

## The Recent Attempt at a Reform of the Buddhist Sangha in Burma and its Implications<sup>1</sup>

HEINZ BECHERT

### 1. Introductory Remarks

The Theravāda Buddhists are in possession of a uniform ecclesiastical codex comprising the canonical Vinayapitaka together with the corresponding commentaries and sub-commentaries in Pali. Nevertheless, there are quite significant differences in the structure of the Sangha in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and the other Theravāda regions. In this context, the various so-called Buddhist sects have always been of particular interest to researchers. The existence of these "sects" is in its turn closely related to the problem of the organizational structure of these communities, i.e. of the interdependence of the individual monastic communities, the hierarchy and the ecclesiastical

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jurisdiction. Most observers have attempted to approach these questions by analogy to the structure of Christian churches. They have thereby ignored the fact that an adequate analysis of these structures requires consideration of the basic principles underlying Buddhist canonical law and of the question how the individual divisions fit into this framework.

The most detailed and informative study presently available on the structure of the Burmese Sangha is E. Michael Mendelson's *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), edited by John P. Ferguson. For Mendelson sociological and historical questions take first priority; questions of Buddhist ecclesiastical law are not always taken into consideration in his work. Furthermore, evaluation of the older Western source material presented him with some difficulty since the accounts of John Nisbet (1901), James George Scott (1909), J.A. Steward (1949) and Maung Htin Aung (1966) partially contradict each other. Part of the information and interpretations given by Mendelson must therefore be revised.

## 2. Background to the Sangha Reform of 1980

Compared with E.M. Mendelson's account of it, the situation of the Sangha in Burma has changed considerably in recent years. It is a well-known fact that the question of a reform of the Sangha and of interrelations between Sangha and state authority is still one of the fundamental problems of Burmese politics even today. After a period of very active religious politics between 1949 and 1962, influenced above all by the long-term Prime Minister U Nu, there followed a comparatively long period in which the Ne Win government, in power after 1962, more or less refrained from formulating and pursuing an active religious policy.

The constitution of 1947 made provision for the religious neutrality of the Union of Burma; Buddhism was, however, accorded a special status. At the same time a clause was inserted into the constitution expressly forbidding the misuse of religion for political ends - a consequence of the negative experience with the political activism of large groups of Buddhist monks between 1920 and 1940. Since about 1956 political groups and monastic associations have increasingly demanded that Buddhism be made the state religion of Burma. The religious policy of the then Prime Minister U Nu, who aimed at a reform of the Sangha, proved ambivalent and did not produce a permanent solution, especially to the problem of monastic discipline. Far from easing the situation, the introduction of Buddhism as state religion in 1961 merely exacerbated the political tensions and brought about a deterioration of relations



between religion and state. I have discussed these developments in detail elsewhere<sup>2</sup>.

On March 2, 1962 the army assumed power in Burma under General Ne Win. The official communiqués named only the increasing separatism, the acquiescence of the government to such aspirations and the consequent danger to the unity of the union as reasons for the coup. There can, however, be no doubt that the ambivalent, experimental religious policies of Prime Minister U Nu contributed in large measure to the decision of the army leaders to stage a coup.

In principle the goals of the new government were not so very different from U Nu's. State socialism, Burmese-style, was what was aimed at, and the Buddhist Sangha was to be reformed. The methods by which these goals were to be realized were, however, quite different. Representative democracy was replaced in 1963 by the one-party state, dominated by the "Burma Socialist Program Party". The program of the party was based on a "philosophy" which henceforth was the guideline of all Burmese politics. It is described as a "purely secular and human doctrine" which cannot in consequence come into conflict with religious doctrine. Nonetheless, this Burmese state philosophy was unmistakably rooted in the tradition of Buddhist philosophy in Burma and clearly influenced by Buddhist-Marxist syncretism (cf. Bechert, *Buddhismus*, vol. 2, pp. 150-154 and 170-173). It should be recalled here that the principle of separation of the religious and secular spheres conforms to Theravāda Buddhist tradition<sup>3</sup>.

In 1963 and 1964 an open conflict arose between the Ne Win government and active groups of monks who had been accustomed under the U Nu regime to influence political decision-making. In 1965 the Ne Win government set about reforming the Sangha, the task which had already been unsuccessfully embarked upon under U Nu. A conference was convened with representatives from all groups of the Sangha. In a statement issued to Sangha the government emphasized that complete religious freedom would remain guaranteed under the socialist system and that all endeavours to preserve and reform the Sāsana (i.e. the Buddhist religious institutions, esp. the Sangha) would receive support. Although the laws passed by the U Nu government in 1949 pertaining to ecclesiastical jurisdiction (*The Vinicchaya Thana and Vinicchaya Tribunal Act*) were annulled at the beginning of 1965 by the *Revolutionary Council Act No. 1/1965*, on the - quite valid - grounds that they had

2 See Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus*, vol. 2, Wiesbaden, 1967, pp. 74-85 and 136-147; cf. also Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1975, pp. 341-355.

3 Cf. Bechert, "Einige Fragen zur Religionssoziologie und Struktur des südasiatischen Buddhismus", *Internationales Jahrbuch für Religionssoziologie* 4 (1968), pp. 267-275.

not fulfilled their purpose, measures were at the same time taken towards the introduction of new legislation in this sphere.

In cooperation with distinguished, for the most part elderly, monks the government organized an *All-Burma All-Sect Sangha Convention* that was held in the Hmawbi "Agricultural Garden", near Rangoon, on March 17-19, 1965. This conference was presented with drafts for a basic law of the Sangha that would regulate the hierarchy, the ecclesiastical jurisdiction and the registration of the monks. However, these plans could not be carried out due to the militant resistance of influential groups of monks who staged several mass demonstrations. The government obviously did not then command the authority necessary to enforce these reform measures against the will of such groups of monks who resisted them, and particularly the proposed registration of all monks.

In the next 15 years the government confined itself to improving the educational standard of the monks through the promotion of monastic education and to carrying out measures in support of monastic circles with which it had close ties. Disputes within the monastic order that called for state intervention (e.g. cases pertaining to residential rights in certain monasteries) were decided by the Ministry of Religion, whose activities in this sector were re-regulated on April 28, 1975<sup>4</sup>.

