

HANDOUT

Guest Lecture, Global History III
Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Barcelona, 5-3-2020

Turn of the Millennium

Meditation and Buddhist Literature in 20th-century Burma

Aleix Ruiz Falqués
(Shan State Buddhist University, Taunggyi)
arfalques@cantab.net

(1) The reality of *Pyidawtha* ["Happy Nation"] however, was less happy than planned. Fundamental constraints doomed U Nu's good intentions from the start: factionalism among the AFPFL and the various groups within the reigning political coalition; rebellious compatriots; the physically devastated post-war nation; and, perhaps most important, his inability to reconcile his own Buddhist aspirations with the practical needs of the modern state he led. In 1950, for example, at the first signs of a slight easing of internal political pressure, U Nu went off to meditate, exhorting his aides: 'Do not send for me, even if the whole country is enveloped in flames. If there are fires, you must put them out yourselves.' (AUNG-THWIN & THANT MYINT-U, 1992: 69)

(2) In the 1820s and 1830s, Baptist missionaries in Lower Burma monopolized printing capabilities; their works, mostly copies of the Bible, catechisms and other Christian tracts, were distributed not only in colonized parts of the country but in royal Burma as well. There was thus already widespread familiarity with books and publications in both British-controlled and independent areas. By the 1870s, Burmese Buddhists, too, could readily access print in Lower Burma. Htin Aung observes, when discussing unorthodox lay preachers and writers: "Some of the lay preachers even expressed themselves in print, and the harm inflicted on the religion became great, because with the introduction of cheap printing presses in Rangoon, their books and pamphlets were widely circulated." Whether laypeople inflicted harm or not, their activities suggest a situation in which people had a relatively unfettered ability to print works. (BRAUN, 2013: 68)

TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM • HANDOUT

(3) His [U Nu's] role of "promoter of the faith" is one way in which U Nu seemed his own people to resemble the Burmese kings of the past. Characteristic of his official support of Buddhism was his government's sponsorship of the Sixth Great Theravada Buddhist Synod of 1954–56, for which a "peace pagoda" and a man-made cave, among other buildings, were constructed at a cost of \$6 million. The goal of this international meeting of clergy and laymen, according to Nu, was to "purify" Buddhism. This was Nu's chief goal, too, in sponsoring the 1950 Pali University Act and legislation setting up a Buddha Sasana Council to promote the study and propagation of Buddhism and to supervise the monks. Nu also created the cabinet post of Minister of Religious Affairs, ordered government departments to dismiss civil servants 30 minutes early if they wished to meditate, commuted prison sentences of convicts who passed examinations on Buddhism, brought sacred relics of the Buddha from Ceylon and sent them on tour of the nation, and encouraged the restoration of ancient pagodas as well as the teaching of Buddhism to non-Buddhists. For these actions Nu has been accused of living in "a past in which the King, in exercise of his personal right and will, spent most of the people's money and labor in building religious edifices, holding festivals without end, going on costly pilgrimages and doing things like that." And former Cabinet colleague U Tun Pe has compared him to a spendthrift "oriental monarch." (BUTWELL, 1963: 65)

(4) The Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha had played a key role in the plan advanced by Burma's first prime minister, U Nu, for building a nation-state along Buddhist lines. Moreover, MTY's founding monk, Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982), had been the scholar-meditator who systematized and revitalized the practice of *vipassanā* meditation in keeping with a twentieth-century Burmese Buddhist idea about the possibility and rectitude of laity pursuing enlightenment. (JORDT, 2007: xii)

(5) Between the influence of political scientific presuppositions about state and civil society, which I will discuss later, and fashionable trends in postcolonial studies, there somehow came to reign an assumption among Burma scholars that Burmese history stretched only back to colonialism or independence and that cosmological, political cultural and institutional elements dating from before that time could safely be disregarded.

The scholarly confirmation that a deep analysis of the relationship between Burmese Buddhist cosmology and contemporary politics was apposite came from the work of my graduate school adviser, S. J. Tambiah, a leading authority on the relationship of Buddhism and society in neighbouring Thailand. ... (JORDT, 2007: xiii)

Basic Bibliography

AUNG-THWIN, Maureen & Thant Myint-U “The Burmese Ways to Socialism” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Rethinking Socialism (1992), pp. 67–75

BRAUN, Erik. 2013. *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

BUTWELL, Richard. 1963. *U Nu of Burma*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

CLARK, Chris. 2015. “The Sixth Buddhist Council: Its Purpose, Presentation, and Product,” *Journal of Burma Studies* Vol. 19 No. I: 79–112.

HALLISEY, Charles. 1992. “Councils as Ideas and Events in the Theravāda,” *The Buddhist Forum*, Vol. II: Seminar Papers 1988–90. Edited by Tadeusz Skorupski. School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London): 133–148.

HOUTMAN, Gustaaf. 1990. “Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma,” PhD dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University.

TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM • HANDOUT

JORDT, Ingrid. 2007. *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement. Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Ohio University Research in International Studies. Southeast Asia Series No. 115. Athens: Ohio University Press.

PRANKE, Patrick. 2010. "On saints and wizards. Ideals of human perfection and power in contemporary Burmese Buddhism," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Volume 33, No. 1–2: 453–488

THANT MYINT OO. 2004. *The Making of Modern Burma*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Online Publications

BRAUN, Erik. 2014. "Meditation en Masse: How colonialism sparked the global Vipassana movement," *Tricycle*, Spring 2014: <https://tricycle.org/magazine/meditation-en-masse/>

DOWNING, Jared. 2017. "Myanmar History 101: How Britain defeated Burma. A brief history of the wars that led to the fall of the Burmese monarchy and the imposition of British colonial rule," *Frontier Myanmar*. 21 February 2017: <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/myanmar-history-101-how-britain-defeated-burma>

FERNQUEST, John and Pichaya SVASTI. 2016. "Read Thailand's ancient palm leaf manuscripts online for free," *Bangkok Post*, 25 March 2016: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/learning-news/909392/read-thailands-ancient-palm-leaf-manuscripts-online-for-free>