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## **BUDDHISM IN THE MANDALAY PERIOD (1852-1885): A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT**

### **Abstract**

Based on Myanmar Buddhist context, the meaning of the *Pali* word *Sasana* refers to the set of teachings of Buddha which has been considered intact in its purest form since it originated from Buddha Himself. As time went by, the said set of precepts might have faced some modifications according to taste and liking of those who embraced it. As a result, it is not assured that the *Sasana* in Myanmar Buddhist context is still intact in its original form. Myanmar history had depicted the 19th century as an era of Buddhism where it flourished like the *Sun and the Moon*, so to speak. Furthermore, the *Sasana* was said to have been refined and propagated during the reign of Mandalay Kings particularly during King Mindon's reign (1853-1878). While the kingdom's political and economic state were unstable, the king and his people made significant investments in various kinds of religious works of merit-making. Although every Myanmar king in history stood as the protector of religion and supported the religion and *Sangha* (community of monks), the extent to which King Mindon devoted his efforts to support the religion still raised many political questions. An analysis on the said allegation would entail gaining in-depth insights into the beliefs and practices of Buddhism by people from the Mandalay Period, the role of the *Sangha* in the preservation, and the protection of the *Sasana*.

**Keywords:** Mandalay Kings, Myanmar, *Sangha*, *Sasana*, Theravada Buddhism

### **Introduction**

Myanmar history had depicted the Mandalay Period (1853-1878) as an era when Buddhism prospered like "the Sun and the Moon" shining day and night. During the rule of King Mindon (1853-1878), the *Sasana* was refined and propagated with the help of monks because the staunch support provided by the monarchs alone could not guarantee the refinement and improvement of the *Sasana* but, on the contrary, Buddhism was not actually purified. In this paper, the proponent will discuss three major topics; (1) how the *Sasana* was propagated by King Mindon, (2) the public mindsets or attitudes toward Buddhism in the Mandalay Period, and (3) the role

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of monks during the period of King Mindon.

Buddhism during the Mandalay Period should be understood according to the historical context of Buddhism in Myanmar. Thus, it is claimed that the pureness of Buddhism can be likely observed simply because the Theravada Buddhism had been practiced in Myanmar since the Bagan period. However, the time difference of more than 800 years between the Bagan Period (1044-1287), i.e., when the religion began its roots and the Mandalay Period (1853-1878) covered by this paper could not claim to have explicitly caused for considerable changes on the part of Theravada Buddhism.

### **Data Collecting and Methodology**

The data in the form of information are collected from various primary sources specifically the Royal Orders and manuscripts relating to the religious affairs from late professor Dr. Than Tun's collections, and secondary sources from Historical Research Commission and University of Yangon Central Library. An analysis of this paper is based on the abovementioned data using historical analytical methodology. The main objectives of this article are: (1) to realize the concept and attitude of the king and his people towards the Theravada Buddhism that existed in Myanmar in the 19th century, (2) how the Myanmar people proliferated *Sasana* by taking various factors into consideration, and (3) how those factors contributed.

### **The Historical Background of Buddhism in Myanmar**

The meaning of the *Pali* word *Sasana* refers to the teachings of Buddha within the Myanmar Buddhist context. Though, Theravada is the one embraced among other factions of Buddhism, other canons of Buddhism are also accepted. However, it is difficult to say if it is still in the purest form of Buddhism. Therefore, the common assertion that Myanmar has adopted Theravadaism because of its pure nature should, in fact, be the other way round, given that it is only said to be pure mainly because Myanmar has adopted it. The set of teachings might only be in its purest form during Buddha's lifetime. As time went by, it could have faced some modifications in accordance with the taste and liking of those who adopted it. Thus, it is not easy to assert that the *Sasana* Myanmar practices are intact in their original form.

With the advent of the *Bagan* Period (1044-1287), Myanmar had been familiarized with Buddha's life stories and teachings. It was also believed that some modifications of Buddha's teachings were made to suit their situation. The latter part of this era was marked with high popularity of rural/forest monks known as *Arannyavasi* based on stone inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> Those monks built huge monasteries on large plots of land and lived comfortably as landlords dispensing with most of the

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<sup>2</sup> Tun Than, *History of Ancient Myanmar*, 2nd edition, 1969, p. 9.