In addition, the Ne Win government saw to it that the monks were no longer in a position, as previously, to interfere in political affairs. The period between 1966 and 1978 thus can be described as a phase in which the Ne Win government refrained by and large from religious policy-making. Many observers went so far as to conclude that a strictly secular, if not an anti-religious policy had become a matter of principle, all the more so since Burmese were rarely permitted to participate in international Buddhist conferences. Such views were, however, based on a fundamental misjudgment of developments in Burma.

### 3. The Sangha Reform of 1980

In 1979 Ne Win again took up the reform plans which he had proposed already in 1965, because now he considered himself powerful enough to realize the aims of his religious policy. On August 4, 1979, he explained in the State Council the principles for a comprehensive reform of the Buddhist Order. As a guiding principle he formulated that religious disputes and court pro-

4 Cf. Bechert, *Buddhismus*, vol. 2, pp. 155-158; Sao Htun Hmat Win, "The Unique Solidarity of the Sangha Order", *The Light of the Dhamma*, New Ser, 1, no. 2 (Aug. 1981), pp. 30f.



ceedings pertaining to Sangha affairs were in future to be decided exclusively by ecclesiastical courts to be appointed by the Sangha itself, and not by the state. The following rules were to be observed<sup>5</sup>:

1. All the members of the Sangha (Order) shall observe and practise in compliance with the Vinaya Rules.
2. The Sangha shall unanimously elect and form the Boards of Juries to arbitrate, settle and decide all the religious disputes and monastic cases among the members of the Order.

Formally, the principle of the separation of state and religion is thereby upheld. But at the same time it was conceded that for the actual implementation of the planned reform of the Order, the assistance of the state was indispensable. Minister of the Interior and Religion Brig. Gen. Sein Lwin - who later on became notorious for his role in the events of 1988 -, Deputy Minister U Ohn Kyaw and General Director of the Directorate of Religious Affairs U Kyi Kyunt together with his officials were entrusted with the preparation of a general Sangha Convention ("Congregation of the Sangha of all Orders for Purification, Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sāsana"). By August 1979 they had received the approbation of the cabinet for their proposal that the ministry responsible should address itself to "the eminent leading Sayadaws (Elders of the Order), the Buddhist Patriarchs", requesting them to support the task of "Purification, Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sangha". Thereafter a "Working Executive Committee" was formed, presided over by U Kyi Kyunt. It was to define the goals and procedures of the Sangha Convention as well as to meticulously prepare the details of its work and to draw up appropriate draft resolutions. A "Sangha Working Committee" consisting of 66 Elders of the Order was to be entrusted with preparing the draft of a basic law for the Sangha of Burma that could then be submitted to the Sangha Convention.

These rules of procedure were approved by the cabinet on September 24 and November 14, 1979. On November 21, a conference was convened to implement them. Chaired by the Minister of the Interior and Religion, it was attended by high-ranking government officials and also by the "Working Executive Members of the People's Councils" from all over Burma, i.e. by the heads of the regional administrations. Thereafter the Minister himself, together with eight other high-ranking officials approached the country's leading Sayadaws whom they requested to appoint "the right members" to the "Sangha Working Committee". First of all they addressed themselves to the heads of the traditional Sangha hierarchy, then to leading monks from the

5 Quoted from Sao Htun Hmat Win, "The Unique Solidarity", p. 31.

various regions. This was done in adherence to the convention obtaining in Burmese traditional Buddhist society whereby laymen place their request before the monks in the form of a supplication. The result of these consultations was, of course, bound to be influenced by the very selection of those consulted.

The 66 members of the "Working Sangha Committee" were monks of the largest of the nine *Nikāyas* ("groups") of the Order which we shall discuss below. They included 58 Sayadaws of the *Sudhamma Nikāya*, five Sayadaws of the *Shwegyin Nikāya*, two Sayadaws of the *Mahādvāra Nikāya* and one Sayadaw of the *Mūladvāra Nikāya*. This committee met for its first session on February 1, 1980 when it discussed the drafts to be submitted to the Sangha-Convention. On April 5th it was agreed that 1235 delegates should attend the Sangha Convention, to be constituted as follows: 38 monks who had been honoured in recent years with high religious titles, viz. five *Abhidhajamahā-ratthaguru* Sayadaws, thirty Sayadaws with the learned title of *Aggamahāpan-dita* and three monks bearing the title *Tipitakadharadhammabhandāgārika* as well as all 66 members of the "Working Sangha Committee", and finally 1131 representatives of the nine *Nikāyas* ("groups") in the Order, viz. the *Sudhamma Nikāya* (1006), the *Shwegyin Nikāya* (77), the *Mahādvāra Nikāya* (17), the *Weluwun Nikāya* (12), the *Mūladvāra Nikāya* (9), the *Mahayin Gaing* (3), the *Ngettwin Gaing* (3), the *Kanawimoke Kado Gaing* (3) and the *Anaukchaung Dvāra Nikāya* (1). The representation of the various *Nikāyas* was to correspond to the percentage they constituted of the total number of monks in the country. Some records give the number as 109,032, others, however, as 123,450. At any rate, the number of delegates was 1235. According to the first total an average of 10 delegates would have been sent for every 100 monks of a *Nikāya*, which makes a total of 1090 delegates from the *Nikāyas*, not including the 145 Sayadaws who were selected according to other criteria. In the second case there would have been one delegate for every 100 monks. The records are inconsistent on this point.

The Sangha Convention now had the task of passing the drafts prepared by the Working Committee and of thereby creating a constitution for the Sangha which would be legitimized by the Sangha as a whole. In this way the Sangha was to be radically reformed and, in addition, a unified and centralized administration for all Buddhist religious institutions created. A centralized administration had existed during the period of royal rule in Burma, though, strictly speaking, it would be more correct to say that the Burmese of colonial and post-colonial times project the existence of such a centralized organizational structure into the period of the monarchy. This is due to the tendency, so prevalent among the Buddhists of Burma (and of Sri Lanka), to



glorify the pre-colonial past and to imagine that the same problems as exist today had then been ideally resolved. In actual fact the situation was far more complex, as Mendelson has shown<sup>6</sup>.

