

Daw Nanacari (1900-1975) The Pioneer of Modern Myanmar Thilashin, Nun

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ABSTRACT

Every society paid the way for the prominent one as the important role in the specific field in the world. That person may be a secular leader or spiritual leader for its people as well as for its nation. The person was not a male but female spiritual leader that accepted as the member of Buddhist female Order what we called in Burmese is 'Thilashin' which means a nun. What we would like to focus on here is about a spiritual leader who performed her best role in the modern time in Burma (now Myanmar) and her services to the people and the nation especially in religious sector proved how ability she had and much she had done for her newgeneration. She was none other than Daw Nanacari, the founder of Thamiddhodaya Sukhitarama Myanaung Nunnery School. Her services to Theravada Buddhism in Burma were deeply recorded in Burmese history.

Key Words : Society, Men, Women, Nanacari

INTRODUCTION

There are two types of duties for the *bhikkhu* (Order of Men) and *bhikkhuni* (Order of Women) in Buddhism. These duties are called '*Ganthadhura*' learning religious scripture and '*Vipassanadhura*' applying the theory into practice. *Ganthadhura* is the foundation for last long of Buddhism termed as *Pariyatti Sasana*. The monks and nuns have been carrying out this duty since the life time of the Buddha till now.

Even though the lineage of bhikkhunis has disappeared for a long time in the history of Theravada Buddhism, the similar lineage called 'Thilashin' in Burma (now Myanmar) have been existing before the Pagan dynasty which means before eleven century A.D. The word 'Thilashin' was commonly translated as nun into English. The Thilashin community has been performing their duties as the bhikkhuni order did in the past.

Among those nuns, Daw Nanacari was one who had carried out the above mentioned two tasks by setting up a famous nunnery called 'Thamiddhodaya Sukhitarama

Daw Nanacari Myanaung Learning Center'. This center has recorded its long history and carrier by producing many well known nuns and nunnery branches in Myanmar.

Early childhood:

The nun-hood which will be a well-known person in the history of Myanmar nun was born in 11th waxing of Kason in 1259 Myanmar Era (M.E). Her parents were U In Kyin and Daw Ngwe Yon. The parents named her Ma Nyein Hla and she was the 8th one among the eleven brothers and sisters. Her native place is Htan Thone Pin village, Myanaung Township, Irrawaddy Division.

She was not so well even in her childhood and she had to suffer mysterious diseases till being skeletoned. The parents and relatives did not know what to do by looking at their baby girl. As suggested by the Physician, they had to cure their daughter in religious belief. There is a tradition in our Burmese society, if anyone, especially a child was not well very often, the child must be offered or sold to a member of Buddhist monks or nuns.

The parents had a thought to offer their daughter to a nun and luckily, a nun came to their house in the morning and they requested the nun to stay at their house for 3-days and to recite Paritta, the teaching of the protection taught by the Buddha. Due to unseen forces, the child was recovered from her health within a few days. The parents were pious Buddhists and they donated much money and other offertories to the nun.

When Ma Nyein Hla was 9 years old, she went to school and she was so intelligent and bright girl even praised by her teachers. She was good at Myanmar and Mathematics subjects. She could help her parents' business even in her young age. She read not only school subjects but also *Jataka* stories, the past lives of the Buddha such as Ten *Jataka* stories and *Jinathapakasani* and so on.

Young but matured one:

When she was 13 years old, she had a chance to listen to Dhamma Talk by a wellknown Venerable Ledi Sayadawgyi. Ven. Ledi Sayadawgyi came to Bhavana forest meditation center in Myanaung invited by Ingyin Myaing Sayadaw. Even though she did not have mature knowledge to understand the deep religious discourse, she wanted to see the very well-known Ledi Sayadawgyi so the family went to that place to listen to the Dhamma Talk.

Ven. Ledi Sayadawgyi taught *Abhidhamma* doctrine for seven successive days at the center and due to lucid explanation on the profound teachings; Ma Nyein Hla could understand well the nature of aggregates, mind and matter. In addition, she had another opportunity to listen to Vipassana teaching from Ven. *Tikkhaindriya*, known as *Ambarana* Sayadaw, Shwetaung Township so she did not want to live anymore in secular life and had strong desire to leave lay life and join into homeless life as a Thilashin, a nun.

One day, she came to across with two nuns while she was performing social works in a village. She had a chat to them and learned that the nuns were from Bhavana forest meditation center and they came for receiving dry alms-food. She helped them and giving them a shelter at her house. Thus, she came to familiar with them and they had good relationship from that time onward. She wanted to join as a nun under Daw *Vilasi*, the head of the nunnery because whenever she visited to Bhavana forest meditation center, she felt so serene and peaceful in her heart.

