

ENLIGHTENING THE BATS:
SOUND AND PLACE MAKING IN BURMESE BUDDHIST PRACTICE

By

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ABSTRACT

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In Burma (Myanmar), the Abhidhamma, a rigorous and abstract soteriological treatise situated within the vast Pali Buddhist canon, is the focus of both monastic and lay practitioners' close study and popular veneration. In particular, the *Paṭṭhāna*, the last and most complex volume of the Abhidhamma, is envisioned as a keystone in the long-term preservation of the Buddha's teachings, which are also understood to inevitably disappear. As a result of these conditions and understandings, a popular ritualized and amplified recitation of this difficult text has developed in order to maintain the text's presence in popular consciousness. This is a conscientious move by Burmese Buddhist practitioners to create opportunities for people to hear the Buddha's teachings, while also providing merit for all of the people involved in the production of the ritualized recitation, including the listeners. The accrual of this merit can provide for a better rebirth, for example, in a time when the future Buddha returns to earth and restores these teachings to humans once again. The amplified practices of this festival drew my attention to the significance of sound in the role of place making, not only at the sites of these festivals but also within the monastery I stayed at while completing fieldwork for this thesis. That is, I found sound and a sensibility of sound to be a critical means by which individual and collective memory make sense and place out of experience. In this

Burmese Buddhist cosmological context, sensing sound was an avenue by which to preserve the Buddha's teachings, accrue merit, obtain spurious enlightenment, and expand the sacred space of effective practice.

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Uddhaṃ, tiriyaṃ apācinaṃ,
yāvataṃ jagato gati
samavekkhitā va dhammānaṃ
khandhānaṃ udayabbayaṃ.

Listen: http://host.pariyatti.org/dwob/itivuttaka_4_111.mp3

Above, across or back again,
wherever one goes in the world
let one carefully scrutinise
the rise and fall of compounded things.

Itivuttaka 4.111

<http://tipitaka.org/romn/cscd/s0504m.mul3.xml#para111>

Gemstones of the Good Dhamma, compiled and translated by Ven. S. Dhammika
http://store.pariyatti.org/Gemstones-of-the-Good-Dhamma-WH342-4_p_1679.html

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

To Lashio

In May of 2009, I finished my contract working for a library in Mandalay and I was invited to visit a monastery in Lashio in northeast Burma. One of my students, Ekka, a novice of about 17 years old, spoke with his abbot about hosting a foreigner for a month. While staying there, I agreed to offer English lessons for students and teachers. This monastery previously hosted foreigners who conducted month long teaching workshops and I felt comfortable and interested to commit some free time to this community's and my own educational pursuits. We agreed on a departure date and reserved a couple bus tickets for the Northeastern route.

“Will I be able to stay at the monastery?”

“Yea, why not? It's free to stay there. You'd have to pay a lot to stay at the guest house,” Ekka replied.

We arrived at the bus station on time for our 20:30 departure. Our bus finally and slowly rolled out of the Mandalay East bus station shortly after 22:00. The bus driver's assistant who helped load passenger luggage oriented himself to the CD player and loaded a disc for the start of our journey.

“...NAMO TASSA BHAGAVTO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA...”

a monk's immediately recognizable, slow, opening homage to the Buddha burst blasted from the speakers just as the assistant reached for the volume control to rattle us listeners a little less. Some passengers laughed at how they were startled and looked to the front of the bus, while other passengers maintained a staid reception of the events, as if they had seen it all unfold. As the assistant adjusted the volume, the monk on the recording

continued per usual by declaring his taking of refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha with the appropriate Pali phrasing. By that time, after two years of living in the country, and having taken numerous bus rides, I was quite familiar with this opening recitation of all recorded monk sermons, in addition to the frequent ritual of playing these sermons at the beginning of longer bus rides. The playing of the recitation established a sense of safety and wellbeing for the journey- as if the sound reinstated the strength of the structure of the bus as well as reinvigorating the driver and priming good will thinking among the passengers. The interior front end of the bus also displayed a variety of laminated Buddha images. Some buses even held altars with blinking lights, plastic flowers, and small Buddha images similar to the altars prepared for homes or businesses. After an hour-long sermon, if it wasn't too late, the bus assistants might play some other music. Or if there was a TV on the bus, a formal Burmese stand-up comedic troupe or soap opera type drama would fill the screen.

By the time we rolled into central Lashio, the sun had risen and the streets and markets were already filled with vendors preparing their goods for the day's sales. We found a group taxi from the market that dropped passengers off along the way to the outlying neighborhood where the monastery was located. We still had to walk through a small neighborhood and up a long gradually steepening hill before reaching the monastery gates. Three quarters of the road up the hill had been laid with concrete. The last quarter revealed the compacted red soil the concrete had been laid over. Roosters crowed and I could hear splashing water coming from behind the houses that lined the road. The sun was slowly warming up the environment.

At the monastery, we headed to the main hall and removed our sandals before

entering. I leaned my bag against the wall and eventually followed Ekka to the front of the green matted hall. With large wooden doors opened on the east, west, and north sides of the building, the remains of the crisp and cool morning air filled the hall. Several cabinets and the few circular tables in the large room were all pushed against the walls making the hall feel even larger. In the front of the hall was a large Buddha image surrounded by smaller Buddha images, flowers, slow and fast radiating lights, and other images of monks. Eventually, the abbot emerged from a room to the right of the images. We paid our respects, as he sat in a large wooden chair and greeted us. Then we settled on the ground for a conversation. Ekka and the abbot sorted out some logistic details about which group of students and teachers I would work with and where I should stay for the month long period.

Apparently, the ordination hall also served as a temporary residence for guests and I could stay there. I was surprised by this arrangement as I was aware there were more standard guest rooms on the compound and the ordination hall is physically demarcated. This demarcation represents a divide in the sacred *sima* space of the ordination hall and the rest of the more profane, but still sacred as it is a monastery compound, space. *Sima* translates from Pali as ‘boundary’, but in use it also refers to the sacred space established by the monastic lineage that consecrated the hall. The demarcation is represented by a depressed area between the perimeter of the ordination hall and rest of the monastery compound. A small raised concrete path provides access from the rest of the compound to the hall.

By living in the hall, as a human (vs. monk), I thought that I would in some way be polluting the sacred space with my unholy existence and literal baggage. However,

the abbot's decision to assign my residency there suggested the sacred space was more impervious than I originally thought and, furthermore, obviously existed beyond the hall's and my own materiality.

Entering the Code

After teaching for over a week at the monastery school, run by the abbot and filled with monastic and lay teachers alike, I started to feel comfortable with the daily routine at the monastery and school. Eventually, I asked Ekka about what went into the ordination process. I had been interested in ordaining as a monk for a couple years and sleeping in the ordination hall every evening had invited even more frequent consideration. I was also aware that it is common for Burmese men to ordain at some point in their lives for as little as a week, usually during the new year celebration in April. While living at this monastery, I noticed that they kept an organized community schedule and the abbot seemed to take pride in that routine. The monastery and its monks were also well supported in the neighborhood for their efforts in running the school. This contrasted to other monasteries I had visited where sometimes just a few, perhaps intentionally, isolated monks resided.

“Sure, we can talk with the abbot. Are you sure you want to ordain? You really want to live like this?” Ekka said while adjusting his robes, “We wake up very early—everyday. And so many rules.” Ekka had lived continuously as a temple boy and then ordained novice from an early age in his home village. This village was another two hours northeast of the abbot's monastery, even closer to the Southwest border of China. He was Palaung¹. He made his way through the Burmese education system as a novice

¹ ethnic minority that has forcibly maintained a self-administered zone in Burma's Shan

and then monk, finishing high school in Mandalay where we met.

I was nervous about approaching the abbot thinking that I didn't know enough about Buddhism and he'd rather not see me get involved with ordination matters. My own 'Buddhist education', at that point, was rather haphazard and derived from American undergraduate coursework, my own selected readings, and visiting temples and monks with friends while living in Burma and Thailand.

In meeting with the abbot he initially chuckled in surprise, but then followed up with some of the questions used to verify a man's eligibility for the ordination ceremony.

"Do you have leprosy or any other skin issues, or big health issues?" Ekka mediated some of the medical language of the abbot's questions into English.

"How about, um, what is it called in English?" Ekka motioned his hand over his chest to indicate an area for infection.

"Tuberculosis?" I asked, "No."

"Do you think your parents would mind?"

"No,"

"Do you have any, um, debts?"

"Nope," this before entering graduate school.

"Who will be his lay support?" Ekka asked the abbot, "he doesn't have any family here."

"The monastery can provide his robes and alms bowl," the abbot replied.

The next day, after the monks had returned from collecting alms, Ashin² Thiri, a monk I was regularly teaching with, approached me and told me that Ashin Kalava was

² Ashin translates as 'Venerable' and is used along with a fully ordained monk's name.

ready to shave my head. Ashin Kalava pulled the razor out of a paper package noting the fresh single-use blade he would be using. Then, without any ceremony, Ashin Kalava shaved my head from the back of the neck up while I squatted wearing a longyi and shower sandals with a bucket of water at my side and a towel resting on my shoulders. This was the first step in transitioning from ‘human’ into a ‘son of the Buddha’. Ashin Thiri stood to my side with arms crossed, occasionally chuckling, presumably from the sight of a white foreigner partaking in his weekly grooming exercise.

After finishing the shave and rinsing my now bare head, I walked back to the ordination hall with Ekka and Ashin Thiri feeling just a bit lighter in step. Inside, Ekka handed me some plastic wrapped robes.

“These are some basic robes. They can get a bit warm. See, feel the difference.” He held out a corner of his robe. The ‘basic robes’ were mostly polyester, while Ekka’s had to have been a high thread-count cotton. Up to that point, I hadn’t seriously considered any differentiation in the material of monk’s robes, or any possibility of developing preferences thereof.

Ekka showed me how to wear the robes in a couple different styles. Then, with shaven head and fitted in the new robes, I returned to the main hall where I formally requested to be ordained as a novice by the abbot. In English, the line goes, “Venerable sir, I respectfully ask you to ordain me as a novice in order that I may be free from the cycle of existence and attain *Nibbana*.” However, here, the abbot said the line in Burmese while I repeated it back. Following this request, I recited the lines that establish ‘taking refuge in the Triple Gem’ in Pali, just like I had heard on the recording from the bus ride. The Triple Gem includes the *Buddha*, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha* (i.e. the *Buddha* is

the enlightened one, the *Dhamma* is the teachings of the Buddha, and the *Sangha* is the monastic community that maintains the *Dhamma*.) I then undertook, by repeating the lines of the abbot, the ten precepts of a novice which include: 1) abstaining from harming or taking life 2) abstaining from taking what is not given 3) abstaining from sexual misconduct 4) abstaining from false speech 5) abstaining from the use of intoxicants 6) abstaining from taking food after midday 7) abstaining from dancing, singing, music, or any kind of entertainment 8) abstaining from use of garlands, perfumes, and adornments 9) abstaining from using luxurious seats, and 10) abstaining from accepting or holding money. Following the undertaking of this first batch of proscriptions, I then formally requested the abbot to be my preceptor and I was given a new name in Pali. The abbot also formally identified my alms bowl, outer-robe, upper robe, and inner robe.

Since I was already beyond the age of 20, I was able to immediately continue my ordination into that of a full monk (*bhikkhu*) bearing the 227 precepts, including the ten precepts of the novice I had just taken. These 227 precepts are thoroughly elucidated in the *Vinaya*, or monastic code. This *bhikkhu* ordination process is called *Upasampada* (higher ordination) and is completed with the participation of at least five other monks within the *sima* space of the ordination hall, where I had been sleeping.

Five other monks, including Ashin Thiri and Ashin Kalava, met me inside the hall and after laying some thick blankets on the ground we sat before the hall's Buddha image. This time I was formally asked eleven questions that verified my eligibility: 1) Do you suffer from leprosy? 2) Do you have boils? 3) Do you have eczema? 4) Do you have tuberculosis? 5) Do you get epilepsy? 6) Are you a human being? 7) Are you a man? 8) Are you a free man? 9) Are you free from government service? 10) Do you have your

parent's permission to be ordained? 11) Do you have a set of three robes (outer, upper, inner) and alms bowl? I was to answer these questions truthfully and, at this point, affirmatively. Two more questions followed: What is your Pali name? And what is your preceptor's name? Following this verification, one monk pulled several large laminated rectangular papers from his side. These were less stylized versions of the gilded palm-leaf manuscripts that I saw in museums or as decoration in people's homes. The monks recited the text (*Kammavaca*) from these pages while I kept my hands together, palms and fingertips touching in a praying style, at chest level. This text contains the words of the Buddha regarding the significance of higher ordination. Their reiteration strengthens the monastic lineage by serving as a reminder for the participating monks' religious duties, while also bringing the ordainee into that fold. Their recitation within the *sima* space of the ordination hall works to reinforce the bond of that space to the lineage and to the Buddha, while also bonding me, in this case, to that chain of practice and responsibility to uphold the Buddha's teachings.

I noticed the monks paying close attention to one another's recitation and even sweating. Each monk read the entirety of their page slowly and deliberately while emphasizing certain syllables. The tempo and style and manifest conscientiousness in the recitation were markedly different from other daily recitations I heard around the monastery. As a part of an ordination ceremony, and, thus, verbal act extending their monastic lineage, it was crucial that the text be recited accurately. Compared to other ordination ceremonies I had seen, my own was happening without fanfare, audience, and decorative embellishments. Despite this austerity, and, of course, due to my own participation, I felt an intensity from the monks' recitation that was both aurally and

orally tying together the words of the Buddha, the sacred space of the ordination hall, the monastic lineage, and myself. The ceremony was completed with the usual slowly said, ‘*sadhu, sadhu, sadhu*’, meaning good or excellent, and prostration towards the Buddha image. Ashin Thiri then collected the laminated pages and a couple of the monks and I continued to sit talking about the ordination hall that they hadn’t visited in a while. Eventually, I stood up and chatted with Ekka while slowly and conscientiously walking out of the ordination hall and across the small raised concrete bridge connecting us to the more ‘profane’ monastery compound.

Learning by Ear

The next day I woke up around five in the morning to prepare for collecting alms. It was still dark while I brushed my teeth and washed my face around the square concrete pool that was overflowing with cold bathing water. A few other monks were walking around the compound or washing up as well. Then I went to find Ekka to ask who I would be following for the alms round that morning.

“No, not today. We don’t have to collect alms. This is a special week. The donors are making breakfast and lunch here.”

“Oh yeah?” At first, I was slightly disappointed that I wouldn’t be walking through the quarter, barefoot, begging for food, “What’s the reason? Why this week?”

“The monks are reciting the *Abhidhamma* from inside that pagoda up on the hill.”

“All week?”

“It takes a long time to recite the whole thing. They are starting today after breakfast. There are lay people here, in the kitchen now, cooking breakfast.”

After breakfast, I walked through the back gate of the compound, across a small

dirt road, and up a large concrete staircase with smoothed wide steps that lead to the pagoda atop the hill. As I walked up the staircase, I could hear the loud projection of numbers called off to test the amplifier attached to the pagoda. Mid way up the wide set of concrete stairs, I turned around to look out over the surrounding village.



1.1 A slightly elevated view of the monastery compound and city in the distance.
Photo by author.

The pagoda at the top of the hill had four entrances facing each cardinal direction. Inside, the space was large with high ceilings and in the center were Buddha images facing each entryway. Large mats had already been laid down to cover the tiled floor. Several tables had been moved in and positioned alongside the outer walls. On one table was a thermos with a few small teacups. Just next to this table was a low, long table with a large battery and two large receivers. The battery evidently would serve to pick up any

cut in electricity that happened almost daily. On the opposite side, there was another low standing table with a large wooden bench just behind it. The table had two high raised, white cloth umbrellas on either ends and was filled with a few reading lights and a microphone. Just to the left of the microphone was a stack of four books. Ashin Nyanathara was already seated on the bench in front of the microphone. It was his voice that I was hearing while walking up the stairs. From inside, I could hear his actual voice just before the microphone picked it up and projected it outside over the hillside and into the surrounding quarter. Some laymen, then, were on the other side tinkering with the receivers. At one point, without any fanfare, Ashin Nyanathara began reading the first page of the first book on the table.



1.2 Ashin Nyanathara beginning the *Paṭṭhāna* recitation. Buckets filled with water and other bottles of water are placed in front of the reading stand to absorb the reverberations of the recitation. Photo by author.

I sat listening for a while as a few people came in and prostrated towards the Buddha images and then towards Ashin Nyanathara reading from the text. Some people

stayed and sat silently, others sat with their back against the wall and appeared to meditate, some paid their respects and left, and others opened one of the many buckets to pull a cup of drinking water. I then looked over to the wall and saw a schedule. Each hour of the day had its own slot and different monk's names were filled in next to each hour. The schedule ended on Sunday morning.

I soon learned that they were reciting the last volume, or *Paṭṭhāna*, or *Pathan* as it is called in Burmese, of the seven volume *Abhidhamma* (Briefly described as the core methodology of Buddhist philosophy and metaphysics. This will be described in greater detail in Chapter Two). It wasn't uncommon to hear monks chanting over loudspeaker for what seemed like an hour or so, but I was piqued by the lengthy, continuous recitation and single text emphasis of this event.

In addition, everyday, during the weeklong recitation, different families and businesses, came to the monastery to donate breakfast or lunch for all the resident monks and novices in support of the recitation. As the donors cooked a variety of curries in the monastery's open air kitchen, set the tables, and finally offered rice to the monks and novices, the recitation fell on everyone's ears and filled the silent gaps in conversations.

During that week, I could hear the recitation while walking through the local quarter visiting people's homes with other monks, while teaching, and while meditating. I could hear it in the evening while falling asleep and it would pick up again when I woke in the morning. I even remember noticing how the sound of the recitation would enter a dream before I fully woke up and opened my eyes. Of course, I didn't understand anything of the recitation. It was entirely in Pali. But the recitation of the text had a certain rhythm that became ingrained in the atmosphere during the week. I then too

became more curious of the meaning and significance of the text.

“Who’s reciting now? Who IS that?” Ekka asked while chatting with some other monks one afternoon. Some monks were complimented for their palatable tone, while others were scoffed at for their apparent tone deafness. A good tone made the recitation easier listening.