In Thailand, and in Cambodia prior to the revolution of 1975, the Burmese found the model of a central Sangha organization that really worked<sup>7</sup>. The Burmese government had, as we have seen above, taken into account that it was, by its own definition, a secular government. It had, for many years, propagated the separation of state and Sangha - in deliberate contrast to the religious policy of the U Nu era. On the other hand, Ne Win was well aware that he could gain broad national support if he were able to initiate a successful religious policy. For most Burmese their national identity cannot be separated from their Buddhist faith, and, therefore, they feel that it is the responsibility of the Burmese government to look after the Sangha and its integrity.

The great Sangha Convention took place after the preparatory phase described above between May 24 and 27, 1980 in the cave near the Kaba Aye Pagoda north of Rangoon, which had been specially constructed for the sessions of the Sixth Buddhist Council (Chatthasangāyanā) in 1956. One thousand two hundred nineteen of the monks selected to participate in the convention actually attended. The convention discussed and passed the laws submitted by the Sangha Working Committee concerning a centralized organizational structure for the national Sangha and the creation of an effective ecclesiastical jurisdiction. In future only those who were ready to submit to the authority of these regulations would be recognized as *bhikkhu* (fully ordained Buddhist monk). The nine Nikāyas represented at the convention were given official recognition. The formation of new Nikāyas was, however, banned. Furthermore, provision was made for the registration of all monks and for their being supplied with identity cards which were to be issued in close cooperation between ecclesiastical and secular administration.

The new constitution of the Order provides for a "Working Committee" of 330 members to be elected during the convention. Thirty-three members of the Working Committee were to function as Sanghanāyakas ("heads of the Sangha") and to form the executive Sangha government ("State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee"). The text of the new Sangha constitution was approved by the Burmese parliament on June 25, 1980, whereby it became law. Another step of crucial importance was enacting the law pertaining to ecclesiastical jurisdiction, which was likewise passed by the Sangha Convention and after-

6 Cf. Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, pp. 57f., 84 and passim.

7 Cf. Bechert, *Buddhismus*, vol. 2, pp. 184-195 and 230-235 and Yoneo Ishii, *Sangha, State and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*, Kyoto, 1986, pp. 67-120.

wards by the Burmese parliament. The decisions of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction are, if need be, to be enforced by the organs of state<sup>8</sup>.

In May 1982 it was reported that - up to that date - 4316 Sanghanāyaka organizations (i.e. executive bodies) had been formed at the local level and 5773 Vinayadhara Sayadaws (ecclesiastical judges) elected to the Vinicchaya Courts (ecclesiastical courts). Up to then, too, 160,845 monks and novices had been registered. The number of all monks in Burma at that time was given as 252,890 (120,823 monks and 132,067 novices) by the Presiding Sayadaw of the Central Working Committee in June 1984<sup>9</sup>.

The reform also applies to the community of nuns, although it is traditionally agreed in all Theravāda countries that since 456 A.D. there has been no *bhikkhuni*, i.e. nun who has been fully ordained by *upasampadā*. However, the "Meithila-shin", who wear religious robes and have taken at least ten vows, enjoy a position in Burmese society today that corresponds to that of the old Order of nuns. They are also obliged to have themselves registered. Of Burma's 20,364 nuns, 14,810 had already received their registration documents by the beginning of 1984. A conspicuous consequence of the new religious fervour was the increased interest in monastic life among young women, especially from the educated urban strata.

On the occasion of the Sangha conference in 1980 the government also issued an amnesty that benefitted, above all, the political prisoners and opponents of the government who had gone into exile for political reasons. The most prominent returnee was U Nu who, at that stage, seemed to reconcile himself with the regime. He was made president of the "Pitaka Translation Society", which was entrusted with making a completely new English translation of the Buddhist canonical texts, being at the same time responsible for the propagation of Buddhism throughout the world. "Only the Chattha Sangāyanā edition of Pitaka either in Pali or Burmese languages [i.e. the text as edited by the Sixth Buddhist Council, 1954-1956] (sc. was to be used) as basis for translation; and in the translations ... simple and common terms understandable by the people (sc. were to be used) without sacrificing to the smallest degree the spirit of Lord Buddha's sermons"<sup>10</sup>. The Burmese consider the available English translations, published primarily by the "Pali Text Society" in London, to be too much influenced by Western thinking; so I was told by Burmese co-workers of the project in 1984. The strongest objection against the earlier translations is, however, that they do not always adhere to the in-

8 An English translation of this law was published in *The Light of the Dhamma*, New Ser. 1, no. 1 (May 1981), pp. 19-24 (reprinted in Bechert, "Neue buddhistische Orthodoxie", op. cit., pp. 51-55).

9 *Working People's Daily* (Rangoon), 10.6.1984.

10 Quoted from *Working People's Daily* (Rangoon), 7.9.1980.



terpretation of the texts as transmitted by the commentators, but deviate on occasion from them. The translation committee itself consists of laymen who do, however, regularly work together with a committee of monks.

With his new religious policy President Ne Win considered himself as following the tradition of the Burmese kings. At the same time, he continued the religious policy of the U Nu era as regards the attempts to create a centralized Sangha structure and to enforce monastic discipline. In addition, the Burmese claim to a leading position within world Buddhism, made already by King Mindon, patron of the 5th Council, and by U Nu as patron of the 6th Council, was renewed, at least on paper, despite the fact that the country had more or less isolated itself for some twenty years from all endeavours towards international Buddhist cooperation. This isolation becomes evident in the reports of the "World Fellowship of Buddhists" (W.F.B.), which had its centre in Rangoon during the U Nu era. Thus, the former "World Institute of Buddhist Culture", which was established in 1950, had in 1964 to limit its activities "because of certain reasons ... to The Buddhist Discussion Group", and even this "is now in recess *sine die*, due to circumstances beyond our control implying matters of state policy". The president of this centre, Miss Sujata Soni, "has in view to shift the Centre to India in due course, to enable her to come out of certain limitations and to intensify the Buddhist activities"<sup>11</sup>. These quotations from the 1988 report of the now Bangkok-based W.F.B. testify to what extent the xenophobia of the Burmese government continues preventing contact of Burmese Buddhists with the outside world, including Buddhists in other countries, despite high-sounding claims made in official propaganda.