Finally, she requested her parents to give her permission to become a nun but her parents refused her appeal and her relatives also did not want her to do so. U Kyaw Ya, her uncle, was so worried hearing she would leave her home so he did not let the nuns coming to her house. Anyway, she did not give up her desire and she sewed clothes for nun to be ready and kept them with her while waiting for the chance.

Leaving her house secretly:

When she was 17-years old, she left her home at night with the help of her two cousins. It was in the 9th waning of Tabaung in 1276 M.E. They moved to Bhavana forest meditation center, Myanaung and they accompanied with farmers who went to the town for their business and they reached Bhavana center in early morning.

Ma Nyein Hla had already known that she could not become a nun without the consent of her parents. This is the rule formulated by the nuns so she cut her hair priority. Under the management of Daw *Vilasi*, she had a great chance to become a nun patronaged by Ven. Bhavana forest meditation center Sayadaw. She was named as 'Ma *Nanacari*'. Soon after joining into the order of nun, another 20 girls from her village also joined into nuns together with her.

At that time the place was called Bhavana Hill because Ven. *Asabha* who was well known as an Arahant from Ingyin Myaing forest meditation center came to practice meditation at that forest centre and from that time onwards, the place was called Bhavana Hill. When the Sayadaw practiced meditation there, nuns also came to practice meditation under his guidance and many nunneries were built and Daw *Vilasi* managed those nunneries.

The challenge of being a Thilashin, nun:

Leaving a home and joining a homeless life is not easy for a female. Even though having desire to become a nun, the responsible nuns did not let her join into their life easily because the door for joining the order of a monk for male is open forever but not welcome for a female. The parents and relatives did not encourage them to become nuns.

By looking at the history of the beginning of bhikkhuni order, *Pajapati Gotami*, the step mother of the Buddha, requested the Buddha to let her live a homeless life but the Buddha refused her appeal for

several times because of difficult challenges for women in homeless life. Finally, the Buddha allowed her to become a bhikkhuni, homeless life with Eight Great Condition (*atthagarudhama*) and later He promulgated the rules for bhikkhunis which later known as '*bhikkhuni patimokkha*'.

Now a days, not only parents but also family members and relatives do not want their daughters to become nuns and they thought that it is a type of inferior level to join as a nun or women join into nuns due to lack of dependent persons such as husbands or sons. Therefore, it is difficult for a woman to leave homeless life. Only the girl or woman who had strong desire opposed the parents' attitude and wish and finally they approved and let their daughters do as they wish.

The systematic procedure of becoming a Thilashin, nun:

The following procedures are step by step of becoming a nun:

1. First, the parents entrusted their daughters to the nuns.
2. A girl who is going to become a nun must reflect the 32-signs of the aggregates while shaving her hair.
3. She has to offer her clothes to the nun.
4. She has to ask for her clothes from the nun.
5. The nun returns clothes to her and put on the clothes.
6. She has to recite the three refuges and precepts as administered by the nuns or the monks.
7. And finally, she is going to be given her religious name.

With the management of Daw *Vilasi*, Ma Nyein Hla became a nun and Bhavana Hill forest meditation center was founded by Ven. *Asabha* later known as 'Bhavana Hill Sayadaw', the native of Seikkhun village, Shwebo Township. Later the venerable Sayadaw shifted to Sagaing Hill and established a centre Myan Aung Chaung by name.

Learning Buddhist Scripture:

Soon after becoming a nun, Ma *Nanacari* started learning Buddhist scriptures under her teacher as well as the guardian, Daw *Vilasi*. She learned *Abhidhammatha sanghaha* in great detail. Daw *Vilasi* was an experienced teacher in her subject especially in this *Abhidhamma* field. She was the pupil of Ven. *Javana*, a well-known Ven. *Sasana's* disciple.

Therefore, she was well versed not only *Abhidhamma* but also *Alankara* and *Channa*.

Being an intelligent girl, Ma *Nanacari* could learn the lessons easily as she was taught. She had learned Basic Buddhist literature for four years under her Daw *Vilasi*. She had learned the Pali texts such as *Dhammacakkapavattana sutta*, *Anattalakkhana sutta*, *Satipatthana suttas* which are the principle doctrines in the practical field.