As a monk, I was able to participate and I would read alongside another monk. I was still able to read the Burmese script even though the text was entirely in Pali. Reading alongside another monk helped me to learn some Burmese letters that are used only for Pali words and I could jump in and out of my accompaniment depending on my familiarity with the pronunciation. Although the text and its accurate recitation demanded great respect, the reciting monks didn’t appear caught up in too much stress or obsessing in their recitation. Compared to the intense recitation during my ordination, most of the participating monks read with a calm and relaxed approach. Immediately around the pagoda, visiting lay people and monks tended to walk slower creating an intentional meditative environment.

On Sunday morning when the recitation ended, the absence of the sound of the recitation was striking as my ears adjusted to the ‘silence’. The monks didn’t do anything in particular to wrap up the recitation after the text ended. The amplified recitation just stopped. An abbot from another monastery, with a background in studying the *Paṭṭhāna*, was invited to give a sermon that Sunday morning soon after the recitation finished. For the sermon, the large main hall was filled with people from the city and local quarter. After the sermon, the visiting abbot and his entourage of several monks were offered lunch along with this monastery’s abbot and monks. The mats, tables, receivers, and

microphone were all eventually removed from the room in the Pagoda. The following day, I woke up early to finally venture out barefoot into the neighborhood and collect alms with the other monks.

After three more weeks, I de-ordained, in a brief ceremony led by the abbot, and returned to Mandalay. Shortly thereafter, I left the country for another teaching contract in Indonesia. However, that week long recitation festival and its establishment of an explicit aural environment resonated with me through the rest of my ordination at the monastery and sometime afterwards. I had never heard anyone mention an extended ritualized recitation such as this one. At first, I thought it might have been a unique practice to that monastery as it was so aptly situated on a hillside and was able to project the sound so fully over the surrounding quarter. However, I soon learned that the fest was popular throughout the country and happened on a non-calendrical basis. Since that initial exposure, I wondered, why were Buddhist monastics, usually a quiet crowd, in my experience at least, picking up loudspeakers for not only short 15 or 20 minute long broadcasts, but for an entire week, 24 hours a day? And how did other people receive this extended recitation? I wasn't able to return until 2012 to continue that exploration 'on the ground'.

Theorizing Sāsana Society and Sound

The rest of this thesis derives from the research I conducted from October to December 2012. During that time, without ordaining again, I lived at a monastery school with around 1400 monastic residents, southwest outside of Mandalay, Upper Burma while studying Pali (the Buddhist scriptural language) and participating in daily activities with monks and a variety of lay practitioners. In addition, I tried to attend as many

Paṭṭhāna recitation festivals held outside of the monastery as I could. My research questions, during that period, surrounded the Burmese practices of studying and preserving this specific Buddhist text, the *Paṭṭhāna*, how that text related to practitioners daily life, and how local practice related to a larger nationalized Burmese Buddhist effort towards slowing down the disappearance of the *sāsana*, or the Buddha's teachings and supportive community. I soon learned that a variety of practices of preserving the *Paṭṭhāna*, including lecturing, publishing commentaries, studying, reciting, and listening to its associated texts, are well established efforts of the 'sāsana society' in Burma and the attempts by monastics and lay practitioners, both, to cultivate the 'sāsana society' (Jordt 2007).

As a society oriented to the perpetuation of the Buddha's teachings, Jordt identifies the 'sāsana society' as also "...structured by certain premises that limit the range of possibilities for social action and contain the system for its adherents as a coherent, meaningful whole," (2007: 90). These premises include the Theravadan Buddhist cosmological understandings that, first, the Buddha's teachings will eventually and completely disappear and, second, these teachings enable individuals to escape the endless cycles of rebirth (*samsara*) and suffering (*dukkha*). As a result of these cosmological understandings, individuals, monastic *and* lay, working on behalf of the 'sāsana society' envision themselves as assisting the perpetuation of the Buddha's teachings while also developing their own store of merit for a better rebirth and ultimate goal of reaching nibbana. Jordt states, "The temporal and spatial dimensions of sāsana locate the individual within a historical stream, imparting a sense of immediate purpose and future destiny," (ibid.).

Furthermore, Jordt's research identifies how the mass lay vipassanā meditation movement, a central part of the 'sāsana society', has supported a particular Burmese Buddhist negotiation of state and society relations that reject the limits of geospatial nation-state marking as well as the formation of state bureaucracies that ignore morally constituted sources of truth/power. Additionally, this meditation movement and the 'sāsana society' by extension, rejects "...Western modernist theories of personhood that do not situate an individual's actions, speech, and intentions in terms of both conventional and ultimate contexts for the production of knowledge and being," (Jordt 2007: 92). And,

Vipassanā meditation deconstructs the social categories and meanings of pragmatic life in order to assert a mode of knowing and perceiving in which the actor/agent takes up a position in the lifeworld that is fundamentally skeptical of the objectivity of the structures of social space. The individual's practical activities are directed to another level than the conventional one, while he or she simultaneously acknowledges common life experiences as conventional reality within which cosmic forces are played out. The actor/agent is trained to adopt a practical position that asserts the continuous relationship of the individual vis-à-vis the environment and not opposition and separateness from it. The location for practical involvement with the world then remains within the individual's own psychophysical process (ibid.:94).

As I mentioned above, apart from, but alongside, vipassanā meditation, individuals working on behalf of cultivating the 'sāsana society' are also concerned with textual transmission. Textual study (*pariyatti*) and meditation (*pattipatti*) are two verification processes that facilitate realization (*pativedha*) of the truth of the Buddha's teachings. Textual study, and even the ritualized recitation, of the Buddhist canon carry the same ultimate and conventional orientations as the meditation movement. *Pariyatti* and *pattipatti* are positioned as complementary to one another in the pursuit of *pativedha*. Jordt's highlighting of the deconstruction of social categories and meanings of practical life learned through meditation relays into and is strengthened by textual study. Due to a

variety of historical factors (discussed in Chapter Three) both *pariyatti* and *pattipatti* have become essential practices not only for serious monastics, but also committed laity. And the ritualized recitation of the Paṭṭhāna, that I first encountered while ordained in Lashio, has become another mode of facilitating the adoption of, "...a practical position that asserts the continuous relationship of the individual vis-à-vis the environment and not opposition and separateness from it," (ibid.)

Before reaching the field in 2012, as an outgrowth of monastic life in Lashio, my research interest centered on these ritualized recitations of the *Paṭṭhāna*; how they were carried out and how they were framed and received by practitioners as working to preserve the *sāsana*. In these festival instances, the central focus is on amplifying and projecting the monks' recitation in order to emit the sound of the text and publicize its veneration. The collective efforts of the laity and monks co-facilitated that focus. Out of this practice, there is a resultant very distinct occupation of sound space. I will discuss this issue in greater detail in Chapter Six. In contrast to the holding of the ritualized Paṭṭhāna recitation festival at this monastery in Lashio and throughout the country, I quickly learned that a number of the monks at the intense scholastic monastery that I lived at emphasized the limits of these recitation practices. And no such festival would ever be held at that monastery, in part because, of course, the text was intensely *studied* at this monastery. I discuss those circumstances in Chapter Five. Furthermore, the ritualized recitation alone does not convey the textual meaning to most people. However, many of the monks at this monastery also more subtly and tacitly approved of the fest as a mode of publicity oriented towards maintaining *sāsana* continuity and encouraging the strengthening of the 'sāsana society'. That is, by promoting and engaging the text, the

recitation festival actively worked against its inevitable erasure.

Indeed, outside of that monastery, other monks, nuns, and lay devotees recognized personal and community improvement after holding the fest, which they interpreted as beneficial in a conventional sense for cultivating and maintaining the ‘*sāsana* society’ while also recognizing long standing kammic benefits in the ultimate sense. Again the conventional and ultimate fields are closely related and essential orientations for Burmese Buddhists. Their work of maintaining the *sāsana* helped them to create future kammic benefit, and as I will describe in Chapter Six, there always remains some possibility of spurious enlightenment through sound alone. The different soteriological orientations of these different communities of Burmese Buddhist practitioners (scholar monks, non-scholar monks, nuns, laity) are put in relief through their different responses towards the *Paṭṭhāna* recitation festival. However, these divergent, but overlapping orientations (soteriological rupture vs. conventional continuity and achieving a better rebirth) are always entwined. The *Paṭṭhāna* festival, with its conventional and ultimate implications, continues to be enthusiastically celebrated by lay people with the support of monastics throughout the country on its non-calendrical basis.

In this thesis, I argue that this festival, its sound and amplified words, and the listening practices engaged by practitioners at or around the festival are multi-salient in that they can serve as a directly communicable means of introductions, reminders, reviews, appreciation of the depths of the contents of the *Paṭṭhāna* while also working to alter the listener’s affect. This is worked out on behalf of the tenets of the ‘*sāsana* society’ (i.e. 1) the Buddha’s teachings are bound to disappear 2) support will extend the life of the *sāsana* and produce good merit for those who support it). Furthermore, these

amplified and projected recitations function to create, demarcate, expand, and strengthen the spatial significances of Burmese Buddhist cosmology. This latter argument derives from a variety of other anthropological research that attempts to resituate the significance of the senses in place making (Feld & Basso 1996). Alongside place making, Feld (1996) identifies what he calls “accoustemology” and “acousteme” in order “...to argue the potential of acoustic knowing, of sounding as a condition of and for knowing, of sonic presence and awareness as potent shaping forces in how people make sense of experiences.” (97). Feld specifies accoustemology as, “... an exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of ways in which sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth,” (ibid.) Furthermore, Feld notes that a sense of place can always be understood through its acoustic dimension.

After attending a *Paṭṭhāna* festival or hearing the faint sound of a festival from afar, participants, and especially Burmese Buddhist practitioners, and the surrounding environment are primed by the “sacred words” of the Buddha despite not understanding the entirety of their complex meaning (Tambiah 1968). The ritualized recitations of the *Paṭṭhāna*, their words and sound then can be understood as acting as a force on Burmese Buddhist practitioners, or interested listeners, assisting them in their cultivation of affective and embodied *sāsana* preservation practices. Simultaneously, the ritualized recitation establishes and expands Burmese Buddhist cosmological place making and the opportunities for enlightenment that entails.

Outline of Thesis

In Chapter Two of this thesis, I discuss, in finer detail, the philosophical aspects of the *Paṭṭhāna* and the impermanent nature of the Buddha’s teachings. In Chapter Three,

I demonstrate the historical significance of *sāsana*, and more specifically, *Paṭṭhāna* preservation in Burma following colonization. I also introduce the scholastically focused Shwegyin lineage in Burmese Buddhism. The lineage of the monastery I stayed at while completing my fieldwork was Shwegyin affiliated. In Chapter Four, I contextualize the contemporary nation-level political atmosphere that challenged the wellbeing of the *sāsana* during my fieldwork and highlight how monks utilized *sāsana* preservation tropes in order to protect the ‘*sāsana* society’ in the contemporary Myanmar nation-state. I then cover my fieldwork methods, before contextualizing the monastery that I lived at in 2012. In Chapter Four, I describe my introduction to the Shwegyin affiliated monastery, Maha Ghandayon, and their institutionalized textual approach to *sāsana* preservation that establishes their authority among other monastics and lay practitioners. I also draw attention to the significance of the *place* of this monastery and elucidate my experience of the monasteries place making. In Chapter Five, I discuss how monastic embodiment practices at Maha Ghandayon integrate the technology of the ear and the significance of listening in the cultivation of embodied *sāsana* preserving practices. I then fully depart from Maha Ghandayon monastery to illustrate a few examples of the popular ritualized recitations of the *Paṭṭhāna* that were working within the nation-state to project the sacred space of the monasteries and pagodas beyond their compound walls or over their surrounding hills. Finally, in the conclusion, I discuss the implications of these observations and the prospects of future research relating to the significance of considering place making in the everyday practices of establishing sacred space.

CHAPTER TWO: NOTES ON SĀSANA AND THE PAṬṬHĀNA

Further Situating the *Paṭṭhāna*

In brief, the *Paṭṭhāna* describes the twenty-four conditional relations that are the basis of all phenomena in Buddhist epistemology. Situated in the vast Pali Buddhist canon, the *Paṭṭhāna* is the last volume of *Abhidhamma Pitaka* and demands a cumulative knowledge of the preceding six volumes in order to fully comprehend its contents. Apart from the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, the Buddhist Pali canon includes two other *Pitaka* (or baskets): the *Sutta Pitaka* (lectures of the Buddha including Jatakas stories about the Buddha's previous lives) and the *Vinaya Pitaka* (Monastic code). The *Abhidhamma Pitaka* is concerned with depicting mind and matter. These three *Pitaka* combine to be called the *Tipitaka* (ti- as a prefix for three) and make up the primary Pali texts of Theravada Buddhist cannon.

Immediately following the death of the Buddha Sakyamuni (5th century BCE) the contents of the *Tipitaka* were transmitted orally. Four hundred and fifty years after the Buddha's death (1st century BCE) the material was written down by a group of monks in Sri Lanka. For many Buddhist practitioners, the *Tipitaka* is believed to be the words of the Buddha. However, Buddhologists, including Buddhist practitioners, investigate the debates, discrepancies and changes that occurred during oral transmission, as well as after the texts were finally written. Each engagement with the canon, as researcher and/or practitioner, brings its own varying levels of disputed granularity of accuracy and veracities within those texts (McDaniel, 2011). Despite, or in spite of, those debates, the *Tipitaka* is directive of Burmese Buddhist practice.

This third basket of the *Tipitaka*, the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (hereafter referred to as the

Abhidhamma), which contains the *Paṭṭhāna*, is quite different from the *Sutta* and *Vinaya Pitaka*. The *Sutta* and *Vinaya Pitaka* provide a practical path for achieving soteriological goals. Their imagery and language are situated within everyday experiences. The *Abhidhamma* (literally the ‘ultimate’-*abhi*, ‘truth or teaching of the Buddha’-*dhamma*) on the other hand, is a rigorous and abstract soteriological treatise. As ‘ultimate truth’, there is no narration or instruction within the text; it reads as a series of lists upon combinations of more lists. More specifically, the *Abhidhamma* “...classifies consciousness into a variety of types, specifies the factors and functions of each type, correlates them with their objects and physiological bases, and shows how the different types of consciousness link up with each other and with material phenomena to constitute the ongoing process of experience,” (Bodhi et al. 2006: 4). It is an “ethically informed hierarchical taxonomy of consciousness, mental factors, and material phenomena” (ibid.). Greed, hatred, and delusion are identified as the base, or roots, of this hierarchy. From these roots, mental formula, identified through the processes of purification and meditation, scale levels of meditative absorptions and insight. At the top of this hierarchy lies an “...irreversible emancipation from all defilements...”, the cessation of suffering, or the ‘unconditioned element’, *nibbana* (ibid.: 5). Within the Theravada Buddhist world of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, the *Abhidhamma* is regarded as “... the most perfect expression of the Buddha’s unimpeded omniscient knowledge (*sabbannuta-nana*). It is his statement of the way things appear to the mind of a Fully Enlightened One, or *Buddha*, ordered in accordance with the two poles of his teaching: suffering and the cessation of suffering,” (Bodhi et al. 2006: 3). In addition, Jordt (2007) highlights the *Abhidhamma* as, “...a theory of causality and of the interdependence of the conditions of

mind and matter than ideologically oppose scientific, Marxist-socialist, capitalist, and other ideologies that underwrite systems of social welfare and governance,” (94).

The *Paṭṭhāna*, as the final volume of the *Abhidhamma*, applies twenty-four conditional relations to all levels of consciousness, mental factors, material phenomena, and the unconditioned element (*nibbana*). There are four major divisions in the *Paṭṭhāna* that discuss different modes of origination: positive, negative, positive-negative, and negative-positive. Under these four major divisions, there are six subdivisions of origination: of dyads, of triads, of dyads and triads, of triads and dyads, of dyads and dyads, and of triads and triads. The twenty-four conditional relations are applied to each of these twenty-four divisions in order to exhaustively depict all instances of arising phenomena (Bodhi et al. 2006). This method demonstrates, in its dissection, that what might be seemingly whole is in fact made of parts and therefore any arising phenomena is not isolated, with a substance of its own, but connected and dependent upon other phenomena. In effect, this belabored exercise demonstrates two major Buddhist principles: no-self (*anatta*) and dependent origination (*paticca samuppada*) (ibid.).

Taking a hagiographic turn from the contents of the *Abhidhamma*, in his commentary of the *Abhidhamma*, Buddhaghosa, a 5th century scholar monk from southern India, provided a vivid description of the Buddha upon realizing the *Paṭṭhāna*. We learn that while contemplating the first six volumes of the *Abhidhamma*, the Buddha did not emit rays. However, when he reached the *Paṭṭhāna*,

“...’he began to contemplate the twenty-four conditional relations of root, object, and so on, his omniscience certainly found its opportunity therein. For as the great fish *Timiratipingala* finds room only in the great ocean 84,000 *yojanas* [~672,000 miles] in depth, so his omniscience truly finds room only in the Great Book [the *Paṭṭhāna*]. Rays of six colors— indigo, golden, red, white, tawny, and dazzling— issued from the Teacher’s body...”

(Bodhi et al. 2006: 9; *Atthasalini* 13).

As a part of the Buddha’s hagiography, this story and description are relished by many Burmese Buddhists. I would frequently hear versions of it when discussing the *Paṭṭhāna*. Additionally, depictions of this event were illustrated in fliers or a variety of laminated holographic cards and posters, and even embroidered in fabrics. When visiting Burma, some tourists are surprised to see Buddha images surrounded with all varieties of blinking lights that resemble something between Christmas decorations and a lottery machine. These representations spring from Buddhaghosa’s depiction.

This brief introduction to the *Abhidhamma*, the *Paṭṭhāna*, and their veneration in Burma is not exhaustive. These texts and their surrounding practices are discussed in greater detail below. However, it is necessary to begin by providing some highlights of the significance of these texts within their socio-religious context.