#### 4. The Nikāyas of Theravāda Buddhism

The groupings within the Sangha which are named in Pali *nikāya* ("group") and in Burmese "gaing" (derived from Pali *gana*) are often erroneously described in Western literature as "Buddhist sects". The above-described reorganization of the Sangha required a definite clarification of the Nikāya formations existing within the Burmese Sangha, because criteria were necessary for ascertaining the validity of monastic ordination. This provides us with a clearer picture of these groupings than was hitherto available<sup>12</sup>. Nine Nikāyas

11 W.F.B. *Regional Centres Record*, publ. by W.F.B. Secretariat 2531/1988, Bangkok 1988, pp. 26-28.

12 For the information hitherto available about the structure of the Burmese Sangha see Bechert, "The Structure of the Sangha in Burma: A Comparative View", *Studies in History of Buddhism*, ed. A.K. Narain, Delhi, 1980, pp. 33-42; see also E.M. Mendelson, *Sangha and State* (see above).

were officially recognized under the Sangha reform. This means that every Burmese monk must belong to one of these nine Nikāyas in order to be considered a legally ordained *bhikkhu*. The formation of new Nikāyas has been explicitly banned. Existing Nikāyas may, however, amalgamate.

How are these Nikāyas defined and how did they originate? It is well known that the early Buddhist Order had no head. The Buddha refused to designate a successor, declaring that his teaching should be the only guide for the Sangha after his death. The early Sangha was thus organized in autonomous local communities; the hierarchical structures existing today are of much later origin. Even today individual communities may form a *sangha* in order to carry out the legal procedures of the monastic community (*dhammakamma, sanghakamma, vinayakamma*) prescribed by Buddhist ecclesiastical law. They must be carried out in assemblies in which the complete (*samagga*) Sangha, i.e. all monks resident within a certain fixed "boundary" (*sīmā*) must participate. Otherwise the legal proceedings are not valid.

In the canonical Vinaya text a schism (*sanghabheda*, "split in the Order") is recorded which was caused by the apostate Devadatta. Such a "split in the Order" is, as is quite clear from the text, the split of a particular, local Sangha into two or more parties, which no longer conduct their legal proceedings together, although they belong to the same residential area (*āvāsa*). Such divisions were generally caused by differences of opinion about the application of the rules of monastic discipline and of Buddhist ecclesiastical law. To be responsible for such a "split in the Order" (*sanghabheda*) is considered a most serious violation of monastic discipline. But if there are differences of opinion between separate local Sanghas who make unanimous decisions within their own boundaries (*sīmā*), this is not considered a "split in the Order" (*sanghabheda*), but a *nikāyabheda*, i.e. the formation of separate "groups" of monks for which the above-mentioned term *nikāya* is used<sup>13</sup>. This fact was not known to Mendelson, and thus he could not understand the remark by monks of the "Weluwun Sect" that "sects grew up only for disciplinary purposes and without any aim of splitting the Sangha"<sup>14</sup>.

It is important that, as a rule, monks belonging to different Nikāyas do not conduct joint legal proceedings in matters pertaining to the Order (*vinayakamma*). Though they do not in principle dispute the validity of each other's monastic ordination (*upasampadā*), they do not necessarily recognize it as being beyond dispute. But if there were doubts about the validity of the ordination of the monks participating, the validity of the legal proceedings

13 For details see Bechert, "Einleitung", *Zur Schulzugehörigkeit von Werken der Hīnayāna-Literatur*, part 1, Göttingen, 1985, pp. 26-44.

14 Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, p. 103.



conducted by them would be questionable. The ordination of monks must be considered the most important legal proceedings of this kind. If its validity is called in question, the legitimation of the Sangha as such is endangered.

For these reasons monks in Theravāda countries attach the greatest importance to a thorough scrutiny of all the conditions to be complied with in conducting ordinations. This requires not only that all monks participating be members of the same Nikāya, but also the assurance that the fixation of the community boundary (*simā*) be valid beyond all doubt. Disputes about *simā* questions have frequently led to splits in a Nikāya in both the Burmese as well as the Sinhalese Sangha<sup>15</sup>.

It is the exception rather than the rule for interpretations of dogma to differ in the various Nikāyas. At any rate, the Nikāyas in existence today are "groupings" within Theravāda, i.e. within one and the same Buddhist persuasion, and they all regard one and the same corpus of sacred texts as authoritative. This has not prevented minor differences in the exegesis of these texts from having led to slightly different regulations, not just as regards monastic discipline, but also in the liturgy. There are even instances where new Nikāyas originate not as a result of differences of opinion, but simply from the fact that a group of monks finds itself so remote from other members of the same Nikāya that mutual supervision of the correctness of legal procedure is no longer guaranteed. In such a case release from the association of a particular Nikāya (so-called *ganavimutti* or *ganavimokkha*, "release from the group") may be agreed upon. This procedure was apparently used for resolving conflicts within the hierarchical structure of the Sangha.

## 5. The nine Nikāyas of the Burmese Sangha

I here give a brief résumé of the nine Nikāyas of the Burmese Sangha based on a study by Dhammaghosaka U Maung Maung which was published in 1981 in Rangoon<sup>16</sup>.

15 The first comprehensive interpretation of the *simā* regulations is to be found in Petra Kieffer-Pülz, *Die Simā: Vorschriften zur Regelung der buddhistischen Ordensgrenze im Vinaya der Theravādīn*, Phil. Diss., Göttingen, 1989.