*Viniya*, i.e., their code. They invested in real estate and completion of any transaction, and bribery, dining, and wining followed. They also frequented drinking bouts.<sup>3</sup> A further act of ostentatious lifestyle to be pointed out was found in a stone inscription (1248 ME) which stated that cooks had to prepare morning meals as well as evening meals for these monks. Apparently, the leader of these forest monks was believed by devotees to have gained some supernatural powers.

### **Buddhism in the Mandalay Period (1832-1885)**

Myanmar history had depicted the Mandalay Period (1832-1885) as an era when Buddhism prospered like “the Sun and the Moon” shining day and night.<sup>4</sup> It is true that during the reign of Mandalay Kings, particularly during King Mindon’s (1853-1878) reign, the *Sasana* was refined and propagated. It is also said that after the year 1885, when Myanmar fell under the British rule, the *Sasana* suffered a lot. An analysis of this claim would involve insights into:

1. The belief and practice of Buddhism by people of the Mandalay Period,
2. The acceptance of Buddha’s teachings, and
3. The role of the *Sangha* in the preservation and protection of the *Sasana*.

Regarding the *Sasana* of the Mandalay Period (1852-1885), the following points are to be tackled, whether: (1) The *Sasana* reigned unrivalled during King Mindon’s rule, (2) It diminished under the Bagan kings, (3) The diminishing was caused by internal forces, and (4) The *Sasana* is at its apex right now.

The answers to the abovementioned queries should be taken seriously. Various facts and findings might lead to the correct answer. One important fact was that the Myanmar Buddhist *Sangha* organization was an institution well-adjusted to the feudal system. However, with the decline of the feudal system, the institution found itself at odds with the changing times and circumstances.

Monastic education was once a prestigious mode in the training of clerics who could set hopes on becoming the State of *Sangha Nayaka* (Head of the state monk), and in the royal service career, a minister at the Royal Court. With the socio-economic changes, monastic education was almost abandoned since it could no longer guarantee anything of that sort, and at the same time was unable to impart basic education for a livelihood in the secular world. Another reason is that economic hardships prevented families from sparing their sons from studying at the monastery. When the capitalist system replaced the feudal one, the Christian church made some reformations to adapt to the changing situation. The Myanmar Buddhist monasteries never did that and, therefore, their prestige was lost among the public. For the *Sasana*, the appearance of able members of the *Sangha* was

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> Myint Myo, *Confronting Colonialism: King Mindon’s Strategy for Defending Independence (1853-1878)*, Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2012, p. 190.

few and far between as well. These were some reasons that caused the *Sasana* to weaken.

### King Mindon Exploited the *Sasana*

Everyone would agree that Buddhism reigned unrivalled during the Mandalay Period. The three factors that led to this recognition were the belief that Buddha Himself, had been to Mandalay during his lifetime, the assumption that Mandalay was the hub where Buddha's *Sasana* prospered in accordance with sacred revelations, and that in line with the two factors above, the public at large, absorbed the imperial propaganda.

King Mindon was the anointed Monarch who was heir to the *Sasana*. Usurpers to the throne in Myanmar history then justified their action by elaborating on the fact that they were preordained to rule. In accordance with feudal practice, they made the exaltation of the *Sasana* their foremost responsibility, and therefore, earned the title *Sasana Daryakar* (donor, provider). King Mindon's great efforts to promote the *Sasana* was more of a ploy of his political agenda than an expression of being a fervent Buddhist. His intention was to reunite the country where there were signs of pathetic nationalism, and to make a holy war justifiable and necessary against the British invasion.<sup>5</sup> His aim was to wage war versus the pagans by influencing and tarnishing the religious sensitivity of the people. The assertion in the later period that the kings were making donations out of the taxes levied upon the citizen, and thus infringed one of the 25 types of theft, which could not be accepted as solid accusation. The ideology that the *Sasana* was transformed into the purest form of Theravada Buddhism through the coordinated efforts of the kings and *Sangha* was also to be accepted under cautious scrutiny. Buddhism during the Buddha's lifetime was pure in its origins, however, there might be some modifications later to suit the followers in terms of the geographical differences. Thus, the assertion that only during the Mandalay Period that the *Sasana* was transformed into its purest of origins would be eulogizing too far. Besides, the Buddha's *Sasana* of Mandalay Period was found to have no significant difference with that of today.