Impermanent Teachings

The three characteristics of existence in Buddhist thought are *Anicca* (impermanence), *Dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), *Anatta* (not-self). These characteristics also apply to the Buddha’s teachings (*Sutta*, *Vinaya*, & *Abhidhamma*, or *Tipitaka*). Time in Buddhist cosmology is cyclical and runs through eons of decline and renewal as well as through spatial levels of celestial abodes, earth, and hells. The birth of a Buddha, his enlightenment, and the efforts to spread his teaching’s mark a time of renewal.

Following the birth, people can easily practice and understand the Buddha’s teachings, or

sāsana, and many become enlightened. As time distance grows away from the birth of a Buddha, the *sāsana* becomes weak and the chance of enlightenment is diminished. Eventually, the *sāsana* ceases to exist and another Buddha is born restoring the *sāsana* to human beings once again.

The Pali term '*sāsana*' translates as 'teachings', but the concept of the 'Buddha *sāsana*' in Burma now includes a larger sphere of reference including the practice and maintenance of the teachings by individuals and institutions (Turner 2014). Jordt (2007), as an extension of the New Laity, uses the term '*sāsana* society' to describe the contemporary Burmese project of Buddhist revitalization and preservation. Jason Carbine uses the phrase '*sāsana*-ization' to discuss this emphasis within a particular monastic community, the Shwegyin, in Burma. (The main site of this fieldwork was conducted at a Shwegyin Monastery. Discussed in detail below) Furthermore, in Burmese, there are *multiple* and *specific* terms that refer to one's position and activity in relationship to the Buddha *sāsana*. For example, someone could be described as within (as in monastics) or without (lay people) the *sāsana*. In addition, the varying degrees, or type of involvement (head, teacher, patron, enemy) can also be noted with specific and everyday terminology (Carbine 2011).

Many of the Burmese Buddhists I spoke with referenced a *five thousand year* period of decline noting that the current *sāsana* of the Buddha Sakyamuni who lived in India during the 5th century BCE, is already half way towards its complete disintegration. As time passes after the death of a Buddha, the *sāsana* becomes increasingly opaque until it finally disappears. There may be a period with no Buddha, and then a future Buddha descends from the celestial abodes, is born, and restores the *sāsana* on earth once again.

Burmese Buddhist historian, Alicia Turner, has identified multiple chronologies for the decline of the *sāsana* that range from one hundred to five thousand years (2014). In the time of decay, also known as the *Kaliyuga*, all traces of the *Tipitaka* and their supporting practices eventually vanish destabilizing the *sāsana* and triggering its dissolution.

Different chronologies articulate different stages of how this decline specifically unfolds. Turner (2014) notes that the tropes of *sāsana* decline have helped drive patronage and reform for centuries. Indeed, in 2012, this trope of decline was concretely tied to the focus of this research, the ritualized recitation of the *Paṭṭhāna*.

For the ‘*sāsana* society’ of Burmese Buddhists today, preserving the *Paṭṭhāna* is envisioned as critical work in the larger mission of preserving the *sāsana* in the face of inevitable decline. Many Burmese Buddhists readily identify the *Paṭṭhāna*’s position, the last and most difficult volume of the *Abhidhamma*, as particularly precarious, and therefore understand it to be the first text that will disappear. Despite the historical identification of various chronologies of decay, most people I spoke with in 2012 repeated the following order. First, the *Paṭṭhāna* will disappear, then, one by one, the preceding volumes of the *Abhidhamma* will disappear (i.e. sixth, fifth, fourth, so on.) followed by the *Vinaya* and the *Sutta*. The disappearance of the Buddhist canon, and their scholarly study (*pariyatti*), will destabilize the effectiveness of practice (*patipatti*) and, finally, insight (*pativedha*) will no longer be possible. Some descriptions began with emphasizing that insight is no longer possible now and the texts and practices will follow in their disintegration. The *Paṭṭhāna*, then with its precarious positioning and difficult content, is considered the “front-line fortress” for the *sāsana* (U Htun Hlaing *in* Carbine 2011: 153). The defense theme in this metaphor written by a Burmese author is not

found in the Pali, but speaks to the active defensive mind-set in Burmese preservation practices.

The public veneration, concern, and interest in the *Paṭṭhāna* and the *Abhidhamma* in Burma is not shared among neighboring Theravada majority nation-states (e.g. Thailand or Sri Lanka). Monks and nuns that have spent time studying in Burma are even believed to have superior *Abhidhamma* knowledge upon their return from Burma due to the regional reputation (Meister, 2009). In addition, visual representations of the *Paṭṭhāna* as a wheel, or flower, with 24 spokes, or petals, are printed as stickers, decals, posters, on blank CD-Rs, and found in/on automobiles, buses, doors, house windows, etc. On long distance bus rides, drivers often play videos of extended recitations of the *Paṭṭhāna* or recorded sermons that discuss the contents of the *Abhidhamma*. In Thailand, an overnight bus ride might play a Hollywood movie. In Sri Lanka, there may be devotional music or a film. Furthermore, many people I met in Burma were able to recite by heart the titles of at least several of the 24 conditional relations and more often than not, all 24. One laywoman I interviewed excitedly requested for me to record her recitation of a condensed version of the *Paṭṭhāna* that she had memorized. I also received a lot of positive feedback and encouragement when I mentioned my research topic to Burmese acquaintances. As a foreigner interested in Buddhism and especially the *Paṭṭhāna*, I was envisioned as another agent perpetuating the *sāsana*. When I brought up my research topic with Thai and Sinhalese friends, however, very few had the slightest idea what the *Paṭṭhāna* was. I mention these examples here to briefly sketch the comparative significance of this text in Burma.

When I asked people why the *Abhidhamma* was popular in Burma, I was often told a

story about a ship that had sunk while carrying the *Tipitaka* across the Andaman Sea from India. Each ‘basket’ of the *Tipitaka* floated to a different country. The *Sutta Pitaka* went to Sri Lanka, the *Vinaya Pitaka* went to Thailand, and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* went to Burma. Thus, some people would partly explain the popularity and familiarity with the *Paṭṭhāna* and the *Abhidhamma* in Burma through this story. While tempting, I could not settle with this story alone in pursuing the historical context of the contemporary everyday familiarity with the *Paṭṭhāna* in Burma.

Several historians have charted some of this territory already. This introduction has served to briefly highlight some key terms and contexts for the following work. Next, it is necessary to begin by situating this ethnographic investigation within the existing historical and anthropological literature in order to understand how and why the preservation of the *Paṭṭhāna*, as a part of *sāsana* revitalization was of great concern for Burmese Buddhists during my fieldwork.

CHAPTER THREE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Historicizing *Sāsana*

The British Empire gained control of Upper Burma and the royal court at Mandalay in 1885. In that year, the last Burmese king, Thibaw, was dethroned and sent to India in exile. Soon after, the remaining royal court crumbled, taking with it what had become a central Burmese Buddhist authority long before the British set foot in Lower Burma. In their years of control, British authorities took a ‘neutral’ stance towards religion and refused to develop any official office that would settle ecclesiastical disputes or provide widespread or large-scale patronage of Buddhism (Turner 2014, Braun 2013, Carbine 2011, Jordt 2007).

Turner (2014) has closely examined the period of 1890-1920 in Burmese history. She identifies that this vacuum of Buddhist authority allowed for lay Buddhists to cultivate and establish themselves as collective patrons and defenders of the *sāsana*. Furthermore, she argues that by focusing on *sāsana* preservation “... Burmese Buddhists rejected the universality of the material goals of colonial modernity— keeping the goal of preserving the *sāsana*, however fluidly defined, ahead of creating modern colonial or national subjects,” (ibid.: 153). The categories of nationhood or colonial modernization, at least initially, were not directive of collective Burmese anti-colonial efforts. Instead, the life of the *sāsana* became the salient concern of a Burmese Buddhist imagined community. During colonization, “The explanation that made sense of all of this inarticulable drift was the broader soteriological frame of *sāsana* and its inevitable decline,” (Turner 2014:155) The frame of *sāsana* offered not only symbolic and moral means of anti-colonial intervention, but also provided opportunities for action. Organizing around

sāsana, individuals deployed lay engaged priorities and leadership, and worked to change the sense of a moral self *as a part of* a community. The changes ushered in with colonization created, "...an opportunity that inspired a new set of Buddhist *bricoleurs* to borrow liberally from the symbols, language, and techniques of previous incarnations of *sāsana* reform and from the technologies of the European acolytes of the civilizing mission and their cosmopolitan cousins from across Asia who were busy inventing their own modernities," (ibid.). It is important to note, as Turner does, that the Buddhist associations that developed under colonialism, "...did not plan to resist British colonialism or to save the Burmese nation. They were not conceived as a means to resist colonial hegemony, reshape Burmese modernity, or consciously reshape Buddhism and Burmese identity. They arose as independent and contingent responses to locally perceived problems and a general unease with what was going on in their world," (ibid.: 154). However, the frame of the *sāsana*, with its fluidity and indeterminacy, arguably allowed for greater management and response to the colonial encounter than violent battles or political mobilization (ibid.:155).

Braun (2013) focused on one significant Buddhist *bricoleur* in this period of Burmese history. Braun's (2013) depiction of the life of Ledi Sayadaw, a widely influential Burmese monk, articulates how Ledi deployed his precolonial Buddhist education as an improvised response to the colonial threat to Buddhism. This improvisation included developing social organizations dedicated to doctrinal study, writing works in simple Burmese, and utilizing print technology for wide distribution. Ledi Sayadaw made a strong call for lay communities to actively study Buddhism and he began directing his writing to a lay audience. After spending several years in the forest building up his own

monastery (a site that was fiercely defended against a controversial mining project contemporaneously during my fieldwork), he returned to the public fold with greater prestige and exploited the arrival of the printing press:

The increase in the ability to spread information with the proliferation of presses greatly expanded the audience for doctrinal disputation...A shift was taking place, from a Buddhism in which expertise centered on a small subset of largely monkish doctrinal experts, to one in which doctrine and learning became the basis for a pan-Burma Buddhist identity (Braun 2013: 69).

Apart from his prolific publishing, Ledi Sayadaw frequently toured the colony giving sermons and encouraging lay-founded Buddhist organizations. Ledi, without doubt, was also motivated by the frame of the decline of the *sāsana* and disappearance of the Buddha’s teachings. Specifically, Ledi believed that monks, nuns and even lay communities could *slow down* the rate of disappearance by preserving critical canonical texts, particularly the *Abhidhamma*, and the *Paṭṭhāna*. (Ibid.)

One of Ledi’s most critical contributions was a 690 verse poem that encapsulated the entirety of a compendium of the *Abhidhamma*’s basic teachings (*Abhidhammathatthasangaha*). These texts, the poem and the original compendium, are foundational today for introducing lay people *and* monastics into Pali script and terminology. Ledi’s extant, precolonial education in the *Abhidhamma* also allowed him to streamline meditation practice from Pali texts into an approachable practice for lay communities. Braun (2013) argues that colonization did not negate the power of precolonial Burmese history, as some overly deterministic historians are led to conclude. These situational techniques and responses by Ledi Sayadaw, as an individual that straddled precolonial and colonial history, tend to defy categorization as ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’. “Ledi’s traditional view was an integral part of his vision of modernity,”

(155).

Although Buddhist *bricoleurs* were able to situate colonization within the frame of the decline of the *sāsana*, where did this narrative of decline originate? From the 1890s on, the manuscripts *Anagata vamsa* (History of the Future), were published in multiple editions and made cheaply available in Burma. These manuscripts were not a new discovery for some Burmese Buddhists at that time (some of the most extensive versions and commentaries of this manuscript were found in Burmese libraries), but print technology allowed for their widespread dissemination. “Far from being a popular superstition or concern limited to monastic scholars, the text [*Anagata vamsa*] and its narrative of decline were deeply entangled in the origins of Buddhist revival and associations in Burma from their earliest days among the most elite and well-educated worldly Buddhists,” (Turner 2014: 31). The *Angata vamsa*’s growth in popularity was, in part, due to how its contents resonated with the colonial experience of many practitioners at the time.

The *Angata vamsa* (dating to roughly 13th century) specifically depicts five stages in the decline of the *sāsana*. The first stage articulates the loss of the ability for monks to reach the four stages of enlightenment: *sotapanna* (stream-enterer), *sakadagami* (once-returned), *anagami* (non-returned), and *arahant* (fully awakened). The second stage relates the loss of *patipatti* (practice). In this stage, monks lose the ability to meditate and maintain their precepts. The loss of *pariyatti* (textual study) is the third stage and depicts the disappearance of the *Tipitaka*. The fourth stage illustrates the loss of maintaining even appearances of piety i.e. respectful speech, attire, work, and morals. In this stage, monks no longer behave as monks. They are illustrated as married and working

people. The final stage illustrates the disappearance of the Buddha's relics as they are returned to the location of the Buddha's enlightenment and engulfed in flames (ibid.).

When the British arrived, dismantled Buddhist authority, and refused to set up any system of Buddhist organizational oversight, many Burmese Buddhists situated this experience as further evidence for the decline of the *sāsana*. And different Buddhists took concern with different aspects of maintenance. Furthermore, the *Angata vamsa* specifically identified a chain of events that began with governance taken over by 'base-born kings' instead of 'Dhamma-Men'. For the Burmese, 'base-born kings' mapped onto British colonists replacing the Burmese Buddhist royalty or 'Dhamma-Men'. Governance by 'base-born kings' in turn was outlined as stalling the rains, which stalls crop production, and, ultimately, prevents the laity from making offerings to the *sangha* (community of monks). With no offerings, monks are disabled from taking on new students and the perpetuation of textual study declines. In addition, the text specifically delineates the order of decay that begins with the *Paṭṭhāna*, followed by the preceding volumes of the *Abhidhamma* in reverse order. Then the *Sutta Pitaka* followed by the *Vinaya Pitaka* disappear until only four lines of the Buddha's teaching can be recalled. Eventually, that too, disappears (Ibid.:33).

Turner identifies that under the removal of their Buddhist king by the British, the Burmese reading of the text, "...offers three points of intervention: the preservation of lay morality, the continued generosity of the laity, and the promotion of *pariyatti* education," (ibid.:34). Not only did the *Anagata vamsa* indicate the stages of decline, but it was also instructive of how conscientious Burmese Buddhists could act in order to slow the inevitable decline.

A Particular Institutionalized Response

Carbine's (2011) work examines the development of the 'traditionalism' of the Shwegyin, a particular *nikaya* (school) of Buddhism in Burma, from 1860 to 2003 CE (4). Carbine uses 'traditionalism' to refer to the practices that 'connect to pastness' and seek to slow down an inevitable march towards discontinuity (ibid.: 38). Apart from Carbine's work, the Shwegyin Nikaya are significant for this study because the monastery I lived at while completing my fieldwork in 2012 was Shwegyin affiliated. I will relate the significance of this for my own fieldwork in the following chapter.

The Shwegyin's 'traditionalism' is based on the tracing of their school's practices and origins to Sakyamuni Buddha, the historic Buddha. This 'traditionalism' is also based on the trust in the preservation of the Buddha's teachings through former periods of Sri Lankan and Burmese Buddhist royalty. Of course, these efforts of maintaining purity were disrupted through British colonization. One of Carbine's main arguments discusses the "dual forms of rupture and dual forms of continuity" that are directive of the Shwegyin's 'traditionalism' (2011: 5). Rupture here refers to both the liberation found in *nibbana* (a soteriological goal) and the dissolution of the *sāsana* (in conventional terms), while continuity refers to *samsara*, or the cycle of rebirth (a soteriological aversion), and the preservation of the *sāsana* (conventional terms). His other main argument regards the significance of, what he calls, 'sāsana-ization' as exemplified in the institutional practices of the Shwegyin and the larger Burmese societal implications of *sāsana*

emphasis in Buddhist practice (ibid.).³

The Shwegyin Nikaya emerged after the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824), in which the British captured Lower Burma. The British had yet to control Upper Burma and exile the last Burmese king to India. The first Shwegyin *Sayadaw* (abbot) became prominent through his advising of King Mindon, the second to last Burmese King (1853-1878), in matters of monastic practice and discipline. Eventually, King Mindon gave the Shwegyin Sayadaw permission to act independently of the controlling Thudhamma *nikaya* council (Carbine 2011: 19). King Mindon even built a monastery for the Shwegyin Sayadaw and ordered him to lead five existing establishments in Mandalay. This royal connection and ‘pardon’, of sorts, greatly influenced the prestige of the burgeoning Shwegyin Nikaya. The last Burmese King, Thibaw (1878-1885), even attempted to appoint the Shwegyin Sayadaw as Head of the *Sāsana* (*thathanabaing*) with another sayadaw, but the Shwegyin Sayadaw refused. Instead, he oversaw nine ecclesiastical divisions to which Shwegyin monks were sent, increasing Shwegyin presence around Mandalay (ibid.). Mahavisuddharama Sayadaw succeeded the Shwegyin Sayadaw in 1894 and established a headquarters for the Shwegyin by donation of a queen from the remains of the royal court. Mahavisuddharama Sayadaw continued to lead the Shwegyin Nikaya until 1916 (ibid.:22).

During their time as founders of the Shwegyin Nikaya, the Shwegyin and Mahavisuddharama Sayadaw were able to establish the fundamental features of their school that oriented to precolonial Buddhist practice within and outside of Myanmar. By:

‘...holding to *sāsana*-oriented worldview, they affirmed the religious primacy of

³ Out of the *nikaya* in Burma, Carbine does not articulate why he chose to focus on the Shwegyin (Borchert 2013).