16 In addition to the exact terminology the older Anglicized terminology conventionally used for the Nikāyas (as in E.M. Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, and, with minor variations, in E. Sarkisyanz, "Die Religionen Kambodschas, Birmas, Laos, Thailands und Malayas", *Die Religionen Südostasiens*, Stuttgart, 1975, pp. 421-482) has been given in each case. The survey presented here is a radically abbreviated form of the German version published in *Numen* (see note 1); the exact Burmese orthography is to be found there. Since completion of this study, *Burma and Japan: Basic Studies on their Cultural and Social Structure*, ed. by The Burma Research Group, Tokyo, 1987, has come to my notice. This work con-

1. *Sudhamma Gaing* or *Sudhammanikāya* ("Thudhamma Sect"; also called "Kan Gaing" and "Mahagandi" in older sources). This *Nikāya* was formed in 1214 B.E. (Burmese Era, 1852 A.D.) when King Mindon authorized the division of the Burmese Sangha, hitherto one cohesive unit, into two *Nikāyas*, suggesting to the *Sudhamma Sayadaws*, i.e. hierarchs of the Sangha of those days, that they grant *ganavimutti* (see above) to the *Shwegyin Nikāya*. The *Sudhammanikāya* is thus simply the majority group that remained, as before, under the jurisdiction of the traditional hierarchy of the *Sudhamma Sayadaws*. Through the decline in influence of the traditional hierarchy the individual monastic units became largely autonomous. Within the *Sudhammanikāya*, however, certain groupings have formed, the best known probably being the so-called "Pakkoku Sect". This group cannot be considered as a *Nikāya* but it is an association of monasteries that cooperate closely, especially in the field of religious education. They continue regarding themselves as belonging to the *Sudhammanikāya*.

2. *Shwegyin Nikāya* ("Shwegyin Sect"). This *Nikāya*, which originated in the time of King Mindon as a result of *ganavimutti* (see above), advocated stricter attention to monastic discipline. It is the oldest of the Burmese "reform sects" still in existence today and the one which has been discussed in greatest detail in literature on the subject<sup>17</sup>.

3. *Mahādvāra Nikāya Gaing* or *Dhammānudhammahādvāranikāya* (*Mahādvāranikāya* or "Dwaya Sect"). Founder of this "school" was the Okpo Sayadaw (1179-1267 B.E., i.e. 1818-1906 A.D.). This *Nikāya* was founded as an independent group as the result of a dispute in Okpo in the year 1217 B.E. (1855 A.D.). The term *Dvāranikāya* is derived from the use of the word *dvāra* instead of the word *kamma* at the beginning of an important recitation formula; this difference is based on a philosophically stricter interpretation of the law of Karma<sup>18</sup>.

4. *Mūladvāra Nikāya Gaing* or *Dhammavinayānulomadvāranikāya* ("Ingapu Dwaya Sect") - formed by the Ingapu Sayadaw after the death of the Okpo Sayadaw through separation from the *Mahādvāra Nikāya*.

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tains an overview (in tabular form), likewise based on U Maung Maung's account of the nine "gaings" (i.e. *Nikāyas*), by Zenno Ikuno. The data given there are rather exhaustive. There is, however, no explanation of the terminology nor of the relevant context of Buddhist ecclesiastical law.

17 Than Tun, "The History of the Shwegyin Sect in Burma", *Essays on the History and Buddhism of Burma*, ed. Paul Strachan, Whiting Bay, 1988, pp. 151-179; cf. also Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, pp. 96-102. A detailed history of this *Nikāya* by Panditasiri in Burmese was published in Rangoon, 1963.

18 For details about this *Nikaya* see Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, pp. 92-96. The speculations of some authors about a connection between this and related *Nikāyas* and the so-called *Pārupana* controversy in the 17th and 18th centuries are totally unfounded.



5. *Anaukchàung Dvāra Nikāya*, a splinter group that broke away from the Mahādāvāra Nikāya during the lifetime of the Okpo Sayadaw.

6. *Weluwun Nikāya Gaing* or *Veluvanānikāya* ("Weluwun Sect"), founded by the Weluwun Sayadaw U Puntawuntha. It has existed independently since 1281 B.E. (1919 A.D.).

7. *Catubhumika Mahāsatipathān Ngettwin Gaing* or *Ngettwin Nikāya* ("Ngettwin Sect"), founded by the Ngettwin Sayadaw whose monastic name was U Pandava; he lived 1193-1272 B.E. (1831-1910 A.D.) and propagated radical reform ideas, especially the rejection of the practice of placing offerings before altars and statues of the Buddha. He also advocated the compulsory instruction of all monks in meditation techniques as a prerequisite for admission to ordination. The Ngettwin Sayadaw was one of the most prominent advocates of a revival of the long-forgotten practice of *satipathāna* meditation in Burma.

8. *Kanawimoke Kado Gaing* or *Ganavimuttikanikāya Kado Gaing*. This group was founded by Pitakattaik kyaung Sayadaw U Indavamsa (1193-1279 B.E./1831-1917 A.D.), upon whose request it was granted *ganavimutti* in 1258 B.E. (1896 A.D.) by the then head of the *Sudhammanikāya*.

9. *Dhammayuttika Nikāya Mahayin Gaing*. The founder of the Nikāya, the Mahayin Sayadaw U Buddhavamsa came from a Mon village in Thailand. He studied in Bangkok where he received the learned title "Mahā". In 1236 B.E. (1874 A.D.) Buddhavamsa founded the monastery Mahayin kyaungtaik, thereby introducing the Dhammayuttikanikāya (Thamayut Nikay), the reform movement which was initiated in Thailand by King Mongkut, into Burma.

All these nine Nikāyas are orthodox, i.e. they recognize the textual transmission of Theravāda Buddhism as authoritative. Besides the Tipitaka texts this also includes the series of classical commentaries (*atthakathā*) as well as the sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*). For all these texts only editions conforming to the text approved by the Sixth Council are officially regarded as authoritative by the Burmese Buddhists.

As we have seen above, the differences between the various Nikāyas pertain largely to the sphere of monastic discipline, which means that although monks of different observances cannot participate in joint ordination ceremonies, there are otherwise practically no limits to cooperation across Nikāya boundaries. Monks from different Nikāyas can often be found at joint recitations of the Paritta and other festivities, and also on other occasions not strictly pertaining to the prescribed Vinayakammas. The Buddhist laity generally takes little notice of Nikāya differences, the only exception being the adherents of the Ngettwin Nikāya, because its variant religious practice affects the ritual practice of the laity as well.