As far as the *Sasana* is concerned, very few followers realized the fact that it refers to the teachings of Lord Buddha Himself. However, the belief that the *Sasana* had already existed for 5000 years has been accepted to this day without any analytical thought.<sup>6</sup> In fact, there is no element of time for the existence of the *Sasana*. It does exist for those who abide by the teachings of Buddha, and for those who do not, the *Sasana* does not exist as well. The same principle is also applied to those who have accepted Buddhism and those who have not. It follows that once the teachings of Buddha are forsaken, the *Sasana* ceases to exist. The people of the Mandalay Period had believed that by doing their utmost diligence to make the *Sasana* last for 5,000

5 Myint Myo, *Confronting Colonialism: King Mindon's Strategy for Defending Independence (1853-1878)*. . . p. 191.

6 Maung Win, *History of Buddhism in Myanmar*, 1978, pp. 7-8.

years, they could still be eligible for salvation.

### **The Public Attitude towards Buddha in Mandalay Period**

Generally, the attitude in accepting Buddha and His teachings was more on a personal level of worship than a simple belief. Pagodas and statues were built, erected, and dedicated to the Lord Buddha as gifts and signs of gratitude for Him. However, the essence got lost in the face of the superfluous shining pagodas and life-size images and statues. In addition, it is not safe to say that the sculpting of Buddha images and statues is close to His resemblance, in a variety of postures, and in accordance with His wishes.<sup>7</sup> The essence of Buddhism is not in worshipping of His images but adherence to His teachings. Although it is not appropriate to regard Buddha as the eternal living God, most Buddhist members to this day are praying to Him for wellness and prolonged existence. People also offer food to Him as if He is still alive. They believe that like the spirits, Buddha would look after them when they make offerings.

#### *The Public Opinion on Dhamma (Canonical Texts)*

In teaching the Buddhist Scriptures, the language structure and syntax were emphasized, and there was also a misleading assumption that wrong pronunciation would cost you the *Nibbana*. The truth is that renouncing the worldly things and leading a morally upright way of life would ensure Nirvana and not the correct pronunciation in the understanding of the Scriptures. In accordance with the Buddhist laity's desire to achieve *Nibbana*, the *Sanghas* wrote such treatises as *Nithaya* and *Dipani*.

#### *In the Mandalay Period*

As far as the *Sangha* was concerned, the Mandalay Period witnessed an abundance of the *Sangha* community, making up a tenth of the total population. Members of the *Sangha* preferred to excel in the learning of the Buddhistic studies than to put Buddha's teachings into practice. The monarch, accordingly, held religious examinations and titles were duly offered.<sup>8</sup> Since the emphasis was on the recitation by heart of the Buddhist Scriptures, lack of general knowledge led to weakness in rationalism among the *Sangha* community. Some senior members craving for the royal mentorship, secured the titles and awards through malpractices, and once they obtained the goal, they became conceited. Although supposed to be well-versed in theory, these individuals were unable to apply their theoretical knowledge to the practical way of lifestyle the Buddha intended to teach. Some

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7 Tun Than, *History of Ancient Myanmar*. . . pp. 202-203.

8 Maung Win, *History of Buddhism in Myanmar*. . . pp. 98-112.

even joined the *Sangha* community not because they had faith in the *Sasana*, but for a comfortable living as a monk. According to the *Dhamma Vinaya Order* (Purification of the Religions) there were members of the *Sangha* who adhered to the religious rites and regulations as there were some 'worldly monks' who resorted to fortune telling, alchemist, amassing fortunes, and real estate's lawsuits on possession, succession of monasteries, and plots of land.<sup>9</sup>

In general, there were members of *Sangha* who adhered to the *Viniya*, as there were those who violated them. Some monks in the Mandalay Period did agriculture, raised cattle, asked for monetary donations, carried out business transactions, gave medical treatment, told fortune, served the devotees, used umbrella and footwear without sound reason, chewed betel and smoked in the afternoons, roamed about the town, watched plays, puppet and magic shows, listened to music, made mischief between *Sanghas*, armed with offensive weapons, made jewelries, and made use of tattoo marks, amulet, mantras, etc., which were all inappropriate acts for a monk.<sup>10</sup> Some monks were also found to be involved in alchemy.