Sakyamuni Buddha, the authority of Pali texts, the use of Pali as a sacred language, the basic conceptions of existential continuity and rupture outlined in Pali and other sources, the basic patterns of ritual life including the higher ordination, and the basic exchange relations between monks (e.g. as ‘fields of merit’) and lay people (e.g. as donors of material support). These affirmations were correlated with an intense effort to support the *Sāsana* ‘from within’ and an intense concern about misconduct (*kukkucca*), or, as explained in Burmese, ‘being afraid that one has failed to do the right thing or one has inadvertently done the wrong thing.’ They were also correlated with an emphasis on ‘the *Sāsana* as it is studied’ (*parityatti-sāsana*). In other words, since their founding the Shwegyin have seen themselves as a very high scholastic tradition focused on disciplinary purity and intellectual rigor in relation to the *Sāsana*. By upholding their purity and rigor, they consider themselves to be good monastic ‘sons of the Buddha’ (*sakya-puttiya*) [in Burmese, *myat swa pay tha daw*].’ (Ibid.: 23)

Meditation, for example, *vipassanā* (insight meditation), was not overlooked in this school, however scriptural study, scholarship, and teaching, were undoubtedly more strongly emphasized. This rigorous and strict study and practice then has through the colonial and post-colonial/independence era’s of Burma’s history become characteristic of the Shwegyin and aligns with their efforts towards the continuity of the *sāsana* (Carbine 2011). It is important to remember that the concern for the continuity of the *sāsana* was not unique to the Shwegyin. That had become a larger societal concern as demonstrated by Turner (2014) and Braun (2013) during colonization. However, it is the Shwegyin’s emphasis on deep scriptural study and maintaining strict monastic code that was unique to their school’s identity.

In chapter’s three and four I will discuss how the Shwegyin institutionalized their practices as demonstrated to me while living at Maha Ghandayon monastery in Amarapura in 2012. First, I turn to the more contemporary socio-political context of my return to Burma in that year.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT & METHODS

“The name is the same, but the passport number is different,” I hear the immigration officer say to herself in Burmese. She flips through my passport looking for previous visas.

“Have you been to Myanmar before?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Do you have another passport?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Hmm,” she taps my passport against the desk as she looks at the computer monitor in front of her. Eventually, she turns around and waves over a supervisor, a senior immigration officer. He approaches and leans over the small divide enclosing the officer in her desk. Compared to the large, glassed-in walls of US immigration officer desks, this setup feels open with little privacy among visitors and officers. I’m the last in line from the last flight into Yangon.

The male officer looks down at the computer screen and examines my passport. The female officer summarizes the situation while staring into the screen, “The name is the same, but the number is different...”

“Have you been to Myanmar before?” the male officer now asks.

“Yes,” I reply refraining from adding additional detail despite their apparent confusion.

“How long were you here before?” he prods.

“Well, I was just here for 28 days about a week ago, but I lived here for two years prior to that.”

“Do you have your old passport?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I see, and this time on a religious visa? What meditation center are you staying at?”

“I’ll be staying at Maha Ghandayon...in Amarapura. I’m studying Buddhism and Pali [versus meditating]. I’m interested in the *Paṭṭhāna*.”

“I see. Very good monastery,”

“Yes, they are very strict there,” then in Burmese, I say, “I’m also studying Burmese.”

“Ah ha, your Burmese is good,”

The questions continued.

“How long are you staying?” “Do you plan to stay at any other monasteries or meditation centers?”

I answer, and add my own question excited to begin keeping a pulse on my research interest,

“Do you know the *Paṭṭhāna*? Or the *Paṭhān Pwe*? I’m interested in this text and festival.”

“Oh, yes. *Paṭhān Pwe*, *Athan ma seh* [The ‘non-stop’ *Paṭhān* festival]. The *Paṭhān* is very long and the most difficult,” I nod, excited to hear his take and rendering of the text.

“And some people say it protects them when they recite it, right?”

“A ha, right. Just our belief... good, you know a lot about Buddhism,” the senior officer then directs the younger officer to validate and stamp my passport, “Please come

to Myanmar again and again!”

Thud, thud, and my passport is slid back to me over the counter. A wave a relief floods my body. Even with the religious visa in my passport, I was still unsure whether I would be allowed entry, and I certainly didn't expect the officer to encourage me to return 'again and again'. I smile and say,

“*Jezu din ba deh,*” Thank you. The senior officer walks back to his station and the younger officer stands up to leave her desk. The senior officer's colleague at the overseeing station looks at me as I pass the small barrier dividing immigration from the baggage claim. I try not to look back over my shoulder or consider any immediate retraction of the approval. The senior officer turns to his colleague and says, “His name was on the blacklist, but his passport number was different.”

In 2009, after two years of continuously living and working in Myanmar and, lastly, following my ordination and residence at the monastery I described in the introduction, I was deported. The immigration situation described above relates the crucial moment when three years after deportation, knowing that my name was still on a blacklist, I was surprisingly allowed re-entry on a religious visa. In being deported, I was never served with a notice or given any reply as to what law I may have violated or what the deportation regarded, although I suspect I, un-cautiously and with local authority approval, ventured into a 'restricted area' (the monastery) for foreigners to stay while living as an ordained monk in the Northeast region of the country, an area formerly known for armed struggles, heavy opium production, and illegal trade with China. However, the military government at the time could utilize any number of reasons or paranoia to deport someone, and, perhaps, especially an American that was speaking

Burmese and had a passport with a variety of stamps from neighboring countries. When some higher authority learned of my presence at the monastery, I was passively warned with the permanent planting of an ‘observer’ and eventually deported after returning myself to Mandalay.

The years 2007-2009 in Burmese history, my first years living in the country, were markedly different from the relatively ‘open’ present when I returned for fieldwork in 2012. In September of 2007, three months after I first arrived in the country, tens of thousands of monks took to the streets in Yangon and Mandalay to protest the State Peace and Development Council’s (SPDC, the former military government’s name) abusive treatment of a small group of peacefully demonstrating monks in one of the largest anti-government demonstrations the country has seen. Those abused monks were reprimanded for demonstrating against the SPDC’s sudden removal of gas subsidies, which doubled the price of gasoline and raised the price of natural gas nearly 500%. Needless to say, this changed the operations of the daily marketplace. For one, the drivers and bus owners participating in public & private transportation systems were forced to raise fees and ticket prices which prohibited many people from getting to their jobs. The violence perpetrated by the SPDC towards the demonstrating monastic community, in addition to the spike in fuel prices inspired outright anti-government sentiment. The demonstrations escalated during the last week of September and, initially at least, the violent attempts by the SPDC to disperse demonstrators only inspired greater demonstration. When more monks were abused and shot at, even more monks came to join the demonstrations. Eventually, under a dusk-till-dawn curfew, the SPDC was able to suppress the organization of the demonstrations, raid monasteries in the middle of the

night, and make hundreds of arrests.

In May of 2008, Cyclone Nargis, with recorded winds of over 100 mph, devastated the large delta region of the country that touches the Andaman Sea and made significant damage in the former capitol of Yangon where I was living at the time. Over a hundred thousand people were killed and tens of thousands more were stranded or missing. The following day a number of monks had taken to the streets to assist clean up and reparation, while military police were seen slouching, squatting, and generally ignoring the reparative work so desperately needed by many people. Initially, the military government prohibited international relief teams from entering the delta area, despite their proximity and ease of access to the devastated regions.

During those two years, the military government's response to the monastic demonstrations and cyclone, among other daily acts of censoring or random arrest, strongly established a frame of the SPDC's paranoia and xenophobia in daily life. However, my regular interactions with a variety of Burmese individuals and organizations, in my work as a teacher, contradicted this apparent frame. Instead, the government agents of paranoia and xenophobia tended to lie in the shadows and could relentlessly, or softly, strike at any time. Stories of deportation and the inability to enter the country, and other travel and work blockages, circulated heavily among the international community living in Yangon. And any US or European based academic research was often done without any official national level knowledge of the work.

I sketch this background in order to provide context and allow for contrast with Burma's recent political environment and the significant socio-political and historical straddling I have experienced as a visitor and researcher in this country (i.e. temporary

resident 2007-2009, deported in 2009, and allowed re-entry in 2012). These past events demonstrate the significance of religious and monastic authority for the ‘*sāsana* society’ and the former military government’s inability to maintain ‘peace and development’ for the Burmese people, who in turn, supported the long life of the *sāsana* and *sangha*. Furthermore, as partly demonstrated with the scene at immigration in 2012, the government agents of xenophobia had seemingly been overturned or overlooked in favor of, in part at least, an individual researching the *sāsana* and the *Paṭṭhāna* —“Please come to Myanmar again and again!” replied the immigration officer.

Since 2011, international investors, NGOs, and tourists were encouraged to visit the country, see the sights of the long ‘closed’ Buddhist land, and invest. In that year, the SPDC enacted a long-in-production constitution, which eventually dissolved the SPDC and replaced it with a democratically elected parliament and president. The ‘democratic’ vote to ratify this constitution was held the day after Cyclone Nargis hit. This constitution minimized the authority of the military in national governance to a block of 25% of parliament. However, many observers inside and outside of the country have criticized the internal politics that have allowed former military generals to assume private ownership of formerly nationalized industries and, furthermore, create two of the major political platforms/parties. That aside, a now ‘civilian-led’ and economically liberalizing parliament began receiving US and EU approval after releasing thousands of political prisoners and peeling back restrictions on the freedom of the press. Websites such as YouTube and the Democratic Voice of Burma were unblocked. Labor reforms allowed for the formation of unions and penalized business owners for firing strikers. Foreign investment jumped from US\$300 million in 2009-10 to US\$20 billion in 2010-11

(Allchin 2011).

As the reforms rolled out in the second half of 2012, there were several main events that occupied the streets, newspapers, Internet, and radio during my fieldwork. The first, and arguably largest impact on the national political climate, surrounded Buddhist-Muslim riots that erupted on June 8, 2012 after a group of Rohingya gang raped and murdered a Rakhine Buddhist woman and 10 Burmese Muslims, Rohingya and Rakhine, were killed by a group of Rakhine Buddhists.

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority living mostly in Rakhine province located in western Burma. This province neighbors Bangladesh and, according to Rakhine Buddhists, and other Burmese Buddhist nationalists, the Rohingya are not Burmese, but stateless Bengalis despite their long term residence in Burma. By the end of June, 80 deaths had been reported and about 90,000 people were displaced. In July, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began seeking ‘true’ community reconciliation, despite the fact that the parliament had charged 10 UNHCR workers for stimulating the riots (Myanmar Times, 22 July 2012). Protests of the violence spread to Mandalay where monks espoused either peaceful community reconciliation or anti-Muslim rhetoric. In both instances, ‘*sāsana* preservation’ and ‘threats to the *sāsana*’ were invoked by demonstrating monastics to legitimize their positions (i.e. Muslims are an immediate threat to the well-being of the *sāsana* through their attack on Buddhists, -or- peace must be restored in order to allow Islam and the *Sāsana* to continue to coexist).

In August, the parliament had invited the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to independently investigate the violence in Rakhine. However, in October, the OIC opportunity to open an office in Yangon in order to distribute humanitarian aid by

their own means (bypassing state control of the aid) was denied by the parliament, in large part due to the anti-Muslim protests following OIC's announced intention. At this time, the government happily invoked the phrasing that the 'will of the people had spoken.' Some monks and lay people I talked to offered up conspiracy theories that considered the Rohingya as a part of an international Islamic network intentionally striking at this vulnerable time of Burma's transition in order to thwart the ascendancy of a Burmese, and decidedly, Buddhist, democracy.

Meanwhile, in the second half of 2012, international investors were quickly laying foundations for entry into this new market. The IMF announced plans to open a Myanmar office in Thailand. The World Bank and US Firm General Electric made solid plans to open offices in Yangon and the US temporarily 'let expire' a ban on Burmese imports and eased other trade sanctions. The import ban was later reimposed, but other trade sanctions were eased. Visa on Arrival services were expanded to two other international airports- Mandalay, the economic capital of Upper Burma, and Nay Pyi Taw, the now legislative capital for the country. Visa and MasterCard announced they would be providing credit card services soon, while Pepsi and Coca-Cola competed for their influence in the new market.

Around 100 prisoners of conscience were freed towards the end of September 2012. Soon after, thousands of names were removed from nation's blacklist that included international journalists, authors, scholars, and NGO employees (but not my own, apparently). Refugees, and even exiles, were invited to return to the country.

In Letpadaung, near Monywa of western Upper Burma, not far from my field site, protests mounted over the corrupt practices, environmental damage, and unfair land

seizures involved in a Chinese and Military backed copper mining project. In one year, in preparation for the mining project, around 1000 local residents had been relocated. Rumors spread that famous religious sites related to Ledi Sayadaw, whose monastery was located near Monywa, and other religious monuments in the area had been damaged or were to be destroyed. This positioned the protests as not only an abuse towards the local farming community, to which local monastics were directly related, but also a blatant attack on the physical *structures* and *spaces* of the *sāsana*. Early demonstrations against the mine were made up of mostly farmers, but soon monks and nuns joined. Demonstrations in Mandalay *and* Yangon supported the critique of existing land laws that favored large companies over local farmers as well as the abhorrence towards the destruction of religious sites.

Then in mid November, recently reelected US President Barack Obama made announcements to visit Burma on November 19th. Of course, his talk at Yangon University drew national attention and forced the parliament to restore parts of the decrepit and downtrodden campus. Obama was the first serving US president to visit the country. His visit coincided with the first MasterCard ATM transaction, as well as with, in the week prior, one of the strongest earthquakes to hit the country in over 60 years.

This earthquake had a magnitude of 6.8 and killed 26 people and left 12 more missing. The epicenter was in Shwebo, just 100km north of my field site. Aftershocks rippled along the Sagaing fault line. A local woman of 77 years old reported having never experienced an earthquake of that strength (Myanmar Times, November 19-25, 2012). This quake also damaged several pagodas and monasteries. The monastery I was living at did not receive major damage, however I experienced heavy shocks for what

seemed like at least 10 seconds. Near this monastery, Pahtodawgyi pagoda (almost 200 years old) in Amarapura suffered a damaged *htii* (lavish golden umbrella-like top of any pagoda) (see photo). The physical destruction of pagodas is interpreted as particularly inauspicious for the *sāsana*.



4.1. Phatodawgyi Pagoda in Amarapura after 6.8 magnitude quake, November 2012. Photo taken by author.

Following Obama's 'exciting' visit, the mine protests in Letpadaung became violent when military guards used fire-bombs in the early morning of November 29th to disperse monastic and civilian demonstrator camps. Dozens of monks suffered severe burns from the attack and nearly 100 people were injured. Several monks were admitted to major hospitals in Mandalay and disallowed from journeying abroad for proper treatment. This violence, which the monastic community had avoided since the 2007 mass demonstrations in Yangon, incited further monastic protests which came to articulating six requests for 1) the mining project to immediately stop destroying religious heritage buildings 2) the president to issue an apology 3) the military to cease attacks on demonstrator camps 4) the resolution of the mine dispute to satisfaction of local residents

5) legal action against those responsible for the violent attacks on monastics with fire bombs and 6) the immediate release of those arrested in relation to the demonstrations.

The demands of the monks, fueled by the violence they received, eventually garnered enough support for the Parliament to approve an investigation into the circumstances of the copper mine project. Statements from China purported to ‘respect the findings of the investigation’, but the Chinese Ambassador also threatened that shutting down this mining project would deter future foreign investors (The Myanmar Times, December 9-16, 2012). Thus exemplifying the nature of Chinese soft power threatening its informal colony. A tactic that many Burmese people I spoke with were fed up with. The monastic protests at Letpadaung also situated Chinese business and the Burmese military as direct threats to *sāsana* preservation, and therefore misguided.

In the middle of December, the Minister for the President’s Office, U Hla Htun, and the Minister for Health, Dr. Pe Thet Khin, represented government apologies to the injured monks during a special ceremony held at a monastery in Mandalay (The Myanmar Times, December 24-30, 2012). After the ceremony, one monk, U Ottama of Maha Ghandayon (in a surprising authorized ‘political’ involvement) reiterated the remaining four demands of the demonstrating monastics, but acknowledged an allowance of time due to the parliament investigation.

Methodological circumstances

The period of this fieldwork was thus heavily marked by direct affronts *towards* and *from* a variety of Burmese Buddhist monks and nuns (i.e. Rakhine situation, Letpadaung mine). Interestingly, these major events, in part, demonstrate the duality of

Buddhist monks, as victims and perpetrators of violence, as well as the plurality of Buddhist monks (e.g. Rakhine, anti-Muslim, peace facilitator). The move-in of several major transnational corporations also signaled a more subtle, less physically violent, challenge to the *sāsana* underway that at least a few monks I talked with were skeptical of. In these instances, all monastics continued to frame their participation and responses within efforts of ‘preserving the *sāsana*’.

While these events did not directly affect my fieldwork, with the exception of the earthquake, they were controlling in the sense that they obligated responses and approval or disapproval of other monk’s behavior from some of my research participants, while also signaling more trouble for *sāsana* and a greater need for preservation efforts. In contrast to other monasteries where monks and nuns were mobilizing in response to some of these headlining issues, the monks of Maha Ghandayon, where I stayed, did not join demonstrations en masse; they could be kicked out of the monastery for unauthorized participation. U Ottama’s reiteration of monastic demonstrator demands was a surprising exception and highlights the seriousness of the destruction led by the development of the mining project. But the monks of Maha Ghandayon did work to retain their own orientation to *sāsana* preservation through their scholastic endeavours. For some of the more seriously studious monks, they particularly did not want to distract themselves with any remote or political concerns.

However, daily, at Maha Ghandayon monastery, these national issues inevitably surfaced in my conversations with monks and lay people. I was an outsider staying at the monastery and outside events were at least vaguely associated with my presence. And, admittedly, I was interested in learning about this monastic community’s responses to

these dramatic issues. My semi-structured interview protocol reflected some of these current events. I oriented my questions around several themes: the *Paṭṭhāna*, preservation of the *sāsana*, Pali language, ‘about self’, Tourism, monastery experiences throughout life, and ‘other religions’. In what I now recognize as a lapse of judgement in the realistic scope of this project, I used this extensive protocol in attempting to interview approximately 40 people; 10 monks, 10 nuns, 10 men, and 10 women. This was not a good idea. Interviewing one-person everyday alone would have taken over a month, and that does not even account for the difficulty in locating or establishing relationships with appropriate participants. In retrospect, this was a rather inappropriate number of people to attempt to interview with the amount of time I had. Furthermore, in attempting to interview this large number of people, I sacrificed the importance of having previously established relationships with the research participants. As a result, the interviews I did collect were all too often shallow or lacking in greater context of the daily life of the person I was interviewing. I also sacrificed time that I could have been collecting more detailed participant observation experiences or getting to know a smaller handful of individuals perspectives in detail. Furthermore, as a foreigner there was very little means by which I could quickly establish and convey an understanding and/or conversational approach with *different* participants *everyday*. Although I was able to meet a number of fantastic, seriously committed monks, nuns, and lay people, my preoccupation with striving for an impossibly, useless ‘representative’ number prevented me from grasping more of the particularities of participants experiences and attitudes in preserving the *sāsana* as a member of the ‘sāsana society’, and especially learning about the nuanced

experiences of sound, listening, and recitation, that crisscrossed with their engagements of the *Paṭṭhāna*.