## 6. Heterodox doctrines (*vāda*)

While the nine Nikāyas can be considered orthodox, there have also been traditions in the history of Burmese Buddhism whose doctrines differ fundamentally from established Theravāda tradition, for example the heretics of the Middle Ages known as "Ari" and, in the 19th century, the still relatively obscure movement of the "Paramats". The orthodox monks have always opposed such heterodox movements and in precolonial times they even sought the assistance of the state authorities to this end. During the colonial period and since decolonization the Sangha alone was responsible for taking proceedings against heterodox teachings. Large monastic assemblies have frequently declared certain monks to be excommunicated, in most cases, however, without really being able to give these decisions force.

With the reform of the Order in 1980 the situation has changed dramatically. The "special courts" which had been set up in accordance with the law pertaining to ecclesiastical jurisdiction were now also entrusted with "eradicating bogus monks". This means that they were required to ascertain whether the doctrines (*vāda*) expounded by certain monks and groups of monks conformed to the Pali texts and their interpretation as laid down in the Atthakathā and Tikā literature. And when - according to these criteria - it was a matter of *adhamma* or heterodox teachings, they were forbidden by rule of court.

The monks were obliged to officially renounce these "false doctrines" or leave the Sangha. It was also forbidden to disseminate doctrines declared to be *adhammavāda*, and even the possession of such books was declared illegal.

According to reports published in "The Light of the Dhamma" and elsewhere at least ten such cases were conducted between 1981 and 1984. The details published so far are rather limited, but from what is already known about earlier publications of the monks concerned, we may conclude that these cases were directed primarily against proponents of radically modernistic views, including the teachings of monks with Marxist and other materialistic tendencies. The "Lu-thay Lu-phyit U Okkahta Vāda", the "Sammāditthi Sutesana Vāda" and the "Shwe Abhidhammā Vāda" were accordingly officially declared to be *adhamma* on May 13, 1981. The 650-page verdict was read before the Vinayadhara court of jurisdiction from October 24-29, 1981. The accused renounced their heresies. They were found guilty on the following charges: they "rejected the belief of kamma and the results of kamma, rejected the 31 abodes of existence preached by the Buddha, slandered the Buddha's Omniscience, did not accept the fact of freedom from Samsāra and rejected Samatha and Vipassanā practices, branded the Vinaya Rules as superstitious and ignored them, abused the Sangha, compared Buddha's hair



with the horse's tail, compared the monk's robe with women's longyi, and rejected good practices such as reciting parittas, keeping uposatha, performing meritorious deeds" etc. Such views are "materialistic and against the teaching of the Pali Canonical Texts"<sup>19</sup>.

Through these and a number of other cases the orthodox teachings of the Theravādins were meant to be reinstated as the doctrine binding on the whole Sangha. This was achieved only at the cost of freedom of discussion about the content of dogma among the members of the Sangha. At the same time numerous monks were excommunicated by newly formed regional "Sangha Vinicchaya Courts", because they had violated fundamental Vinaya rules. Affected were, above all, monks who had broken the vow of celibacy and had lived more or less permanently with women. These measures have far-reaching implications for Burmese Buddhism because several of the monks implicated were famous charismatic monks who, according to their supporters, possessed supernatural powers. These monks had been prominent in circles of popular mystic Buddhism. Mendelson has coined the term "messianic Buddhism" for this kind of Buddhist cult<sup>20</sup>. Such ritual communities which are also known as "gaing" (lit. "troop", "band", "group"), a term already familiar to us in another context, had always been viewed with suspicion by both the orthodox monks as well as the government, not least because of the political aspirations of several such groups. Among the most prominent of the monks excommunicated are U Paramavannasiddhi, who had resided in a monastery on Mt. Popa, sacred to the Nat cult, and U Saddhammasiddhi of Yaukkaw, who had presided over a large much frequented monastery in a suburb of Rangoon. The last named ex-monk has now a flourishing practice as naturopath in Rangoon.

## 7. The Sangha in Burma after the Reform until March 1988

Any judgement of the impact of the Sangha Reform of 1980 has to take into consideration the overall political and socio-economical situation of Burma. The economic situation has been rather hopeless for a long time, and it has further deteriorated recently. Though rich in natural resources, Burma has been economically ruined by the worst type of mismanagement and all-pervading corruption in the Burma Socialist Program Party. A large percentage

19 For details see Bechert, "Neue buddhistische Orthodoxie", pp. 44-48.

20 See E.M. Mendelson, "A Messianic Buddhist Association in Upper Burma", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24 (1961), pp. 560-580; cf. Bechert, *Buddhismus*, vol. 2, p. 50.

of economic activity shifted to the black market and to the "shadow" economy, and this by far exceeded the share of the legal economy. Thus, all data published in the official statistical handbooks have nothing to do with the actual situation.

In 1974, a new constitution was passed which, on paper, provided for an elected parliament and for a separation of powers, but in fact all power remained in the hands of U Ne Win<sup>21</sup>. His decisions, which he arrived at on his own, became more and more unpredictable. They interfered in practically all spheres of public life and of economy and more often than not were counterproductive. This went hand in hand with the reluctance of officials, including the top administrators, to personally decide even cases of minor importance, for fear of incurring the displeasure of "Number-One", with the consequence that the public as well as the economic life of Burma was almost totally paralysed.

There was a real fear that the Sangha would come to a similar condition as a result of the newly enforced state control over the Buddhist monastic community. This course of events would be all the more probable if Ne Win chose to interfere in the internal affairs of the Sangha in violation of its legally provided autonomy. Unfortunately, this seems to have been the case to a high degree.

Beyond doubt, some of the reform measures have been popular with a considerable percentage of the Buddhist population, particularly with the educated élite, to the extent that they are concerned with a remedy for obvious malpractices in the Sangha. After 1980, the formerly common sight of monks in cinemas and stadiums or similar abuses disappeared. As far as the above-mentioned expulsion of "heterodox" monks was concerned, the opinion was much more divided, because some of their modernistic views had been quite popular. The expulsion of influential charismatic monks under the pretext of declaring them "bogus monks" was hardly a popular measure either, particularly when monastic property was confiscated by the state, as was the case in some instances. For the lasting success of the Sangha reform there would have had to be popular support for Ne Win's policy in general, but in fact there was a growing dissatisfaction which finally exploded in a general people's uprising in 1988.