### *Reformation of the Sasana by Konbaung Kings*

The King Badon (1872-1819) in his royal decrees admonished these individuals that joined the *Sangha* for the sake of respects given, and food and robes offered to them as monks. Badon Min started the reformation, but after seven years there were signs of failure appearing in his Order.<sup>11</sup> Drastic attempts for reform were made at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. However, everything fell back to the old ways in the year 1816.

King Myedu Min (1763-1776) in 1773, urged the *Sanghas* to take extra care in following the *Vinaya*. Those unable to recall the clauses of the *Vinaya*, told fortune, found healing people, etc., were to be defrocked.<sup>12</sup> The acts mentioned in the decree reflected the most common cases in which the monks of that period were involved in violation of the *Vinaya*, and as the members of the *Sangha* wielded personal, social, and religious influence over royal court officials and common people alike, the public were also rallying behind their respective monks. The monarch could exploit the situation by working on long term plans to disseminate Buddha's *Sasana* and practices among the people at large. The task should be done very delicately at the grassroots level where clergy and laity cooperate in reformations aimed at cleansing the *Sasana*. Kings who came to throne after Badon Min had also urged the *Sangha* community to abide by the *Vinaya*. The later part of the Konbaung Era found such urgings becoming more frequent. Therefore, it can be assumed that the number of *Sanghas* violating the *Vinaya* had increased with the times.

King Mindon, in the Mandalay Period also found out that the robe was taken as

9 Myint Myo, *Confronting Colonialism: King Mindon's Strategy for Defending Independence (1853-1878)*. . . pp. 202-203

10 "Miscellaneous Parabike (Manuscript)", Scroll No. 52, Collection of the Mandalay University.

11 "King Badon's Order Parabike (Manuscript)", Scroll No. 5219, Dr. Tun Than's personal collection.

12 Me Htee Sayadaw, *Wuntha History*, 1966, pp. 165-166.

the *Sasana* because of the *de facto* monks prevailing during his reign. His 21-point Alajji Acts or acts contrary to the Buddha's prohibition issued on February 15, 1856, forbade the monks to amass jewelry, socialize with donors and be at their service, fortune telling and administering medical care, practicing alchemy, performing occult, and gambling. In fact, all these were prohibited by the *Viniya*. Similar actions were taken by King Dhamazedi (1472-1492) in the 1470s. The idea that not committing these prohibitions would make the *Sasana* prosper was too simplistic. Then, these malpractices were never found to have ceased. The monarch issued *Dhamma Vinaya Order* (Purification of the Religions) decrees to make the *Sangha* abide by the religious code of conduct. However, since the order was just a repetition of the religious code of conduct, the main aim was to utilize the *Sangha* for political ends. Therefore, the *Sangha* of Mandalay Period wielded social and political influence on a certain extent.

#### *The Formation of the Administrative Council for the Monks*

*Sayadaws* at different levels of administration were appointed to run the *Sasana* affairs during the King Mindon era. The post of the Chief *Sayadaw* of the *Sasana* was created.<sup>13</sup> The Council of *Sasana* Trustees issued orders to keep the members of the *Sangha* within the *Vinaya*. The *Mahadanwun*, the minister in charge of the *Sangha*'s code of ecclesiastic code arrested violators and sent them to the Chief *Sayadaw* of the *Sasana* Trustees who took actions in accordance with the *Viniya*. There were monks involved in politics and some of them took part in the *Myingyun Myinkhondaing Rebellion - The assassination of Crown prince Kanaung*. The usurpers were defrocked and sent up to the royal court. Therefore, the *Sasana Trustees Council* was an institution which served as a buttress to the feudal rule.