Another dimension of my skewed interview formatting concerned the formal requirement of explaining and having respondents sign IRB forms. This contributed a rather clinical air to my interview atmosphere and, I believe, in some cases put some respondents on the defensive. In some cases, saying I was from a university in America⁴ very likely came off as some kind of Buddhist knowledge challenge or triggered a representative duty of the respondent's familiarity with Buddhism. This formal process seemed to signal to participants that they should do their best to provide the 'correct' information or otherwise abbreviate themselves. Furthermore, I was often introduced with the line, "He is studying the *Paṭṭhāna*," as well, as though I was some kind of Orientalist expert on the text. Following up with the appropriate deflation of my knowledge, but also maintaining that I did have a working knowledge of the text was difficult to navigate. Despite trying to explain to people that I was interested in their *practices* or applications of the text, by that point, it often took some kind of miracle to guide the conversations out of stock or script replies.

Often, in this socio-political context, my nationality provided me with privilege over the negative images of Muslim majority, Chinese, or other South/East Asian nationalities. My male gender status allowed me to easily converse with monks and other men, while making it more difficult to approach nuns and women as well. In all situations in conversations with nuns or women, I was accompanied by another monk or male friend. And yet, my research interest in the *Paṭṭhāna* was appreciably received.

⁴ Burmese language commonly uses 'America' over 'United States'

Many people were more than kind in trying to answer the often, awkward questions of a stranger.

Apart from attempting to conduct these interviews, I also tried to attend as many *Paṭṭhāna* festivals as I could during the time I was there. Initially, the trick with catching *Paṭṭhāna* festivals is that they happen on a non-calendrical basis. They can and do happen anytime of year when a monastery and affiliated lay community decide to hold one. A few friends knew I was seeking out these festivals and would often let me know if they heard about any *Paṭṭhāna* fests in the making. Occasionally, I was able to identify a fest by paying attention to the city sounds or serendipitously passing by a monastery that had declarative banners on display. However, sometimes no one was present at the site of the recitation aside from a lay attendee and whatever monk was currently reciting the text. This highlights that the festival functioned, in part, not by continuously drawing people in to the space of recitation everyday during the weeklong recitation, but by projecting that sound among the people outside of the monastery.

Contextualizing Maha Ghandayon

The Founder

When discussing the strict following of the *Vinaya* and the high performance of many students from Maha Ghandayon monastery, many people referenced the founder of the monastery, Ashin Janakabhivamsa⁵ (1900-1977). Ashin Janakabhivamsa was renown as an excellent student from a young age. He passed the tertiary exam (*pathamagyi*) with distinction as a novice. In 1923, he became one of the youngest lecturers at the Pakokku

⁵ '-abhivamsa', "of noble lineage", is added to a monk's name when they complete examinations that are beyond the difficulty of the national exams.

Teaching Center for Monks. Ashin Janakabhivamsa had ordained three times in his life. In the third ordination, he became apart of the Shwegyin lineage, which pride themselves for their “very high scholastic tradition focused on disciplinary purity and intellectual rigor in relation to the *Sāsana*,” (Carbine, 2011: 22)⁶.

By 1941, Ashin Janakabhivamsa had written seven books, acquired a printing press managed by his major donor, and moved to Maha Ghandayon monastery in Amarapura (the site of the monastery today) with the press, to continue writing. At that time, three other monks and a sayadaw had been living at the monastery primarily practicing meditation.

In 1942, the Japanese invaded Burma and destabilized British control, first in Lower, then in Upper Burma. In that same year, the Japanese violently, and with much devastation to the local Burmese population and their environs, took control of Mandalay. Again, later in the same year, the Allies retaliated with bombings of Amarapura, where Japanese soldiers were garrisoned. The bombings covered the area from Amarapura up to and around Mandalay (Ven Neminda, 2011). In his own words Ashin Janakabhivamsa writes, “When the Allied Forces launched the offensive by bombing, I knew that there actually was no safe place left and therefore decided to go nowhere. Once there were thousands of Japanese soldiers in Amarapura. And the Allies bombed seven times in one single day... I had a feeling that I would survive and live a full span of life if I were to serve the Religion [*sāsana*],” (translated by Than Tun, 2000: 49). Here, Ashin Janakabhivamsa’s response to life during wartime is explicit in connecting his work on behalf of the *sāsana* and the protection that work provides.

⁶ Carbine (2011) has extensively covered the Shwegyin as an institution of *sāsana* preservation, some of which was covered in the previous chapter.

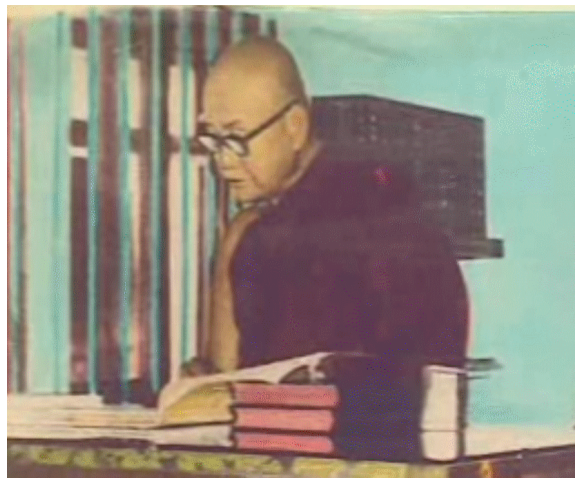
The monastery was largely destroyed at that time, and by the end of the war next to nothing remained of the compound. During the war, the former sayadaw moved out and two of the resident monks died. Ashin Janakabhivamsa stepped into sayadaw status of the monastery remains and students continued to seek his tutelage. With his approximately 50 students at that time, Ashin Janakabhivamsa was able to clear the land and the remains of his monastery and begin the rebuilding process (Ven Neminda, 2011).

In his book, *Anagat Thathana-ye* (The Future of the Sāsana), published in 1948 just before Burmese Independence, Ashin Janakabhivamsa wrote to monastic and lay audiences alike by compiling “intensely patriotic... novel ideas for developing Myanmar into a modern nation state,” (U Ko Lay, 1997: xii). Similar to the Buddhist *bricoleurs* from the colonial era, Ashin Janakabhivamsa harnessed the opportunity to “...borrow liberally from the symbols, language, and techniques of previous incarnations of *sāsana* reform,” (Turner 2014: 155). In four years, the book had sold 40,000 copies. In the text, Ashin Janakabhivamsa “... outlined therein how Myanmar could achieve progress and prosperity through practical applications of [the] Buddha’s teaching and how *Sāsana* could be maintained, purified and propagated through many new reformations he had proposed,” (ibid.). In that text, he also wrote,

“It isn’t necessary to make another pagoda, if there is one already; a monk’s cremation celebration is unnecessary at this time; expensive festivals should not be held; ostentatious offerings are uncalled for now. Attending superfluous rituals and festivities deprive tutors of time to teach their students and wastes money that should be used for essentials. Better to build a school or a hospital to help the people,” (in Ven. Neminda, 2011).

Ashin Janakabhivamsa also outlined reforms for Buddhist education and suggested creating a Pali University that upheld rigorous practice, teaching, and scholarship in order to produce monks that could eventually maintain their own monasteries in their home villages (This is largely realized at Maha Ghandayon). In this text, Ashin

Janakabhivamsa also encouraged the meeting of a Sixth Buddhist Council to be held in Myanmar in order to “standardize the scriptures and purify Buddhism,” (Ven Neminda, 2011). The sixth Buddhist Council *was* held from 1954 to 1956 in the specially built Kaba Aye Pagoda in Yangon and attended by monks from eight Theravada majority countries.



4.2 Ashin Janakabhivamsa at his standing desk.

This book also received notable praise from former Secretary-General of the United Nations (1961-1971), U Thant, in the context of consideration of appropriate reforms for Burma at the time.

By 1977, when Ashin Janakabhivamsa passed, 500 monks had taken up residence at Maha Ghandayon and 97 dwellings for monks were built. In his lifetime, Ashin Janaka wrote 74 books; 11 books on Pali grammar, 14 books on Vinaya, 14 books on Abhidhamma, 8 books on Sutta Pitaka, and 24 books on a variety of topics encompassing the Buddha’s teaching and *sāsana*. Fifty of those books were published before he passed away. U Ko Lay writes, “For full thirty five years between 1942 and 1977, he was intensely and incessantly active in the cause of purification and propagation of the *Sāsana*, conducting courses of instruction in *Pitakas*, writing text books, and sub-

commentaries and many religious handbooks for lay people,” (1997, no page number noted). Although there were several monks who wrote extensively on the *Paṭṭhāna*, Ashin Janakabhivamsa’s writings on the *Paṭṭhāna* were famous and frequently noted to me during interviews. Indeed, Ashin Janakabhivamsa was one of several *Paṭṭhāna* specialists. Carbine (2011) even analyzes Ashin Janakabhivamsa’s *Paṭṭhāna* sermons in light of the *sāsana* defense analogies and urgency he departed to laity in preserving the *Paṭṭhāna*, as the first text of the Abhidhamma that will disappear. Ironically, despite his insistence for austerity in Buddhist celebration and ritual and quietude at his monastery, especially during the initial years of Burmese Independence, when I asked participants about the origins of the *Paṭṭhāna* ritualized recitations numerous people mentioned thinking the idea had come from Ashin Janakabhivamsa. However, I was unable to pinpoint any clear evidence that explicitly noted the origins and development of the ritualized recitations of the *Paṭṭhāna*. It is very likely it arose after the widespread printing of the *Anagata vamsa* (History of the Future) and gained increasing popularity in the 1930s or 40s as it’s precarious position became more widely known.

Throughout the monastery grounds, there were numerous posts nailed to trees dispersing quotes from the corpus of Ashin Janakabhivamsa’s works. A small museum on the compound maintained the sayadaw’s living quarters and included his standing desk (see photo 2.2). His printing press, still in operation, was centrally stationed in the monastery compound, as well as, an office that maintained remaining or reprinted editions of all of his works.

Discursively, Carbine (2011) utilizes Rosalind Morris’ concept of ‘traditionalism’ to describe the Shwegyin, Ashin Janakabhivamsa, and Maha Ghandayon Monastery in

their practices that connect ‘pastness’ to purity. However, Carbine diverges from Morris’ description of ‘traditionalism’ in identifying how the Shwegyin are not *healing or sublimating* a contemporary radical discontinuity through their ‘traditionalism’, but the Shwegyin are attempting to *slow down* what they understand to be an inevitable march towards radical discontinuity.

Taken together, Carbine (2011) identifies that, the monastery, its practices, and its founder highlight a dual emphasis in *sāsana* preservation: embodiment and textualization. By maintaining proper comportment, participating in daily rituals, following the *Vinaya*, and intensely learning Buddhist scripture, the monastic life becomes a collective embodiment of *pariyatti-sāsana*. Furthermore, the founder’s incessant writing, creation of non-embodied teachable texts, and institutionalization of high performing *pariyatti* monks all demonstrate the textualization processes of the *sāsana*. Even when monks fail to adhere to a strict embodiment of the *sāsana*, they can still serve as extensions of the texts that maintain the *sāsana* (Carbine 2011).

The Honorable Routine

As mentioned earlier, Maha Ghandayon monastery is famous throughout the country for its production of high scoring monastics on national exams (*Pathamange* (primary), *Pathamalat* (secondary), *Pathamagyi* (tertiary), and *Dhamma Cariya* (teacher training) testing scriptural knowledge. As a monastery focused on scriptural study (*pariyatti*), over 1400 monks and novices, consisting of lecturers and students, come from all over country, and even internationally (i.e. Vietnamese and Cambodian) to live there for several years and some indefinitely. Some novices (*koyin*) arrive at the monastery at

a very young age⁷. Many arrive after having completed middle or high school. Monks of any age are welcome to study at the monastery, however there is greater scrutiny for students (vs. lecturers) over the age of 25 who wish to live at the monastery, as it is believed the optimal time for studying and the potential for high performance has passed. Continued residency for the monks is not assured and there have been cases of some monastics that have been removed and/or cut off from the school. This is not necessarily due to a failure to perform on exams, but due to any transgressions identified by the chief leaders. I knew of at least one instance where a monk had been removed for being outspoken during the 2007 monastic protests in Yangon, a historic event of which the monks of Maha Ghandayon did not condone.

Formally, the rules of admission for the novices and monks include:

- 1) Emphasizing knowledge rather than mere exam results
- 2) Being of sound body
- 3) A candidate for novice can recite the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, as well as the rules for training
- 4) A monk is able to recite the *Patimokka*⁸ in Pali and Burmese⁹
- 5) Monks seeking admission must have maroon robes¹⁰
- 6) Monks wishing to reside in [the] monastery must also have an almsbowl, a strap or sling for carrying it, and five small containers for curry.
- 7) They must have a maroon sitting cloth.
- 8) They must bring their own bathing bowl, soap holder, napkin, spoon, and a mug.
- 9) All robes, books and other items must be handled according to the appropriate *Vinaya* [monastic code] rules.
- 10) Parents or guardian must accompany the candidate for admission and formally entrust him to the monastery's care.
- 11) Money must be kept by a *phothudaw* because the handling of money is not allowed.
- 12) One who wishes to stay at this monastery must not come by bicycle, horse cart, or oxcart.
- 13) One who wants to stay here must have a mentor. (Ven. Neminda, 2011: 27-31).

⁷ I did not interview these young novices to learn about the variety of motivations for early arrival. However, in passing, some monks would comment that their parents either 'wanted them to start early' or that the education in their home village was not good.

⁸ Basic monastic code consisting of 227 rules for fully ordained monks and 311 rules for nuns.

⁹ Exceptions are made for rules 3 and 4 if the candidate is 'judged to be serious and earnest'.

¹⁰ This is to ensure uniformity and encourage unity.

The mentor is usually responsible for housing the student and resides in the same space as the student. The mentor also helps to establish proper etiquette and appropriate following of the ten rules of discipline that are specific to the monastery. These include:

- To maintain a good disposition is first.
- To comply with the rules of the *Vinaya* as set forth by the Buddha is second.
- To keep healthy is third.
- To maintain cleanliness is fourth.
- To dress properly is fifth.
- To behave gently is sixth.
- To speak in a good way is seventh.
- To move in a good way is eighth.
- To observe the rules of the community is ninth.
- To become well educated and behave accordingly is tenth. (ibid.: 5-6).

Many monks at the monastery do not collect alms from the surrounding community every morning per usual practice of the ordained, although several monks continued to collect alms outside individually. Instead, this monastery actually receives requests by individuals, couples, families, and a variety of lay organizations far in advance to offer (*dana*) the monastics their allotted two meals a day (in early morning and just before noon). The cost of such a donation begins, at least, at USD\$2000 per day and increases with the number of curries or type of food offered. To make an offering to such a large community of monks that are studying Buddhist scripture so intensely everyday is understood as a great meritorious act (i.e. merit is compounded by the number of monks and the nature of their daily activities.).

Almost every other day, different groups of lay people enter the monastery to participate in the ritual offering of food for the 1400+ monks. After the monks eat, lay people, usually invited by the donor, also partake in the large preparation of food. The monastery provides on-site dorm style rooms, in an area separated by gate from the monastic residences, for lay groups and organizations that travel from other parts of the

country to make offerings. Often these groups arrive in their own trucks, vans, and buses and stay for a couple days. In one case, a small community had traveled by bus, train, *and* airplane, from the southern most part of the country, Thanintharyi Region in order to make offerings. Several monks of that region had been living and studying at the monastery. Additionally, the monastery will receive offerings from international individuals, groups, or organizations.

Although this monastery holds no ritualized recitation of the *Paṭṭhāna*, the monastic compound is marked by its own ritualized sounds, rhythms, and honorable routine that work to establish a ‘sacred space’. Prior to eating breakfast just before sunrise, two large, hollowed wooden tree trunks, positioned on opposite ends of the monastery, are hit in echoing succession. The echoing hits very slowly increase with speed until they become a slight roll. Then, the slow echoing successive hits begin again. Effectively, this orchestration functions as the monastery wide alarm clock. At sunrise, when the monastics eat breakfast, the monastery is largely silent apart from the sound of an iron bell marking mealtime and the shuffling of feet towards the dining area, the crowing roosters, and the occasional howling or barking dog. Breakfast, consisting of fruit and rice porridge, is usually set out on the rows of tables before the monks and novices arrive. An electronic clock with synthetic chime, situated near the dining hall, marks the hours and quarter hours with its modified classical grandfather clock-type tone. Surprisingly, this tone too reaches most corners of the compound.

Following breakfast, the rising sun has mostly dispelled the early morning chill. Several monks begin sweeping the monastery compound, while the younger students brush up their robes and review their notes for their morning classes. Soon thereafter,

monks and novices are in lectures from 8 until 10 and the sound of group recitation or lecturing monks emanates from the halls. Around the kitchen, the resident lay cooks are busy chopping up the variety, and numerous, cloves of garlic, chillies, spices, vegetables, and meats while stoking the fires for preparation of the day's lunch offering.

At ten minutes after 10:00, the iron bell is struck again to signal the formal line up for lunch. In another ten minutes, the bell is struck once more and the monks and novices begin to receive their alms. In this short window of time, from the end of morning class until the receiving of alms, many of the monks and novices take their daily bath in open air compounds, and the sound of splashing and running water and casual chit-chat takes over the monastery compound.

Meanwhile, large tour buses and small privately hired cars begin to fill the shaded monastery parking lot. Groups of photo and video camera bedecked international tourists fill up the main entry road before motioned to the narrow sidewalks to allow for the extensive monastic lineup to take form. For lunch, the donating individuals of that day's offering line up around several large circular pots filled with cooked rice and when the iron bell rings for the second time, the monastics slowly walk by the lay donors who deposit small bowl fulls of rice into the monks' alms bowls. The sound of camera shutters, digital and otherwise, makes obvious the international documentation.