Moved to Sagaing Hill, Upper Burma for further studies:

After studying for four years under her teacher, she moved to Sagaing Hill for her further studies where well-known nuns gathered together in learning and practicing meditation. At that time, the good news of 'Thamiddhodaya nunnery Chaung' spread far and wide so with the permission of her teacher she went to 'Thamiddhodaya Chaung' in 1280 M.E. The head of that nunnery school was Daw *Malari* as well as the leader of nuns in Burma and Daw *Malari* was called as Grandmother in nun's community.

We can trace the history of Thilashin, nuns in Burma. The nun who led the community of nun in Konbaung Dynasty was Daw *Khema* known as Mae Kin, a native from Manipur, the border of Western Burma. She was so intelligent at her time and she could even compete with her contemporary well-known venerable Mahathera called Ban Maw Sayadaw. Ban Maw Sayadaw was the one who was the Master of the King. Due to Mea King's ability, the entire nuns were respected and she was the teacher who taught to the king's daughters and maids in the court.

Daw *Malari* was the second nun who led the community of nuns in her time, British colonial period. The news of Thamiddhodaya Chaung reached to every corner of the country and every metropolitan girls and nuns so those girls rushed to her nunnery for their studies and they wanted to pass their examinations with distinctions.

Passing examinations:

As we stated earlier, Ma *Nanacari* was very intelligent and she had studied her basic Buddhist literature under her teacher so when she had a chance to study higher scripture under famous venerable Sayadaws and nuns, she stood the best among the student nuns.

She studied under Venerable Thayankar Sayadaw

to whom the king awarded the title ‘*Rajaguru*’ and later known as *Thayaing Mastery* with the arrangement of her teacher, *Daw Malari*, *Ma Nanacari* enrolled to sit for *Pathamabyan* examination. She passed all levels: *Pathamagne*, *Pathamalat* and *Pathamagyi* within five years. At that time, *Dhammacariya* level had not yet formulated by the authority. She passed ‘*Pathamakyaw*’ which mean the one who stood at first place in *Pathamagyi* organized by *Thamiddhodaya* private examination.

Quest for knowledge:

After passing all levels of exams, she was appointed as a lecturership in her teacher’s nunnery school. She tried her best as assigned the duty to her but she could not satisfy the level she reached so she kept on learning the profound doctrines and treatises such as *Manimanjusa Tika*, *Abhidhammathavibhavini Tika*, *Atthasalini*, *Mulatika* and *Pancapakyaing* under *Tharaing Master* and *Daw Marlari* systematically.

Her attitude for gaining knowledge proved herself by pointing out a passage in *PathanaPali* text which reads “*Pannan nissaya attanam atapeti, paritapeti, pariyitthimulakam dukkham paccanibhoti*” which means one must endure any difficulty when one encounters any situation if one wanted to gain knowledge. Why did she say these words? While studying in *Sagaing*, some nuns had sufficient requisites but some did not have enough even for food. *Ma Nanacari* included in the second group so when her friends shared the food with her, she responded to them the above mentioned words.

While studying in *Sagain*, her father came to visit her place and he practiced meditation near their nunnery. She could have a chance to look after her father and due to advantage aged, her father passed away while practicing meditation in it.

Returned home:

After the funeral processing, *Daw Ngwe Yon*, her mother, requested her daughter to do her mission at her home town. *Ma Nanacari* thought to herself that she had sufficient knowledge in Buddhist scripture and it was her duty to look after her mother who was rippen in life. Thus, she asked for permission from her teacher, *Daw Malari*, to let her go back home and she was welcome by her teacher, *Daw Vilasi* and her relatives.

Setting up new a learning center:

Though staying under her teacher, she could not feel happy because her place called ‘*Bhavana Hill*’ which means practicing meditation place. The place is carrying out mainly only *Vipassana* meditation practice not learning center, *Ganthadhura*. Being a teacher, she wanted to set up a learning center for nuns and shared her knowledge to other nuns but it was impossible for her to do her work that place. Her dream was provided by *U Lin Tun* and *Daw Ohne Nyunt* because they offered a new land for her work which is not far from that hill.

Daw Nanacari managed to construct buildings with the support of lay devotees. *Daw Lon Ma Lay* and family; *U Lin Tun*+ *Daw Ohne Nyunt* family; *U Kan Gyi*+ *Daw Shwe Oo* donated fund for each building respectively. The new place was named ‘*Samiddhodaya Sukhitarama Bhavana Hill* in 1928.’ It focus only on learning, *Ganthadhura* and the place accepts only young nuns. At that time, *Daw Nanacari* was only 31-years old.

She started her mission with 20 nuns and she taught her pupils basic Buddhist literature. There were over 70 student nuns two years later in 1930 so she created private examination for her pupils called ‘*Agama+Sabhava* examination’ which means the candidates must recite the prescribed texts as well as written exam. The examination was patronaged by renowned senior venerable monks in the town. The religious examination for nuns was aimed with the promotion of Buddhist doctrine and discipline in one way.