#### *The Religious Examination in Mandalay Period*

The *Sanghas* took the *Pariyatti* or learning Buddhist Scriptures as the main source of the *Sasana* and it was preferred to the *Patipatti* or practicing of Buddhist truth. The King had examinations on religious teaching and learning held, and awards and titles conferred along with exemption from taxations.<sup>14</sup> Thus, there was fierce competition among the *Sanghas*. The test for recitation of the Scriptures emphasized on the articulation of the texts rather than its meaning. Therefore, the students of Buddhist Scriptures became weak in reasoning abilities. There were those who made great efforts in the teaching and learning of the doctrine. However, some did not make much effort on *Viniya*.<sup>15</sup>

The members of *Sangha* who excel in *Pariyatti* were awarded, in accordance

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13 Tin Maung Maung, *The Chronicle of Kongbaung Dynasty*, 1968, pp. 115-116.

14 Tin U, *Myanmar's King Administration Order*, Vol. III, 1970, pp. 213.

15 Nigawda, *Vinichaya*, Mandalay, Sasana Press, 1941, pp. 7-8.

with their qualifications, the title 'Raja Guru' or mentor to the King. As it is a royal award it becomes a coveted prize for the Sangha community, and many attempted to gain that title of 'Raja Guru' through a variety of means. Titles and awards were given for the further development of the *Pariyatti*. In the feudal education system, the study of Buddhist Scriptures happened to be the steppingstone to the promising career world of the royal court service and that could be the motive for a lot of people.

## Conclusion

The people in the Mandalay Period did not have a full understanding of the *Sasana*. They worshipped Lord Buddha only on a personal level and they took recitation of mantras to be the essence of religion. Most of the people were Buddhist who took refuge in the Three Gems, i.e., the Lord, the Law, and the Order. They also venerated the *Stupa* and the Buddha images, and they believed that the end of all miseries would follow the eight-fold paths to attain the *Nibbana*. The learned explanation is that the images of the Buddha and the *Stupa* are remain as the motivations of believers to learn and practice the teachings of the Buddha and an increase in the Buddhist population is taken as the prosperity of the said Religion. In sculpturing or carving images, it is believed that the images closely resemble the Buddha when He was alive. So, most of the people's belief in Buddha stemmed from the notion of reliance on some living entity that possesses powers to fulfill their desires.

When people pray to the Buddha, they recited prayers that they memorized but did not know its definitions and they did not try to know the meaning by heart. Most of the people in Mandalay Period regarded that if they pray before the Buddha image and recite the prayers, they can escape miseries of life and attain Nirvana (*Nibbana*). Concerning Buddha's teachings, much emphasis was maintained on the correctness in Pali pronunciation of the text of the sermons instead of making efforts to grasp the essence and put them into practice to achieve Nirvana (*Nibbana*).

The *Sanghas* over-emphasized the teachings/learnings of the scriptures at the expense of the practical application of Buddha's teaching. Seemingly, the monks were more interested in *Pariyatti* or teaching and learning Buddhist Scriptures than *Patipatti* or practicing of Buddhist truth in the Mandalay Period. They lived in the monasteries to study and to practice the teaching of the Buddha. Remarkably, most of the chief monks were expert in Buddhist Scriptures and they helped others to understand them. To test how well the teachers could teach the Buddhist Scriptures and how well the pupils could understand the *Pali* texts, religious examinations were held. These examinations became more important to all students than the texts' essences. They just learned by cramming the *Pali* texts to sit for examination and to seek praise and reward. Sadly, they would not be able to teach the wisdom to others because they were not interested in them.



*Sasana* would exist so long as there were monks and monks would not exist if they do not respect the *Vinaya*. However, some monks in Mandalay Period committed knowingly a breach of the monastic code of conduct. Some monks thought that the studying of Buddhist Scriptures and practicing the teachings of the Buddha were not their main tasks.

It is difficult to deduce that the *Sasana*, flourished in the Mandalay Period, was the true Theravada Buddhism. It is said that the king, with the help of monks attempted to purify the *Sasana*, but, on the contrary, Buddhism was not fully purified because it was mixed up with other faith. One belief is that if donation or charity is done with a view to preserving the *Sasana*, it will be a support for emancipation from *Samsara*. One must push himself to get what he wants. One cannot see the Buddha through the Buddha images. People, however, venerate Buddha images to escape the miseries of life and recite the *Paritta* whether they understand the *Pali* texts or not. They also found it difficult to discard old beliefs and practices.