The various reports on religious events in the government-controlled press after the end of the major cases against the heterodox monks record numerous meetings of the Sangha committees, the enacting of new regulations, the building and inauguration of monastic schools and monks' hospitals, the per-

21 See K. Fleischmann, *Die neue Verfassung der Union von Birma*, Hamburg, 1976 (Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde Hamburg, 82).



formance of religious ceremonies and festivals, the construction and consecration of new pagodas, the collection of donations for these purposes etc. A prominent place was accorded to progress reports on the construction of the Maha Wizaya Zedi. This new pagoda on top of Dhammarakkhita Hill, which is situated near Shwedagon Pagoda, was meant to be a lasting monument in commemoration of the success of the Sangha reform initiated by Ne Win. Most of these news items do not provide much background information, but for those who know how to read between the lines it is evident to what extent the government gave orders to the Sangha organizations by means of so-called supplications, which had the authority of the state behind them in fact, though not in name. By means of these "supplications" the government decided which monks were elected ecclesiastical office-bearers, received ecclesiastical titles etc. The same situation prevailed in the case of the newly established Sangha colleges. The government thus regulated the monastic institutions in the same way as it did the units of the government party and state institutions.

One major motivation behind Ne Win's religious policy had been the intention to keep the monks out of politics. As a result of his policies, however, he had integrated the monks into the political structure of the country. This was counterproductive, because it resulted in introducing additional political conflicts into the monastic communities, though these did not surface at once.

## **8. Developments after March 12, 1988**

The situation changed drastically when a local quarrel triggered off a general uprising on March 12, 1988. The dissatisfaction of the large majority of Burmese people with economic misery and with large-scale corruption and misuse of power erupted. The attempt to suppress the mass demonstrations did not succeed, and Ne Win resigned on July 23, 1988. His successor, Sein Lwin, who had been in charge of religious affairs at the time of the Sangha reform, was now responsible for a most brutal attempt made by the armed forces at suppressing dissent, including the indiscriminate killing of unarmed civilians, the shooting of doctors and nurses in front of the General Hospital of Rangoon without warning etc. Thus, he became notorious as the "butcher of the Burmese people". On August 12, Sein Lwin resigned. U Maung Maung, who succeeded him, was not able to pacify the country either, though he made considerable concessions to the opposition, which was now allowed to organize itself. Maung Maung's government was deposed on September 18 by a coup d'état, resulting in a military government, headed by Saw Maung, which

pacified the country at gunpoint<sup>22</sup>. However, the concessions made by U Maung Maung were not immediately withdrawn, and the political parties were permitted to function and prepare themselves for the elections.

From practically all reports on the events during the period from March to September 1988 we learn that the Buddhist monks have played a decisive role in these developments. Very often "students and Buddhist monks" are described as the leaders and the organizers of the demonstrations, or even as "the centre of resistance" against the government<sup>23</sup>. An eyewitness recalls that at least several thousands monks were marching in the demonstrations in Rangoon during the last days of Sein Lwin's rule. Mandalay seems to have been under the control of the monks for some time, and similar conditions were reported from various other places as well, under which, during the days of the breakdown of government authority, monks took care of local administration. The government-installed heads of the Sangha administration published statements against the participation of monks in the demonstrations, but most monks seem to have considered them as puppets of the regime who were urged to read out announcements fabricated by the government, as was explained to visitors<sup>24</sup>. According to some reports, including that by B. Lintner, the "All-Burma Young Monks' Association" (Yahanpyo Aphwe) took part very actively in the organization of the protests<sup>25</sup>. This militant monks' organization resurfaced in 1988 after a long period of having virtually disappeared. Its history can be traced back to its involvement in the riots of 1938<sup>26</sup>.

The role of monks in the disturbances of 1988 is also reflected in semi-official comments published after the military coup d'état<sup>27</sup>. Here we read that on August 25, 1988 "young monks and novices numbering about 600 jumping

22 There are reports in all major news magazines, e.g. "Reading the Stars", *Asiaweek*, 12.8.1988, pp. 19-30; "A River of Blood in Rangoon", *Asiaweek*, 30.9.1988, pp. 25-27; reports in *Far Eastern Economic Review* of 25.8.1988 etc. Cf. also G. Siemers, "Regierungswechsel in Rangoon", *Asien* 30 (Jan. 1989), pp. 60-88 [largely based on governmental sources], and in *Südostasien aktuell* 1988, pp. 415-425 and 513-517, and several other publications. I do not propose to discuss the political events here, my purpose being a study of the role of the monks only.

23 Cf. inter alia reports in *Nation* (Bangkok), 9.8., 14.8., 23.8., 26.8. and 6.9.1988; Denis D. Gray, "Buddhist Societies Prone to Violence", *Nation*, 9.9.1988; Yindee Lertcharoenchok, "Thousands March in Kawthaung", *Nation*, 9.9.1988; *Nation* (afternoon extra), 8.8.1988; *Bangkok Post*, 12.8., 20.9., 22.9. and 24.9.1988; *Nation*, 1.10.1988; "Monks Lead Anti-military Demonstration", *Burma Newsletter* 1988, no. 5, p. 10; *China News*, 5.8.1988.

24 Personal communication from Mr Peter Skilling (Bangkok). H.E. White, "Burmese Leader Says Change Must Wait", *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 3.9.1988.

25 Bertil Lintner, "An Army of Monks", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 29.9.1988; cf. also *Nation*, 10.11.1988.

26 Bechert, *Buddhismus* (note 2), vol. 2, p. 90.

27 Thaki Swe, "For perpetuation of Sangha Nayaka Committees" [in five parts], *Working People's Daily*, 16.-20.12.1988.



and shouting raised their fists up above their heads" in front of Zabudipa Hall on Kaba-Aye Hill, which houses the State Sangha Nayaka Committee Headquarters. They demanded not only the release of all monks and novices who were under detention for their involvement in the disturbances, but also the abolition of the Sangha Nayaka organizations at all levels including the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, and the resignation of the members of this committee. The report adds that "their last demand was to immediately revoke the directive nos 72 and 75 issued by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee". Under these directives monks are not only prohibited from drinking liquor, from gambling etc., but also from watching performances, from all kinds of business activity and from collecting donations at such places as markets, bus terminals etc.<sup>28</sup>.