The curries are already placed at specific intervals on long dining tables. Some monks eat quickly and don't linger in the dining area, while others take their time. Now, the tourists fan back out into the road and approach the divide separating them from the dining hall. They look on as the monks and novices quietly eat their food and then slowly disperse. After all of the monks have received their rice, the remainder of rice in

the large pots is carried back to the kitchen and prepared for the lay workers and donating community. The tour buses and cars shudder power on their motors and eventually depart. Meanwhile, the lay dining hall fills with the company of that day's donors and bowls of curry and rice are brought out from the kitchen filling the multiple low circle tables. If I didn't stay back with Ashin Dana, my sponsoring monk at the monastery, at his residence for lunch there, I would join the large group of lay people having lunch.

Following lunch, there is a break until 13:00, when the afternoon session of lectures begins. The kitchen bustles with its clean up while the rest of the monastery becomes quiet. Just before the afternoon session begins, the monastery is filled with the noticeable volume of the students reciting lines from assignments or parts of texts to themselves. At this time, one novice's recitation seemingly inspires the increase of volume of another novice's recitation, and so on, before one novice is nearly shouting his homework review. Lecturing monks do not hesitate to reprimand the escalation in volume. And temporarily, the reciting volume drops before, without doubt, picking up once again.

The afternoon session is divided into two parts and lasts until 17:00. At 18:00, devotions are carried out in each student's building with their mentor, and chanting fills the spaces between the monk's dwellings. After 18:30, as the sunset approaches, a number of the monks and novices take some light exercise by walking along the road or historic U Bein bridge over Taungthaman Lake found just outside the monastery compound. At 20:30, the monastery is completely absent of any movement and everyone meditates for half an hour. By 22:00, most students are quieting down for sleep in preparation for the next day's early rise for the honorable routine.

By outlining the daily schedule of this monastery, I am intending to demonstrate the scale and systematic nature by which this monastery contemporarily operates in its efforts of preserving the *sāsana*. In theory, almost all of the monastics actions are considered highly meritorious and beneficial, in practicality, for slowing down the rate of disintegration of the *sāsana*. Furthermore, this description of the honorable routine serves to highlight the actions and sounds that combine to animate the sacred space within the monastery compound. While the ritualized recitations of the *Paṭṭhāna* do not happen within this space, these environs through their sound and aesthetic signal and foster, in a different manner, a sacred place making process.

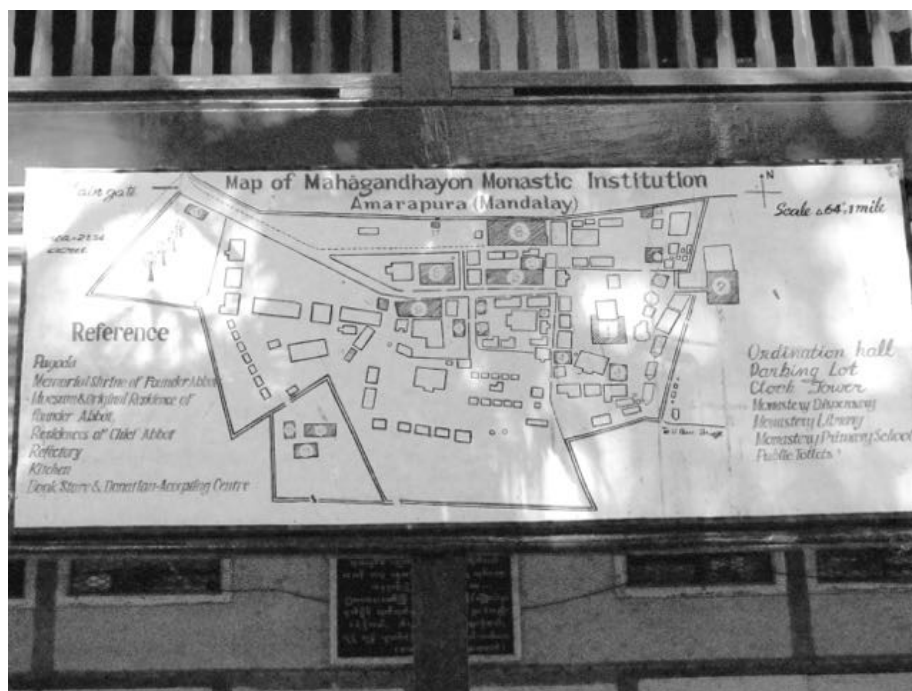


Figure 4.3 The core of the compound is near the center of this map, at the dining hall. Just North of the dining hall is the kitchen. The upper right hand corner marks the area where lay people are allowed to stay, separated by gate, for a couple days when traveling from afar to make an offering. The rest of the buildings compile a variety of halls and monastic residences. Photo by author.

In addition, after completing their monastic education at this school, the monks and novices are imprinted with a textual and embodied mastery of the *sāsana* that they

can carry and distribute to their home villages or wherever they end up living. In the following chapter, I more specifically discuss the contents of this education system at the monastery.

CHAPTER FIVE: TEXTUALIZATION PRACTICES

My Introduction to Maha Ghandayon

Although I had visited this monastery a few years prior while living in the country, I did not consider situating myself there for fieldwork until a friend, Thein Win, suggested it and mentioned a couple senior monks who he thought would be open to the idea of hosting me. Thein Win was from Amarapura and passed this monastery daily traveling from his home to Mandalay for work. In the evenings on the way home, he told me he would often stop at the monastery and chat with these monks. In establishing friendships with several monks in the monastery, Thein Win was able to more absorb more specific pieces of Buddhist history and thought without ordaining himself. He also dedicated free time to volunteering at the Mahamuni Pagoda (discussed in Chapter Six). His work and income was essential for his family and this prevented him from ordaining. Win Thein wasn't a dedicated meditator, but instead heavily followed the historical and *pariyatti* aspects of Buddhist practice.

Unlike a few monasteries and numerous meditation centers in the country, Maha Ghandayon did not seek or streamline any foreigner presence on their compound. Many of the monks at the monastery did not regularly use email and most were uncomfortable using English. However, foreigners were not explicitly turned away either. In fact, everyday, buses of tourists stopped in for around 45 minutes to observe the daily lunch offering for 1400 monks and quickly departed after its completion.

Thein Win mentioned that a few foreigners had stayed at the monastery for an extended period of time before, in order to study Pali or specific Buddhist texts. He also knew a monk, Ashin Dana, who lectured at the monastery, had hosted a foreigner before,

and was already hosting a few lay people (extended family) in his dwelling. He offered to approach this monk and see if he would be interested in hosting me as well. In part, we were following the rules of admission outlined above; it was necessary for me to establish a mentor at the monastery that would also serve as a 'sponsor'.

One evening, I returned with Thein Win on his motorbike to Amarapura in order to approach Ashin Dana about the plausibility of being sponsored. When we arrived, we parked the motorbike near the front gate and walked through the large open courtyard on the west end of the compound, before winding through several small walkways between the numerous dwellings and halls. Light from the residences spilled into the narrow pathways slightly easing the journey. Thein Win walked without any hesitation in his step. The digital clock with its electronic chime marked the half hour. And I could hear the low murmur of monks reciting or chatting in their halls. Eventually, we arrived at a smaller courtyard with several more dwellings casting light into the centered open space.

Ashin Dana's residence was a single story house. Two windows faced the courtyard and a four step concrete staircase to the right of the windows led to two shine finished wooden doors that parted in the center. When we entered Ashin Dana's residence, he was already seated in a turquoise plastic chair just to the right of the front entryway and across from a large wooden bench and table. A few other people were also in this main room chatting with Ashin Dana from the finished wooden floor. The room was brightly lit.

We immediately prostrated towards Ashin Dana and Thein Win began making some jokes to lighten the mood. As they were talking, I soon noticed that Ashin Dana, although wearing eyeglasses, was not making eye contact and would stare off while

listening... “Ah, he’s blind.” Thein Win then introduced me as a student from the United States that had previously lived and ordained in Burma before, and worked at a library in Mandalay. After Thein Win introduced me, I added that I wanted to study the *Paṭṭhāna*.

Ashin Dana then shifted in his chair and leaned towards Thein Win and I. He sternly replied, “You want to study the *Paṭṭhāna*, Oh? Than you must be able to recite the 81 mundane *cittas* (states of consciousness) and the 40 supramundane *cittas* ... can you recite those now? I want to hear a foreigner’s recitation. You must have a strong foundation in the *cittas* if you want to learn the *Paṭṭhāna*.” I stuttered not being prepared for the exact and exhaustive recall of enumerated mental states. For many Burmese monks and novices, especially many of the monks at Maha Ghandayon who had been studying such foundational lists as adolescents, Ashin Dana’s request would not have been very difficult to serve. In this context, mundane and supramundane *cittas* were like the ABC’s; simply the tip of the iceberg for future work. To systematically study the *Paṭṭhāna* is a very difficult undertaking that many monks do not begin to approach until later on in their careers. Its content comprises one of last courses in the formal monastic education at Maha Ghandayon and any *Paṭṭhāna* specialist, such as the Founder Ashin Janakabhivamsa, receive true distinction. Following Ashin Dana’s questions, I couldn’t help but identify my naïve, precocious American attitude and approach to studying this difficult text, a sense of which I was already aware. Here it was resolutely affirmed.

“Uh. Well! That’s what I’m here for...I would love the opportunity to study the 81 mundane *cittas* and 40 supramundane *cittas* here with you. I don’t have that chance in the United States.”

“So you want to live here and study Pali and Buddhism?” Ashin Dana smiled and swung his hand over to one of the young men, not monks or novices, sitting on the wide wooden bench who were simultaneously staring at me and chatting with each other.

“Moe, Moe, get over here! Say something in English! Go on, practice your English.”

Moe sat up and leaned in to say in English, “Your Burmese is good, but my English isn’t so good. Where are you from?”

After an extended conversation, and thorough discussion of the length of my stay, my proposed program of study, and my research interest in the *Paṭṭhāna*, Thein Win and I prostrated before Ashin Dana and excused ourselves.

While still on a tourist visa, I returned to the monastery a few times to chat more with Ashin Dana and get a feel for the surroundings. I learned that Ashin Dana was also opening his residence to these few other young lay men (the guys encouraged to speak English). They were children of his siblings from a smaller city to the east of Amarapura. One was finishing high school, one was attending a nearby university, and another had finished a bachelor’s degree, but was unemployed looking for work. In the evenings, an older cousin would return late and leave early in the morning. Everyone slept on the floor in the main room. That is where I would sleep as well, as resident native English speaker and over ambitious student of the *Paṭṭhāna*. In further establishing a relationship with Ashin Dana and his residence, I was simultaneously orienting myself to the large monastic compound and its residents, while other monastics and staff were able to situate me in relationship to Ashin Dana.

My meeting with the senior abbot of the monastery was brief and I was surprised at the air of non-concern he had in regards to my residence at the monastery. It was

necessary, of course, to confirm his approval. In a complimentary challenge, he handed me a small recently published book of the Ashin Janakabhivamsa's and suggested I translate it. My level of Burmese was often perceived to be much beyond my actual ability. I smiled and paged through the text swimming in the density of the work while recalling my Burmese language classes where I would circle almost every other word in a new text. "That might take me a while, but I'd love to," I replied.

I then met with another monk who maintained the administrative work for foreigners who stayed at the monastery. Ashin Thuda had a better understanding of the technicality that I had to go through in order to obtain the religious visa that would allow me to stay, bureaucratically speaking. Up to this point, at times, it felt like I was making up some story about visa logistics, hardly the concern of anyone but me. Finally, Ashin Thuda sat down at his desktop computer, opened Microsoft Word, and a file titled 'meditation visa'. It was a brief stock letter that explained the purpose of visit: to study Buddhism. Ashin Thuda printed it off, stamped it, and signed for Ashin Dana. With this letter, I returned to Bangkok and applied for the religious visa.

Textualization in Practice

In his close study of the Shwegyin, and their traditionalism or emphasis on pastness, Carbine (2011) identifies their practice of continuous '(re)textualization' of the *sāsana* in order to preserve and sustain its livelihood. "From the perspective of the continuity of the *sāsana*, the (re)production of a non-embodied, textual corpus is crucial," (40). Specifically, he is referring to all the literature that surrounds the *sāsana* including written Pali and Burmese texts that cover and include the canon, commentaries, histories, biographies, as well as recorded, transcribed, and published sermons. He even includes

monastic administrative records. In his work, he covers (re)textualization from a historical perspective and primarily examines a variety of documents relating to Shwegyin practices (e.g. the conduct and record of ordination ceremonies). In expanding upon Carbine's work, I am drawing attention to the practices of textualization as evidenced on the ground in 2012 at Maha Ghandhayon monastery and how this impact of textualization supported lay orientation to studying Pali and the *Paṭṭhāna*. The situated practices of textualization evident at the monastery and its impact on the laity, also functioned in preserving and sustaining the livelihood of the *sāsana*. The close study of the *Paṭṭhāna* by numerous monks allowed for multiple discourses to emerge that could then be expounded upon following the weeklong ritualized recitations of the *Paṭṭhāna*.

As noted above Maha Ghandayon monastery is renowned for its production of high scoring monastics on national exams (*Pathamange* (primary), *Pathamalat* (secondary), *Pathamagyī* (tertiary), and *Dhamma Cariya* (teacher training) testing scriptural (*pariyatti*) knowledge. From 8:00 to 10:00 and again, 13:00 to 17:00 everyday, except for full moon days, monks and novices are in courses that increase with complexity and depth of Pali grammar and literature, as the student graduates from class to class. This continuous production of high performing monastics on *pariyatti* exams ensures not only a (re)production of *sāsana* oriented texts, but also a large, user and teaching community for the existing *sāsana* oriented literature.

First year students use introductory bilingual Pali-Burmese grammar books written by Ashin Janakabhivamsa. Ashin Janakabhivamsa's creation of these 'easy-to-use' Pali textbooks, alone, is another example of this process of textualization. By creating these books, Ashin Janakabhivamsa processed extant Pali sources and Pali

grammar books in order to devise a means by which a greater number of people could grasp the functions of Pali. Furthermore, when these books are deployed as teaching devices another process of textualization begins. Their content becomes a means by which to organize the graduated learning of the essential language of *sāsana* preservation.

These books are written as a part of a series that graduate the student from one book to the next. The pages can be easily broken down into single grammatical lessons (i.e. they include introductions, examples, and appropriate exercises). Indeed, elementary classes are organized around the structure of these books (i.e. first book for first years, second for book for second years, and so on). Each class had a majority of students in a certain age range, but there were always exceptions of older students joining the elementary classes appropriate for their familiarity with Pali.

During an interview, one monk mentioned that he had written a paper for an International Seminar in Sagaing about the teaching method of the monastery as embodied in Ashin Janakabhivamsa’s texts. He replied, “The teaching method is very good in this monastery because I was able to understand a lot within three years.” This monk, Ashin Kalapa, was unusual because he had joined the monastery at the age of 24 after finishing a Bachelor’s degree in Mathematics. He was rejected by the head abbot three times before another chief leader recognized and appreciated his secular education and saw the potential of Ashin Kalapa to improve the education at the monastery, despite having passed the prime age for studying Pali.

Ashin Kalapa was thankful for Ashin Janakabhivamsa’s texts and further explained the importance of studying Pali, “You will be cheated if you don’t know about

Pali and for this, I feel very grateful for this country because they preserve all the words and I have a chance to study. In my own book, in the preface, I wrote, if I didn't have this country, this monastery, I would have to go abroad and then I would have some problems. I wouldn't be comfortable because when I see Cambodians, for example, it's a different culture, different nationality. At least I'm comfortable. I say often to people who stay with me: this country, for Buddhism, is like Oxford. They shouldn't go to Oxford for Buddhism." Here, Ashin Kalapa emphasizes larger picture of Burma as a significant *place* for the preservation of Pali and Buddhist texts and practices and his initial comment highlights the succinct teaching approach developed through Ashin Janakabhivamsa's learning devices.

While I was living at the monastery, I initially joined a group elementary Pali class, in addition to regularly meeting the lecturer outside of the class to further cover the material presented in the class. I had never systematically studied Pali before and was curious about the introductory teaching style. The students in this class, ages 8 to 11, would enter the large hall with shiny, waxed wooden floors, set down their own sitting cloth (as required in the formal admission) before sitting cross-legged facing a chalkboard. Before class began, as students slowly joined, each row filled, not in any disorganized fashion, but with each student sitting to the right of the previous student. When one row filled, the next row began. Eventually, Ashin Pandita, the lecturer, of about the same age as me, entered the hall and slowly paced in front of the class before writing down some lesson notes on the chalkboard. Pali is a highly inflected language and these early lessons introduced a variety of inflected forms of nouns, verbs, and objects in simple sentences. I was quite surprised to see this young group of students

tackle this difficult material at such an early age. However, we can relate this to examples where young children in the US learn Latin. At the beginning of the lesson, Ashin Pandita would review the previous lesson's material and homework. The students would recite their answers in unison and if answers were not to Ashin Pandita's liking, he would stop the recitation and have students repeat, in unison, until the correct answer was formed. If after repeated chances the answers were still wrong, individuals were called on to correctly articulate the inflection. Once the correct answer was found, Ashin Pandita may have the several students individually repeat the correct answer. Primarily, Ashin Pandita was not articulating pronunciation in the replies but whatever inflection the lesson had been examining.