Daw Nanacari had two reliable friends as well as her companions for performing her successful mission for nuns. One was *Daw Silavati* and the other was *Daw Medhari*. The three leader nuns joined hand together to uplift the life of nuns and the women in Burma. There were three types of examination held in *Myanaung* at that time. They were:

1. *Sudhamma* exam,
2. *Veluvun* exam and

3. *Agama-Sabhava* exam. The *Agama-Sabhava* exam was annually held in *Kason*, the second month of *Myanmar Calendar*. Many people near or far came to the event. In 1298, a family from *Rangoon* visited the nunnery when the exam event was held and they donated a community hall in the nunnery compound.

Daily routine of Thamiddhodaya nunnery:

All nuns who lived in that nunnery have to pay homage to the Buddha for three times in a day: early

morning, afternoon and evening. For the first period, they have to do the service at 3:30 A.M early in the morning. For the second period, thenuns those who have to follow the classes are exempted and all other nuns have to do the service at 1 O'clock and the last period they do the service is at 7:00 P.M in the evening. In the interval time, they have to study their respective subjects and do their lessons.

A thought of establishing a new center in Rangoon:

Daw *Nanacari* wanted to extend her mission for she noticed the works of Christian nuns and their success in the community so she admired their activities and she thought Burma, our mother land, is a land of Buddhists but Christian nuns came to do their mission from far away so why they did their work largely in our land.

Daw *Nanacari* had this thought whenever she visited Rangoon on her works so she decided to set up a nunnery to produce the future generation nuns to propagate and promote Buddhism and to prove that Buddhist nuns can perform their duties more than Buddhist monks if they have ability and capacity.

The victory land is important to carry out the mission so Rangoon, the capital, is only the most suitable place for her work so she resolved to establish the learning center in the capital and she made solemn wish when she paid homage to Shwedagon Pagoda. In 1301, she went to meet U Chit Maung, Rangoon Municipal Commissioner, who was her former lay devotees while he took his duty in Hinzada and she requested him to permit her a land by giving information him what she wanted to do for her future plan. At that time, U Ba Win was a Mayor of Rangoon and his family donated fund to purchase the land which is wide 2-acres situated near Hanthawaddy round about (Now, the place can be seen as Common Wealth Cemetery). Taking 20 pupils with her she moved to the new place to perform her mission

While doing her works, she came to across with the Second World War in 1303 and the buildings she constructed were damaged and due to the dilapidated and affected conditions during the war she could not live in her place for it was not safe place for her and the pupils in the Capital so she came back to her native town.

The war did not spare Myanaung and other places the refugees were full in their nunnery and she nursed and looked after those refugees while performing her duties such as teaching her pupils and paying homage to the Buddha for 3 times in a day, offering flowers, telling

beats, practicing meditation.

Buddhists from Myanaung believed that the danger could be escaped by offering flowers to the Buddha amounted to one million so with firmly resolution, nuns and the people performed that merit without fail. Finally, they overcame the unpleasant sense of the war. Even though many buildings were destroyed, the morality of the people stood high and they carried out more and more religious activities.

Second time effort for the Nunnery learning center:

After the World War II in 1309 M.E, Daw *Nanacari* moved to Rangoon again with the intention of performing her mission. When she reached her place, she found nothing but the damage and dilapidated situation in her nunnery and what she found her place turned to the Common Wealth Cemetery.

She went to meet U Chit Maung who served his duty again at Municipality Council. U Chit Maung promised her that he would return the land wherever she wanted so she searched the land and chose the present place located not far from the previous one. Accompanied by her senior pupils: Daw *Indavati*, Daw *Zayavati*, Daw *Santavati*, Daw *Pavani* and other ten nuns started their shelters for themselves.

While cleaning compound and constructing buildings Ven. *Kesara* from Veluvan monastery and Mr. Bha Shein, her cousin and some lay devotees gave their hands whenever she needed. Being the disciple of the Buddha she entrusted herself to the Buddha and she recited '*Brahmajala sutta*'. She believed that this *sutta* would ward off every difficulty and harmful unseen spirits so they performed recitation of the *sutta* daily as their duty. Daw *Nanacari* and her pupil nuns enjoyed the benefits of reciting this discourse and within one decade, the nunnery became famous in passing religious examination.

Received certificate of good service:

In 1937 (1299 M.E), the governor of Burma presented certificate of Good Service to Daw *Nyanacari*, the head of the nun Teacher, Myanaung for her excellent service in recognition of preparing nuns for the Pathamabyan examination.