It is obvious that certain sections of the Sangha not only joined the political mass protests of the Burmese population against the government, but used or rather misused the political crisis for their demand that all measures of the Sangha reform be revoked. This related to the resignation of the members of the monastic hierarchy which was installed in the course of the reform, and to the demand that the "directives" concerning the strict observance of monastic rules should no longer be enforced.

After the military coup d'état on September 18, the official hierarchy of the Sangha administration again called for peace. On September 20, the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee issued the request that "on the part of the people who are responsible for governing the country, the spirit of sincerity and magnanimity guide their actions in dealing with the Sanghas and the people. On the other hand the Sanghas and the people should refrain from behaving in disregard and disrespect towards the Leaders of the State, thus observing the blessing of pleasant and reasonable language"<sup>29</sup>. This request was referred to in the address to the nation delivered by General Saw Maung on September 23<sup>30</sup>. However, at the same time, monks participated in the "umbrella group" formed by the key opposition leaders<sup>31</sup>. Leaders of the student opposition claim to have hidden considerable stocks of arms and ammu-

28 Thaki Swe, "For Perpetuation", 16.2.1988.

29 From "Request by State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee to State Law and Order Restoration Council and leaders of the movement for Democracy", *Working People's Daily*, 22.9.1988. See also *Bangkok Post*, 21.9.1988 and 22.9.1988.

30 "We wish to submit our supplications to the Sayadaws of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee that we would most respectfully make note of the request made by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee on 20 September", *Working People's Daily*, 24.9.1988, quoted in *Burma Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (Jan. 1989), p. 11.

31 *Nation* (afternoon edition), 27.9.1988.

dition in monasteries<sup>32</sup>, and several monks were arrested and some taken in for questioning about weapons found in a monastery<sup>33</sup>.

It is, therefore, no surprising news that "Burmese authorities ... moved to prevent any demonstration by the country's revered Buddhist monkhood against the ruling military council" at the beginning of November 1988 by arresting a number of monks in the Burmese capital and by transferring other monks "to less politically active temples"<sup>34</sup>. It is evident that the military government has widely exercised the practice of arresting and defrocking monks under the pretext of declaring them "bogus monks" without the prescribed legal procedures, if they were considered politically suspect<sup>35</sup>.

On March 2, 1989 the Saw Maung government published the draft election law for general free elections, which it has promised to hold in 1990. According to this statute, not only civil servants and military personnel but also monks are barred from running as candidates<sup>36</sup>. This is in line with the old tradition in Theravāda Buddhism of the pre-colonial age which excludes monks from active participation in politics.

Most recent developments cast serious doubt on the intention of the military government to hold free and fair elections. The leaders of Burma's main opposition party were placed under house arrest for one year on July 21, 1989, and many supporters of the opposition parties were arrested<sup>37</sup>. There are no more foreign journalists in the country, since David Storey, Reuter's chief correspondent for Thailand and Burma, has been expelled on July 20. Burma has been practically closed for foreign visitors except for package tours with a guide<sup>38</sup>. After the military government released a total of 17,877 prisoners held of criminal charges after an amnesty, thousands of political dis-

32 Erhard Haubold, "Nach dem Feigenblatt-Putsch Brutalität", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7.10.1988. See also report in *Bangkok Post*, 8.11.1988, quoted in *Burma Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (Jan. 1989), p. 5.

33 *Nation*, 8.11.1988.

34 *Bangkok Post*, 5.11.1988, quoted in *Burma Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (Jan. 1989), p.5.

35 One example out of many is quoted in "Burma: The 18 September 1988 Military Takeover and its Aftermath", *Amnesty International*, Dec. 1988, pp. 22-24.

36 *Asiaweek*, 17.3.1989, p. 27. *Südostasien aktuell*. Juli 1989, pp. 330f.

37 *Nation*, 21.7.1989; Sein Win, "Rangoon defend twin arrests", *Nation*, 22.7.1989. See also reports in *Bangkok Post*, 22.7., 13.8. and 19.8.1989; *China Post* (Taipei), 22.7.1989.

38 "Rangoon kicks out Reuter's newsman", *Nation*, 20.7.1989. The notice in *Südostasien aktuell*, July 1989, p. 335, is rather misleading. The Burmese Embassy in Bonn confirms that the 15-day entry permits are available only for package tours and not for individual tourists. Visa are issued for certain groups of businessmen and for meditators in the Mahasi Meditation Centre in Rangoon. The meditators are, however, not allowed to leave the Centre on their own. This situation in the Centre existed already during my visit there in 1986.



sidents were arrested<sup>39</sup>. Western diplomats in Rangoon, speaking on condition of anonymity, agree that Ne Win continues to influence the political views of the military government behind the scenes, and General Saw Maung indirectly confirmed this view during a recent press conference<sup>40</sup>. It seems that the present Burmese government hopes to improve the desperate economic situation of the country by attracting foreign investment, but without making any substantial concessions to the pro-democracy movement - a situation which is not essentially different from that in mainland China after the suppression of the Chinese pro-democracy movement<sup>41</sup>.

## 9. Conclusion

The Sangha reform of 1980 as such was, in principle, nothing new, but a revival of old traditions in a superficially modernized form. At the same time, it was designed for political ends in the context of the Burmese situation during the Ne Win era. It may be still too early for an adequate assessment of its various long-term consequences, but it is evident that it has failed to achieve its political objectives. While in Thailand it is the government which controls the monkhood, the Sangha of Burma has remained a strong potential force in politics, and it is obviously capable of being activated in times of crisis. It will be one of the crucial tests for any future Burmese government if and how it will be able to handle the political influence of the Sangha.

39 "Burma releases 18,000 criminals after amnesty", *Bangkok Post*, 11.8.1989. In *Südostasien aktuell*, July 1989, p. 332, the amnesty is reported, but not the subsequent political arrests.

40 *Bangkok Post*, 8.8.1989.

41 Unfortunately, the information supplied in *Südostasien aktuell* mostly relies on the reports published by the government-controlled official news media in Burma, and consequently does not provide a realistic description of the events.