The belief that the Buddhism of Mandalay Period was the purest of the Theravada Buddhism thanks to the Kings' purification purges could not be taken as true. Although the monarchs took much care of the *Sasana*, they themselves were engaged in non-Buddhist practices such as those considered as occult, along with the Buddhist rites, in building new cities since the Bagan Era.

Many Buddhists take the pagodas and sculpture images to be the true Buddha, reciting scriptures and making donations to be the true teaching of Buddha, and anyone seen in yellow robes to be the true *Sangha*. The fundamental concepts are far from being correct. The people have not yet realized that the way to achieve Nirvana is not through pagodas and statues, recitations, and religious/cleric robes. When this is pointed out overtly, they tend to regard one as the agent of impediment endangering the teachings of Buddha. Therefore, if the peoples' fundamental concepts on Buddhism cannot be changed for the better, the Buddha *Sasana*, or Buddhism in Myanmar can be assessed as propagating, but not to the satisfaction in terms of essence.

It was said that because of King Mindon's earnest support, the *Sasana* during the Mandalay Period prospered. The main aim of the King's support for the *Sasana* was to gain political unity and organizational benefits. On the part of the King, in his role as the designated promoter of the *Sasana*, there were evidence that he was after the title of the *Provider of the Sasana*. He wanted his name in history as the one who had greatly promoted the *Sasana*. Thus, King Mindon built several pagodas and conferred honors on the *Sanghas*. Like King Badon (1782-1819), King Mindon (1853-1878) also set out regulations for the monks to abide by the clerical rules of conduct. In fact, all these moves were made, and measures taken were done with the intent of using the member of the *Sanghas* as pawns in his political power play. The *Sasana* Trustees Council was a pillar supporting feudalism. Thus, the level of religious belief was a very low one.

The *Viniya* was prescribed with the emphasis on the unity of the *Sasana*.

Nevertheless, there had been sectarian cases throughout the history of the *Sasana*. During the Mandalay Period there were *Shwegyin* and *Thudhamar* in Upper Myanmar, and the *Kan* and *Dwarya* in Lower Myanmar which signaled the crack in the *Sangha* community. The disunity in the *Sangha* community led to discord among the respective followers of the Sects. The Sect leaders attributed the prosperity of the *Sasana* to the appearance of differing Sects in the *Sangha* community, but no improvement had been witnessed.

The Administrative Councils for the *Sangha* were meant for ensuring allegiance to the monarch. Examinations on religious texts were held, honors and titles conferred with the goal of luring the *Sanghas*. These are explained in this paper, and of other kings who followed in Mindon's path as far as the *Sasana* is concerned. In fact, no distinguished achievement by King Mindon for the *Sasana* was to be found. The Buddhist faith, its followers, and the *Sangha* community benefited no better than under other Kings' reigns in Myanmar.

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## БУДИЗАМ У ПЕРИОДУ МАНДАЛЕЈА (1852-1885): КРИТИЧКА АНАЛИЗА

### Сажетак

У контексту мјанмарског будизма, значење речи *сасана* односи се на сет Будиних учења за која се верује да долазе директно од Буде и која никада нису мењана. Међутим, како је време пролазило, овај сет учења је можда био модификован у складу са интересима оних којих су их прихватили. То значи да не можемо бити сигурни да је *сасана* у Мјанмару и даље непромењена. Поготово за време 19. века, када је будизам имао важну улогу. То значи да се будизам у Мјанмару посебно развијао за време владавине краљева из династаије Мандалеја, а поготово за време краља Миндона (1853-1878). У том време краљевство је било нестабилно и краљ и његови људи су уложили велики труд у различите врсте верског рада. Иако је сваки Мјанмарски краљ кроз историју био заштитник религије и давао подршку за будистичку заједницу монаха (сангху), улога краља Миндона и његова подршка за религију и даље није разјашњена. Анализа овог проблема подразумева дубинске увиде у веровања и праксе будиста за време Мандалеја и улогу сангхе у очувању и заштити *сасане*.

**Кључне речи:** Мандалејски краљеви, Мјанмар, сангха, сасан, теравада будизам