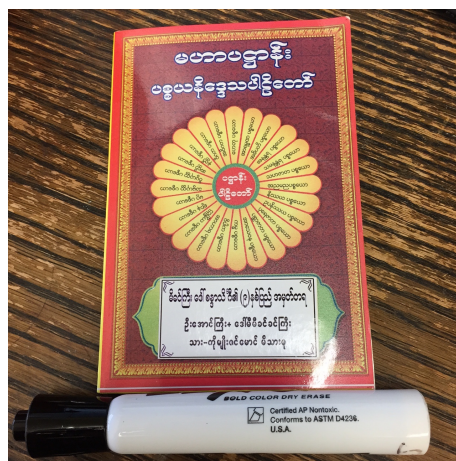
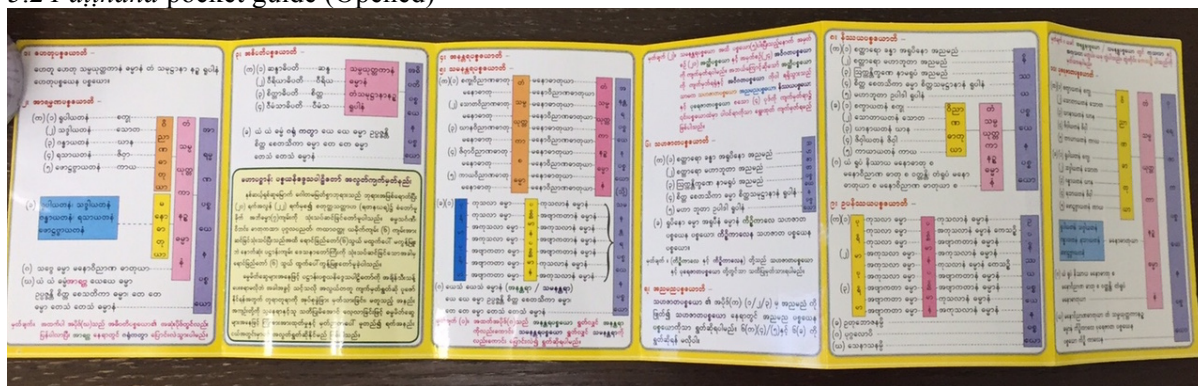
At the other end of textualization in the monastery, scholar monks, acting as lecturers, would lead courses explaining in detail, with Pali and Burmese, the contents of any part of the *Tipitaka*. On several occasions, I sat in on advanced classes and attempted to glean bits and pieces of the oral exegesis happening. One course of advanced students, examined the twenty-four conditional relations as described in the *Paṭṭhāna*. "Sure, you can join!" Ashin Dana replied chuckling when I asked, "You can see how they use all the cittas!"

When I joined this class, I was surprised to find what appeared to be a mathematical dissection of the contents of the *Paṭṭhāna* on the chalkboard. As mentioned in the introduction, the *Paṭṭhāna* has four major divisions discussing the different modes of origination: positive, negative, positive-negative, and negative-positive. The four divisions are further divided into six subdivisions or origination: of dyads, of triads, of triads and dyads, of dyads and triads, of triads and triads, and of dyads and dyads. In

turn, each of twenty-four conditional relations is applied to each of *these* twenty-four divisions in order to depict all instances of arising phenomena. In this course, the lecturer used square-gridded tables to visually and exhaustively depict the variety of combinations in the *Paṭṭhāna*. His shorthand consisted of numbers representing the divisions and subdivisions. And similar to use of multiplication tables, the lecturer could call off combinations with answers from students to be called out.

In another instance of a different kind of textualization exemplified at the monastery, one of the donors of that day's offerings handed me a laminated pocket guide to the *Paṭṭhāna* that they had printed en masse (see figure 5.1 below). This pocket guide was not stamped with any particular authorship or institutional affiliation. However, the guide provided the space for a sticker that shared the names of that day's donors. Later, a monk explained to me that the mother of the donating family that day was involved with a group of lay people that were studying the *Paṭṭhāna* just as systematically as some of the monks at Maha Ghandayon.

This pocket guide is a unique example of textualization because it highlights the less formal and more ephemeral processes of production, access, and distribution to texts that preserve the *sāsana*. At first glance, the pocket guide does not appear to be more than a symbolic token. However, upon opening the guide, the reader is served with an elaborate textual and visual summarization of the twenty-four conditional relations and their relationship to one another (See photo 5.2).

5.1 *Patthāna* pocket guide (Closed)5.2 *Patthāna* pocket guide (Opened)

Outside the monastery

The *Patthāna* pocket guide bridges the worlds of the monastery to the world of lay devotees. Outside of the monastery, lay people I talked to mentioned picking up a variety of religious texts and books, for casual reading, self-study, or recitation, in order to teach themselves different Pali vocabulary, familiarize themselves with the Abhidhamma, or study the twenty-four Conditional Relations in the *Patthāna*.

Ko Gyi worked as a private English language teacher outside of the government schools in Mandalay. He had managed to open his own school that eventually rose to wide popularity in the city because of the success of his students. When I asked Ko Gyi about studying Pali and the *Patthāna*, he commented, “Monks have a great opportunity.

From the novice life they have studied the *Paṭṭhāna*, for lay people we cannot understand all of the Pali words....I just wanted to understand it [Pali], so I decided I would recite it everyday, for nearly three years. After I recited the *Paṭṭhāna* I wanted to know— what is ‘*hetupaccaya*’? [the first conditional relation of the *Paṭṭhāna*] Then I would remember it.” For Ko Gyi, beginning with an original incomprehensible text was enough for him to be motivated to learn the Pali he was reciting. However, borrowing language from the language pedagogy, Ko Gyi was more like a ‘false beginner’. Even though he considered himself to begin at square one, he already had quite a bit of exposure growing up surrounded by monasteries and practicing family members, not to mention the numerous words borrowed from Pali and used in Burmese language. Although Ko Gyi was not producing any text in his recitation or learning of Pali, his behavior is indicative of how existing texts became devices by which lay people partake individual and through self-guidance in the preservation of the *sāsana*.

San Htay worked as a librarian and handled many religious texts, commentaries, histories, biographies, and previously transcribed sermons, of course, along with a huge variety of more secular material. In describing his approach to studying Pali and the *Paṭṭhāna* as a lay person, he replied, “When I set my mind on it, I had to collect a variety of books, scholars, commentaries, simple translations, books for kids. That’s how I learned.” San Htay also mentioned using *nissaya*: a particular style of religious commentary that presented text in Pali and immediately followed it with a Burmese translation. In addition, San Htay started his own *Abhidhamma* study group with several of his friends. Once a week, this group gathered to read over parts of the *Abhidhamma* and *Abhidhammattasangaha*, manual of the *Abhidhamma*, to discuss and share

everyone's interpretations or review the meanings of certain vocabulary.

Daw Myin was an older woman introduced to me by one of the monks, Ashin Nanda, from Maha Ghandayon. Daw Myin was a patron of Ashin Nanda. For her personal study, Daw Myin was able to arrange one-on-one lessons of Pali and the *Paṭṭhāna* with one of her favorite monks in Mandalay. Daw Myin was also involved with international projects building pagodas, particularly in Indonesia. When I asked Daw Myin about studying Pali and the *Paṭṭhāna*, she answered, "The *Paṭṭhāna* is very difficult to learn. All Myanmar Buddhist people would like to learn the *Paṭṭhāna*, but we can't learn all of it! We don't have enough time. It's not something that can be studied at the university. It's something to study for life. I recite the *Paṭṭhāna* daily. I am 63 years old, so I recite 63 pages of this *Paṭṭhāna*. I am also very busy, so I will recite it in my free time. It takes a long time to recite 63 pages, so sometimes I do 10 pages at a time."

Ma Khin was a graduate student at Mandalay University. When I asked her about studying Pali and the *Paṭṭhāna*, she said that she really enjoyed studying Pali, but since she started college she wasn't able to meet with her instructor anymore. Instead she picked up a famous text called *Abhidhamma in Daily Life* written by Ashin Janakabhivamsa, the founder of Maha Ghandayon monastery. This popular text covers the abstract terminology of the *Abhidhamma* in an accessible manner. Pali words are translated directly into Burmese and stories from the time of the Buddha contextualize the meanings (See image below). When I asked her if she thought it was necessary to learn Pali in order to study Buddhism, she replied, "Even when we have learned Pali, the chances are not 100% that we will understand [Buddhism]."

ABHIDHAMMA IN DAILY LIFE		
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5.3 Table of Contents of English version of Abhidhamma in Daily Life (1999)

Chapter titles: Chapter One, *Paramattha*, The Ultimate and Mind. Chapter Two, *Cetasikas*, Mental Factors and *Akusala Cetasikas*, Unwholesome Mental Factors. Chapter Three, *Kusala Cetasikas*, Wholesome Mental Factors. Chapter Four, *Cetasikas*, Associated with Both Good and Bad *Cittas*. Chapter Five, *Carita*: Nature, Character, Habitual Conduct. Chapter Six, Ten Bases of Meritorious Actions. Chapter Seven, Miscellaneous Notes on *Kamma*, Action or Deed.

Ma Khin's comment about still not being able to understand the Buddha's teachings, despite having learned Pali highlights the disjuncture between the processes of textualization, evident in the examples provided above, and the practice or ability to embody Buddhist knowledge, and more specifically the content of the *Paṭṭhāna*. Textualization is only one essential vehicle for the maintenance of the *Paṭṭhāna*, and more largely the *sāsana*. Taken alone, the production of texts cannot sustain the *sāsana*. Their production demands the embodied utilization by communities of practice, for example the classes of monks, the study groups, the teacher-student pairs, and listeners of the ritualized recitations.

CHAPTER SIX: RECITATION PRACTICES

While living with Ashin Dana at Maha Ghandayon, I was confirmed in the significance for a stronger consideration of listening and sound as a means of embodiment in the practice of preserving the *sāsana*. Ashin Dana was blind, but was not born that way. His vision slowly disintegrated as he progressed through his monastic education and ultimately received his *Dhamma Cariya* (Dhamma teacher training). After teaching at Maha Ghandayon for several years, his vision began to fade more rapidly. When I met Ashin Dana in 2012, he had been blind for at least a decade. However, the monastery did not stop Ashin Dana from keeping his teaching duties and he continued to lecture. Before his afternoon lecture, a student assistant would stop by to serve as a reader for Ashin Dana to refresh his knowledge of the material he was lecturing on that day or Ashin Dana would listen to cassette tapes of his material. Apart from his lectures, Ashin Dana would also spend time with me in the morning going over the *Abhidhammatthasangaha*, or Manual of the Abhidhamma, which included the enumerated lists of mundane and supramundane states of consciousness that he had drilled me on in our first meeting. In studying these foundational and ‘basic’ lists, Ashin Dana needed no reminder as to what preceded or followed in each section that we were studying. I could read the title of the section, practice memorizing its contents, and Ashin Dana would verify whether I had completely and exhaustively included all the cittas. In the evenings, Ashin Dana requested that I record with microphone and cassette tape the English translation of the *Abhidhammatthasangaha* edited by Western English-speaking monk Bhikkhu Bodhi. By the end of my stay, I had turned Bhikkhu Bodhi’s text into a cassette-formatted audio book for Ashin Dana. Later, Ashin Dana listened to these

cassette tapes in order to associate the new English terminology with the Pali he was already familiar with. In effect, Ashin Dana's practices due to his 'disability' made evident to me the significance of the ear and listening as a key part of preserving, maintaining, and internalizing the contents of the *sāsana*. The hearing technology of the ear and its associated listening practices demonstrate an essential extension of embodiment that cannot be articulated within practices of an ocularcentric textualization alone.

No vision, no future?

As a part of Shwegyin practice at Maha Ghandayon monastery it is imperative that monks and novices carry themselves with a certain comportment while moving about inside and outside of the monastery. In Chapter Four, I highlighted the rules of admission and the ten rules of discipline for the monastery. In these two sets of rules, monks and novices are required to be 'of sound body', clean, healthy, behave gently, speak and move 'in a good way', dress properly, and not handle money. The monks must also live in accord with their 227 precepts as outlined in the *vinaya*. The purpose of these rules, of course, is to preserve the embodiment of the *sāsana*. "For Shwegyin monks, and for many other monks like them, the human body, is, clearly, an important repository of memories concerning the Buddha, other monastic exemplars, and the *sāsana*-based lifestyle for which they advocated...as such, monastic life is intended to be, first and foremost, a collective embodiment of the kind of world depicted above all in the various baskets and related texts of the *pariyatti-sāsana*," (Carbine 2011:40). At the monastery, it is a daily exercise in not only absorbing the intellectual contents of the studied *sāsana* texts, but also conducting one's body in such a way that preserves the embodiment of the

sāsana. Embodiment practices are departed onto novices through their mentors and through their own internalization. This learning was subtle, happening within the residences, while getting dressed, cleaning up, and studying. Outside of the residences, within the monastery compound, this practice was performed and also worked to maintain sacred space as demonstrated within the honorable routine.

Embodiment and textualization, as emphasized in Shwegin traditionalism, seek to ensure the slowing down of *sāsana* disintegration, while also fostering the potential for obtaining *nibbana*. In considering the practices of the Ashin Dana, as a blind sayadaw, listening was a core part of his practice of preserving the *sāsana*. For him, the recitation of texts was something he relished. Ashin Dana cannot maintain the texts without listening and the function of his ear is a key to regulating his embodiment¹¹.

Non-stop *Paṭṭhāna* Festival, *Thadingyut*, and Buddhist pilgrimage sites

Apart from considering listening as essential in Ashin Dana's monastic practice, the popular ritualized recitation of the *Paṭṭhāna*, Non-stop *Paṭhān Apwe* largely works to develop, sustain, and encourage the broader 'sāsana society'. This amplification of scriptural recitation is weaved tightly into efforts of preserving the *sāsana*. This festival centers on the recitation of the entirety of the *Paṭṭhāna* by monastics over loudspeaker (as described in the introduction of this thesis). Seven days of twenty-four hour recitation are required to complete the text in its entirety. Although Ashin Janakabhivamsa's expertise in the *Paṭṭhāna* and his writings describing the significance of the *Paṭṭhāna* for *sāsana* preservation have been extremely influential in the development of this festival,

¹¹ . Although, towards the end of my fieldwork, Ashin Dana surprised me by demonstrating his intention to partake in the production of texts with a new laptop. He was able to type effortlessly in Burmese and Pali.

Ashin Janakabhivamsa never explicitly encouraged such a ritualized recitation. But surely, the commentaries describing the *Paṭṭhāna* as the ‘front-line fortress’ in defending the disintegration of the *sāsana* encouraged such practices (Carbine, 2011).

When I returned to Burma at the end of October after receiving the religious visa, the major Buddhist holiday of *Thadingyut* was just two days away. Before I had left, San Htay, a friend from my previous years living in the country, had mentioned that sometimes there were *Paṭṭhāna* festivals timed to begin with *Thadingyut* festivals when the pagodas and monasteries were already filled with patrons. Although *Paṭṭhāna* festivals can be, and are, celebrated at any time of year, many large Buddhist Pilgrimage sites in Mandalay now tend to hold a Non-stop *Paṭṭhān* festival at the same time they held *Thadingyut* festivals.

Thadingyut is the seventh month in Burma’s lunar calendar and it follows the end of the Buddhist lent, where monks are required to stay at one monastery for three months during the monsoon season. *Thadingyut* is significant for Burmese Buddhists because at this time the Buddha descended to the human world again after spending his three months of lent preaching the Abhidhamma to his mother who died seven days after his birth and ascended to *Tavatimsa*, a level of heaven. In returning to earth, the Buddha was accompanied by other devas and Brahmas. In celebration of this return, it is common for the operations committees of famous pagodas to hold candle lighting ceremonies and light up the pagodas with a variety of electric lights.



6.1 *Thadingyut* candle lighting ceremony at Mahamuni Pagoda, Mandalay, October 2012. The candles would spell out words such as Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. In this case the candle setters had spelled out their solidarity with suffering Buddhists in Rakhine. Photo by author.

The *Thadingyut* festival at Mahamuni pagoda was complemented by the ritualized recitation of the *Paṭṭhāna* over loudspeaker that year. Both of these events play into the imagery and understood significance of listening reception in grasping the Buddha's teachings. In the instance of the *Paṭṭhāna* recitation, in the human realm, monks read the *Paṭṭhāna* for the benefit of the lay community and *sāsana*, which parallel the Buddha's reiteration of the *Abhidhamma* for the benefit of his mother in *Tavatimsa*.

Although I was just beginning to spend most of my day time at the monastery following the text based study of the *sāsana* with Ashin Dana, I was interested, of course, in attending or visiting some of these major public venerations of the *Paṭṭhāna* as well.

These events were much more heavily attended and stylized celebrations than the festival I first participated in in Lashio. The Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay, regardless of any holiday, was often filled with patrons paying respects to the very large Buddha image, originally created in the Rakhine State. This pagoda compound has four long halls in each cardinal direction that lead out to the nearby streets and neighborhoods.

On this evening of the full moon of *Thadingyut*, the compound was absolutely packed. San Htay and I made our way up one long hall passing the vendors selling Buddha images, meditation beads, and flowers for offerings. Near the Mahamuni image, rows of people were sitting cross-legged, kneeling, and paying their respects to the old image. Some people towards the front of the rows remained seated for extended periods of time, meditating apart from the flocks of men, women, and children, or quietly absorbing the sounds of the loud *Paṭṭhāna* recitation that had already begun. Men were allowed to enter the small room that surrounded the image, walk up a small staircase and apply flattened gold leaves to the image's arms, chest, and legs. Old photographs on the compound showed how much the image had grown over the one hundred years of people apply this flat gold leaf.

In the open air quadrants in between the long hall ways dissecting the pagoda compound, other attendees had set up elaborate tea candle arrangements that spelled out devotional words and phrases, or identified the location or affiliation of the lay community in attendance. Eventually, I found the signature black boxed amplifiers that

were assisting the monks in their ritualized recitation.



6.2. Amplifiers projecting monk's recitation of the *Paṭṭhāna* at Mahamuni Pagoda, October 2012. Photo by author.

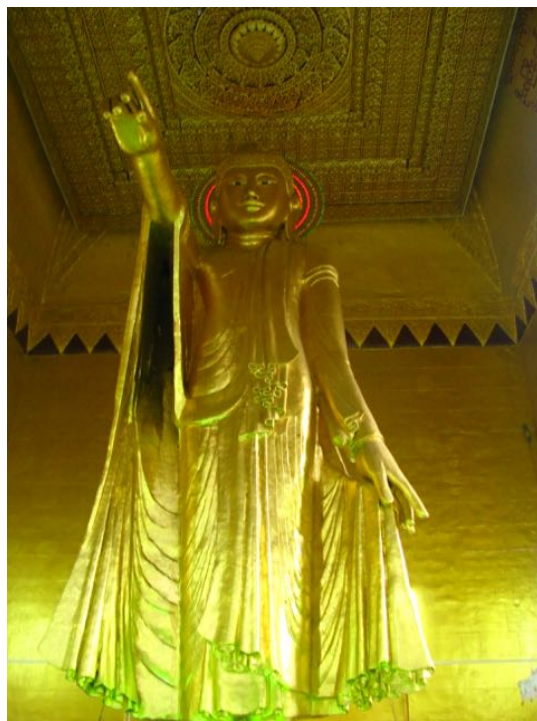
Not surprisingly, the space surrounding the amplifiers was absent of people. As I approached the veranda the amplifiers were perched on, I had to cover my ears and quickly walk by due to the high volume. After I reached the other side of the amplifiers the volume immediately dropped. Inside the room, just behind the amplifiers, I found a very elaborate set up for the monks currently giving the recitation. Three small tables were prepared each with their own reading light and each fronted with a golden fabric ceremonial umbrella. An extremely detailed, glittering tapestry was set up behind the reciting monks.



