, it was not included in the new syllabus.

During his time, the Vinaya examinations had all the Vinaya canonical texts as its syllabus designing to encourage students to specialize in the Vinaya Pitaka. A candidate might sit for part or the whole of the Vinaya Pali texts which were divided into five books. In 1860, a year after the founding of the capital, Mandalay, there were as many as sixty monks reciting from memory different portion of Vinaya Pitaka in the examinations while the king, Mindon and his queen and consorts respectfully listened to the recitation in silence.

To strengthen the new concept of specialization orientated examinations, the king introduced another examination for those who wished to study the Abhidhamma in depth. Its syllabus included all the Abhidhamma Pitak seven texts in total. Abhidhamma had been considered as the most difficult and most important subject of the Buddhist scriptures in Burma. The Vinaya and Abhidhamma examination were held in November, 1861 and there were over 350 candidates enrolled. Some candidates recited the whole Vinaya from memory and some memorized parts of the Abhidhamma Pitaka. King Mindon cane to listen to the recitation with his mother and queen in order to accumulate merit.

The modification of the Pathamapyan under Mindon lay not so much in total transformation of its syllabuses but rather in that of its format. Mindon dropped the word shin laung and pazinlaung and he introduced new system comprising four levels, signaled a purely religious and academic pursuit. The Sangha was pleased with this move.

With some minor changes to the curriculum, the new set-up of the Pathamapyan had four levels. The first three levels are called pathamange, (yxri,f) pathamalat (yxrvwf) and pathamagyi (yxrMuD;) were respectively in the primary, intermediate and advanced levels. The highest level Pathamakyaw had no separate syllabus and Pathamakyaw (yxrausmf) was the title awarded to the candidate who passed and scored the highest marks in the Pathamagyi level.

The new Pathamapyan syllabuses were designed so that a student who passed the primary level had a solid foundation in Pali literature and the Abhidhamma and was able to read by himself the discourses in Pali.

The king Mindon also encouraged his sons to study and enter the examination. He, himself, as a prince, had studied in a monastery in Amarapaura until he was twenty-three years of age and knew the monastic scholastic community in the capital as well. He had the best education the Buddhist monasteries could give and was decidedly the best Burmese monarch of the house of Alaungpaya. His son and his successor, Thibaw, completed the Pathamange level in 1875 and then he was ordained as a samanera and in 1877 the Pathamagyi.

Conclusion:

This formal textual learning formed a central part of Burmese religious examination. The Sangha and the educational authority described the existence of many formal examinations and the emphasis on them by novices and monks. The teachers and the institutions are under pressure to have as many students as possible pass examination. However, within one academic year, it is impossible to complete the syllabus of each level through the textual study method.

Students are prepared for many examinations each year. Central to all of them are the examinations conducted by the government, called Pathamabyan and Dhammacariya. The Pathamabyan offers a foundation in Buddhist scripture and the Dhammacariya is for higher study and has one general degree course. Both Pahtamabyan and Dhammacariya are conducted annually throughout the country. There are also other examinations conducted locally and open to local students. Their syllabuses are closely modeled on those of the above mentioned tow exams.

Therefore, it can be asserted that by and large the monastic educational tradition was maintained outside the formal examination system. As a result, within an average of ten years, students became well verses in Pali including both the Tipitaka and Abhidhamma in Burma.

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