U Nu, the Prime Minister:

U Nu, the Prime Minister of Burma, heard the good news of Daw *Nanacari* and her pupils about the benefit of reciting the discourse so he visited the nunnery learning

center and paid respect the nuns and recorded the recitation of the *Sutta* with tape recorder. He instructed his men to open the tape at every fire station in Rangoon so the voices of the recitation of the *sutta* spread the entire city.

The financial committee led by the Prime Minister was formed for building multi-purpose hall in the compound of the nunnery school. The committee was chaired by U Kyaw Nyeing, U Bha Swe and they collected the fund for the building. Sir U Thwin family and U Pwint Kaung family were the main donors of the Building.

Daw *Nanacari* was the reliable pupil of Daw *Malari*, the leader of the nuns in learning sector because she was awarded the certificate by the Governor of British. She uplifted the spirit of the people of Rangoon including the Prime Minister and the government by reciting *Brahmajala sutta*.

After independence in 1948, Spiritual leaders, Buddhist leaders, the people and the government planned to carry out the message of the Buddha to the world so the Sangha and the people led by the newly government managed the task of convening the Sixth Great Buddhist Council in Rangoon. Burma, leading the role in five Theravada Buddhist countries, held the Great Council in 1953 inviting all Buddhist countries both Theravada and Mahayana including Buddhist and non-Buddhist organizations, leaders of the world, to participate the Great Council.

Among the delegations, Buddhist nuns from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Asam, Nepal and South Vietnam came to participate the Great Council. Those nuns were accommodated at Thamiddhodaya Nunnery and some foreign nuns studied Buddhist scripture at her nunnery school. Daw *Nanacari* who was well versed in speaking Pali and English was popular among Burmese nuns. Every foreign delegation was sent to her nunnery for sight see and to witness the works of the nuns.

After the Sixth Great Council in 1954, the government formulated to open World Buddhist University in Kabar-Aye Hilllock. The parliament approved the Pali University bill to uplift the higher learning centers. The government allowed the learning centers to upgrade the Pali University if the learning centers accommodated over 10 monks who passed Pathamagyi level. At that time, Daw *Nanacari* applied for her nunnery to upgrade as Pali University for there were over ten nuns who had

already passed Pathamagyi level but unfortunately the appeal was turned down so she was very upset for not having the great chance for her nunnery school.

Other missions at the nunnery

She conducted other activities by running several classes at her nunnery school. Those classes are:

1. Buddhist missionary classes lectured by U Hla Thein,
2. Health care classes conducted by Medical officers from medical school,
3. Sanskrit language classes done by U Tha Myat,
4. Pathana classes by Ven. Ketumala,
5. Open medical clinic by Burmese traditional medicine and
6. Conducting summer Buddhist cultural classes for school girls by accepting temporary nuns.

Free pass in land:

Due to sacrificing her life for the nation, the government gave her special free pass to travel by ship, train and vehicles in land to perform her social and religious works.

Returning the gratitude to her teachers:

She always paid respect to her teacher nuns Daw *Vilasi* from Bhavana Hill forest meditation center, Myanaung and Daw *Malari* who taught her higher Buddhist scripture, Thamiddhodaya Chaung, Sagaing, yearly dedicating to their deep gratitude and she donated ks.30 per person till they passed away.

Constructing Pagoda:

She managed to build a Pagoda called 'Uddissa Cetiya' at new Bhavana Hill in Myanaung in 1381.

The last days:

When she was 70-years old, she was not so well due to advantaged age. Although suffering hypertension, she neglected her diseases by giving lectures to her pupils and doing other devotional works. She always recited *Brahmajala Sutta*, the protecting discourse in the Buddha's teachings even though taking medicine as suggested by the physicians. Sometimes, she asked her pupils to recite the *sutta* and she listened to it respectfully by closing her eyes and when she was 78 years old, she passed away peacefully in 1337 M.E.

Conclusion:

The noble person's works have been recorded in history in any situation such as social, politic, law, economic, health, education, religion and so on in every corner of the world. We can see women have ability to perform social and spiritual works for the people as well as for themselves in the Burmese society. As Burma mainly dominated Theravada Buddhism, its society can be classified into two among the women: ordinary women and spiritual leading women and the later one is called 'Thilashin' in Burmese language which is adopted from Christian word, nun. Daw Nanacari, one of the Burmese Thilashins in the modern time, devoted her life for

servicing the welfare and happiness of the people and the nation in social and spiritual sectors so her works have been recorded in the history of modern Burma.

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