6.3 On the left, two silver metal bowls sit holding water. On the right, two monks read the Paṭṭhāna in unison which is amplified with the speakers from figure 6.2. Mahamuni Pagoda, October 2012. Photo by author.

Two silver bowls were placed in front of this room's main Buddha image and the reciting monks. The water in the bowls was set out to absorb the reverberations of the recitation. At the conclusion of the recitation, the water is coveted for its concentrated auspiciousness due to its continuous absorption of sacred sound waves. Several other monks in the room were busy sorting charts with lists of numbers and names to maintain the recitation order. In effect, this loud amplification publicizes the text, but it also works to replicate, establish, and extend the distinct and sacred aural atmosphere. The amplification adds an undeniable vibe to the embodied experience of patrons to the pagoda as they set candles, meditate, chat with friends, and sell devotional offerings.

In that same evening, San Htay and I rode his motorbike over to the far opposite side of town to reach Mandalay Hill. Mandalay Hill is another very popular pilgrimage site in the city. And visits to Mandalay Hill are the equivalent of taking a short hike. A winding covered walkway spotted with smaller pagodas and Buddha images leads visitors from the foot to the very top of the hill where the main pagoda's large balcony overlooks the former royal palace compound, moat, and surrounding city buildings. Along the way up, the pilgrim greets several large Buddha images. One standing and 'prophesying' image has his right hand lifted and pointing south towards the royal palace. In legend, the Buddha visited this hill and announced that in 2400 Buddhist Era, a city, built near the hill would flourish with its patronage of the Buddha's teachings. In 2400 Buddhist Era (1857 CE) the Burmese King Mindon, broke ground in establishment of Mandalay.



6.4 *Shweyettaw* (Standing) / *Byadeippay* (Prophesying) Buddha.
Photo by author.

With the holiday festivities and pagoda visitors numbering a bit higher than usual, we decided to skip climbing the winding staircase and use the access road that brought visitors just below the very top platform. Up top, similar to the Mahamuni pagoda, visitors were spelling out words of devotion or affiliation with tea candles. This pagoda ground had little to no meditators and most people were quickly paying respects to another seated Buddha image that faced south. A constant flow of people emerged from the staircase, prostrated before the Buddha image, and moved over to check out the view of the city. Meanwhile, several chairs had been moved into the pagoda space and set on top of a thin, green mat. The chairs and carpet showed that several government officials had attended the event earlier that evening, probably to open and officiate the ceremony. This was confirmed by a banner listing the Mayor and his affiliated office. The row of chairs were separated where a large open doorway led into another room with a tall Buddha image. Seated in the doorway on a large wooden bench, before the Buddha image, was a single monk in front of a microphone reciting the *Paṭṭhāna*. Above him a banner read, “The Great Non-stop Paṭhān Recitation Festival” in formal Burmese.

In front of the chairs were several clay pots, the style of which are commonly used in water stands at monasteries and along village roads. Here, each pot had a metal plate lid and small plastic drinking cup, in addition to a hanging sign and small white umbrella. There were twenty-four pots. A pot for each of the twenty-four conditional relations articulated in the contents of the *Paṭṭhāna*. The signs designated which conditional relation the pot stood for. As I stood by absorbing the atmosphere, perched on Mandalay Hill, overlooking the city, the *Paṭṭhāna* amplification falling down around the hill and over the city, visitors approached the clay pots and used the plastic cups to

scoop out a cup of water and have a drink. Here again, the idea is that the recitation's reverberations enter the water giving it a certain auspiciousness that is then transferred to those who drink the water. I saw at least a few people systematically take a drink from each of the twenty-four pots. Other people, seemingly at random, approached a single pot and took a drink.



6.5 San Htay takes a drink of water from the *Vipaka paccayo*, or resultant condition, pot. In the background, a monk is reciting the *Paṭṭhāna*. Mandalay Hill, October 2012. Photo by author.

After scoping out the scene we didn't stay too much longer in the busy pagoda compound. As we drove back down the hill, I could still hear the monk's continuous recitation before we entered the traffic down below.

Small Scale Paṭṭhāna Recitation Fests

The *Paṭṭhāna* festivals were not only held at popular pilgrimage sites and sponsored by government offices or famous pagoda trustees. On another occasion I followed two monks from Maha Ghandayon into Mandalay during the day. They were

planning to introduce me to a group of nuns. As we approached the nun's residence, I could hear the recognizable rhythm and tone of the *Paṭṭhāna* recitation. Across from the nuns' residence, a pagoda with a large speaker system set outside its gates amplified the recitation for the neighborhood. This pagoda's trustees had been running their own festival and it was the last day of the recitation. Following the completion of the recitation, the nuns prepared to attend the closing ceremony. A sign outside of the pagoda announced each day's supporting donors. Inside, the lay trustees of the pagoda were busy setting up preparations for the closing ceremony sermon. Lay people slowly collected, sitting on the ground, in preparation for the sermon. Afterwards, the attending monks were offered packages of everyday items (e.g. soap, juice) to use at their monasteries. Again, after the monks had departed the remaining lay people headed towards the main Buddha image where a plastic cooler with water had been placed for the duration of the recitation. Several water bottles had already been filled and some people were again taking a drink of the now auspicious water.

In another instance, I visited a nunnery that was under construction in Sagaing. Sagaing is a city across the Irrawaddy River from Mandalay. This city has a high density of monks, nuns, monasteries, and pagodas all spotted along hills visible from the Mandalay side of the river. In fact, when we arrived at this nunnery, I could hear other *Paṭṭhāna* recitations in the distance. This recitation held at the nunnery was unique because it was held in a building that was under construction and by a nun. Due to the biases of the relationships I was developing I wasn't able to fully explore more of the nun involvement with *Paṭṭhāna* recitations. Towards the end of my research period, I began to follow and learn about the numerous communities of nuns holding their own

recitations. The head nun of this nunnery was excited to be able to expand her existing compound to include this new, currently under construction, hall. “Holding this recitation now will make this building strong,” the head nun replied. In her study of nuns in Burma, Kawanami identified that the voices and recitations of nuns have been attracting a larger amount of public attention, particularly with their recitation of the *Paṭṭhāna*. Kawanami writes, “Young nuns practice out loud and repeatedly until their voices become deep and croaky. Senior nuns instruct them on correct abdominal breathing so that they can acquire strong resonant voices. As their vibrant voices add another level of authenticity and magic to a ritual, the role of chanting has become elevated as an important vocational tool,” (2013: 103) Furthermore, the *Paṭṭhāna* recitation fests provide occasions for nuns to prove their competency with this difficult text. Kawanami’s identification resonated with a conversation I had with the head nun of another nunnery in Southeast Mandalay. She shared that, indeed, ever since a group of nuns decided to hold their own *Paṭṭhāna* recitation festival every year, they have been receiving more visitors and regular patrons. Some of the visitors had mentioned that they never even knew that this nunnery had existed despite its location on a semi-heavily used north-south road on the eastside of Mandalay. She invited me to return to her nunnery the following day when they would be having an opening ceremony for their week-long recitation. When I arrived a group of monks were there to officiate the opening, but the recitation was carried out completely by the nuns. A husband-wife couple were sponsoring the opening ceremony and food donation for the first day.

Diverging Attitudes

When I interviewed people about the ritualized recitation of the *Paṭṭhāna* fests, I received a variety of comments that largely spoke in favor of the festival. As mentioned above, the festival was readily described as a useful means in keeping this difficult text prominent. And the text was a keystone for *sāsana* preservation as illustrated in the previous chapters. That precarious positionality was often enough alone for people to support the fest. From the side of the supporters, the amplified recitation functioned as a mode of publicity, a reminder of the Buddha's teachings, a mood enhancer, a means to develop focus, a meditation accompaniment, and a source of strength and auspiciousness. Furthermore, the ritualized recitation functioned to project the sacred power of the Buddha's words outside of the monasteries and pagoda's walls. For these individuals the words and sound of the recitation also acted on their embodiment through their listening capabilities.

Ko Maung worked as a tour guide in Mandalay and he identified the pedagogical effects of the festival for himself:

“In Mandalay there are so many groups who recite the *Paṭṭhāna*, not only in the monastery, but at pagodas, and on the road. So I heard it before, and I was really familiar with it. By hearing like this we become familiar with the words, so when I began to learn the *Paṭṭhāna* I didn't have any difficulty with reciting it.”

Ko Maung also identified how he thought many Westerners perceived the festival- as a sleep disturbance. He noted some truth in that claim, but ultimately he said he appreciated the festival. When he heard the recitation he was reminded to visit the monastery. He also compared *Paṭṭhāna* specialists and scholar monks to scientists. By extension, he said, “By keeping the monks from sharing their knowledge with the public, it would be similar to not allowing scientists to share their studies.”

San Htay's comment reflected his individual practice of reciting the *Paṭṭhāna*:

“I think if we can recite the *Paṭṭhāna*, we can concentrate on all things. Normally, we are thinking about this or that. And we are quite occupied with our work load, job related things, and emotions, but when we recite the *Paṭṭhāna* we can focus on the nature of the dhamma, the conditions, and if we do good deeds we will get good returns, or things like that. And also, we feel secure, during the recitation and after the recitation.”

San Htay's comment identifies a relationship between the effect of his personal cultivation and his outward behavior. Recitation oriented him towards personal satisfaction or rewards and an improved attitude when dealing with difficult social situations.

For Ma Khin, the graduate student, there was a connection between hearing and emotion:

There's some connection between words and our mental thinking. You know, sometimes when we listen to music, our mind and our body become different, we can become fresh and sometimes we become sad. And also reciting those kinds of things [*Abhidhamma*, *Paṭṭhāna*] it can give us some kind of effect even though we don't understand it.

Ma Khin's statement resonated with the idea that words and the process of listening can work as a technology shaping embodied learning or memory and could in turn reorientate and cultivate an individual's behavior.

Other people mentioned that during a collective or individual recitation, *Nats* (celestial beings) descended from their heavenly abodes to listen in on the difficult text in order to study and learn more of its detail. The listening *Nats* were often incorporated into the *Paṭṭhāna* fest's promotion or supporting imagery, as evidenced in the elaborate tapestry at the Mahamuni pagoda. In response to what benefits the *Paṭṭhāna* fests could

have for individuals or a community, San Htay referenced a *Jataka* story that depicted 100 bats in a cave becoming enlightened upon just hearing a monk reciting the

Abhidhamma:

There's a saying about the *Paṭṭhāna* and the *Abhidhamma* in Buddhist scripture, like you know, even the bat, they were hanging in the cave, they don't know anything about human language, but they listened to the monk reciting the *Abhidhamma* and the *Paṭṭhāna*. And when they died, they went to a higher level of existence...they have become, in Burmese, we say 'Nat', so I think this kind of knowledge is very encouraging for the lay people, even if they don't understand anything about it...

At Maha Ghandayon, however, there were no *Paṭṭhāna* Fests. When I asked about the absence of the festival there, Ashin Dana replied, "We study this text everyday. There is no need for us to hold a festival." In regards to the fest, Ashin Kalapa had strong feelings as he approached his meditation practice very seriously. When I asked him about the *Paṭṭhāna* festival, he replied,

"Actually, I'll tell you, personally, I don't like it... I don't agree with it.... Because I have never found that the Buddha said to recite that kind of festival, but he said try to understand. *Paṭṭhāna* is, I think, the deepest philosophy that is related to all human life. We have to study with a very concentrated mind. It [the festival] is just loud and it doesn't actually help.... I told my people [lay followers] when I give the [meditation] retreat. 'We are doing a quiet festival!'" He laughed and continued, "...because you try to pay attention to what you're feeling: greed, anger,... What I said to them [the lay followers] is that if you believe that shouting, or reading loudly, protects you or takes care of you, what about the Islamic prayer for example [imitates Call to Prayer]. They also think they are protecting their world, so you have to agree with them as well, it's similar. But actually they [Muslims] have it taught like that, but here in Buddhism you are not taught like that. You have to be just silent and quiet and observe within yourself."

Ashin Kalapa's comments here must be highlighted for their implied soteriological framing. As a monk that is very seriously approaching meditation, Ashin Kalapa is oriented towards a much higher rebirth and ultimate rupture with *samsara* (i.e. the cycle of rebirth). For many lay people, this aim is simply not on board for their lifetime. For

Ashin Kalapa, the festival's aural projection detracts from his ability to calm his mind and gain insight into the rising and falling impermanent nature of all phenomena. He doesn't relate to how a lay-person or other practitioner may be facilitated and motivated by the recitation.

From these diverging positions towards the *Paṭṭhāna* Festival and its associated recitation practices, it is evident that there are different senses of what is required in the processes of embodiment to foster behavior that preserves the *sāsana* and/or behavior that encourages rupture from *samsara*. For some of the lay people, hearing the *Paṭṭhāna* and the words altered their moods, or restored a sense of personal calm or strength. For the nuns in Sagaing the recitation was capable of providing strength to their new physical structure. For the nuns in East Mandalay, the recitation of the *Paṭṭhāna* provided them with the opportunity to establish new supportive links in their community while also demonstrating their competency in the single most difficult Buddhist text. The presence of all the water jugs absorbing the reverberations of the recitation and their ingestion operated as physical representation of and analogous process occurring in the listening reception of the powerful recitation. In effect, these individual engagements with the *Paṭṭhāna* recitation fostered the sense of empathy for the larger collective project of supporting the *sāsana*.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Resonances

One evening at Maha Ghandayon, I joined Ashin Pandita with his own advanced Pali course. Ashin Pandita was the elementary Pali grammar instructor that had been tutoring me individually alongside his elementary course for the young novices. As we walked from Ashin Pandita's residence to the study hall where the elder monk, Ashin Pyinna, would be, Ashin Pandita told me about how he and some other advanced students had put together their own book in commemoration and thanks of the lessons they received from Ashin Pyinna. Ashin Pyinna was nearly 70 years old, one of the oldest monks in the monastery and, because of his seniority, served on monastery council boards along with the head sayadaw. However, in contrast to the few other head sayadaws at the monastery, I often saw Ashin Pyinna sitting outside, warming himself in the midday sun or slowing walking around the compound. We usually greeted each other and had short exchanges about my study of Pali or Buddhism. Ashin Pyinna was always very succinct and direct with his replies and I appreciated that in my interactions with him.

When we reached the study hall, Ashin Pyinna was laying down in the fluorescent lit room, wrapped in a flower printed fleece blanket on a raised bench with his covered head rested on the bench's arm. Four other monks were seated semi-circle in front of Ashin Pyinna. We entered the room from the back and kneeled down to pay respects to Ashin Pyinna before settling in for the discussion of the particular text that this small group of monks were closely studying. Ashin Pyinna eventually turned towards us seated students and kind of smiled, then Ashin Pandita set out a tape recorder and the group began discussing the text they were reading together.

After the lesson material was covered for that day, Ashin Pandita shared again with Ashin Pyinna, that I was learning about the *Paṭṭhāna* and the recitation festivals that accompanied the text's veneration. I followed up and asked Ashin Pyinna, "What do you think of these recitation festivals? Are they just noisy and distracting?" Ashin Pyinna smiled, and in his slow spoken manner replied, "No. Reciting and listening to the *Paṭṭhāna* is very important. You know, it can even bring the animal to *nibbana*,". Here, of course, Ashin Pyinna was referring back to the Jataka story about the hanging bats in a cave where a monk was meditating and reciting the *Paṭṭhāna*. Upon hearing the sound of the monk's recitations, the bats immediately transcended their animal existence and obtained *nibbana*. In this instance with Ashin Pyinna, I was surprised and pleased to hear this elder, Pali expert, monk repeat what other monks had relegated to just an example of wishful thinking on behalf of the ones holding all of the ritualized recitations.

As I have argued in this thesis, I find the ritualized recitations of the *Paṭṭhāna* as significant on at least two levels. In the first position, this practice should be understood as an extension of the individual and collective efforts of Burmese Buddhist practitioners operating within the tenets of the 'sāsana society'. That is, by holding these ritualized recitations, Buddhist practitioners are simultaneously slowing the inevitable disappearance of the Buddha's teachings *and* accruing their own store of merit for a better future rebirth. The festival's amplified words and sound allow for introductions, reviews, reminders, spurious enlightenment, and appreciations of the depth of the *Paṭṭhāna* that in turn inspire continued support of the sāsana. In the second position, these amplified and projected recitations function to create, demarcate, expand, and strengthen the spatial significance of Burmese Buddhist cosmology. This argument is

situated within a turn in anthropology that seeks to restore descriptive attention to the *place* making processes and how places, and memories of places, are built up from a variety of sensorial experiences. Keith Basso writes, “Deliberately and otherwise, people are forever presenting each other with culturally mediated images of where and how they dwell. In large ways and small, they are forever performing acts that reproduce and express their own sense of place—and also, inextricably, their own understandings of who and what they are.” By participating with a variety of Burmese Buddhist practitioners in Amarapura and Mandalay, at monasteries and within pagoda compounds, I was able to engage and experience these practices of place making. Their place making practices made clear their concerns with maintaining the *sāsana* in the face of internal and external threats. As political and economic shifts alter the daily operations and livelihoods of many Burmese in the first quarter of the 21st century, their concerns for maintaining their *sāsana* society are very unlikely to waver, the popularity of the ritualized recitations of the *Paṭṭhāna* are evidence of that prerogative.

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