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**Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar**

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# Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar

*Hiroko Kawanami*

In Myanmar, Buddhist nuns are recognized as part of the sangha (Buddhist monastic community) and are commonly referred to as *thila-shin*, meaning a disciplined and virtuous female practitioner. They occupy their own social and spiritual role distinct from, but deeply connected to, Buddhist monks and lay practitioners. This article provides a legal and political description of the religious standing of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar and how, although they are not officially ordained as *bhikkhunīs*, they have built their monastic community and become accepted by society as precept-observing nuns. It provides details about their initiation, typology, monastic code of practice, religious work, and social transactions with the Buddhist laity. Although they are not regulated by the Vinaya governing fully-ordained nuns and monks, their monastic codes of practice are formulated in response to specific problems and provide guidelines for the nuns' daily behaviour in the community.

Once initiated, nuns become shaped by their moral culture in a single-sex environment in which seniority, defined by the time of initiation, plays a paramount role, regardless of their biological age. The article also considers the disparity regarding the amount of donations and offerings a nun receives in contrast to a monk. However, such an economic disadvantage suffered by ordinary nuns can also be overcome by those nuns whose special qualities and academic achievements allow them to overturn gender discrimination.

Learning the scriptures and the Pāli language for Buddhist nuns in Myanmar has been essential in providing them monastic education as well as a legitimate means to become respected in society. However, the article highlights their long struggle to become educated and accepted as worthy monastic members. It lists cases of several prominent nuns who have overcome social obstacles and contributed to the advancement of the nuns' education. Every life story of these pioneer nuns conveys a single-minded determination to study the Buddhist scriptures. It tells how their early endeavours have contributed to raising the standards of nuns' social status and changed their social perception for the positive in contemporary Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Buddhist nuns, Monastic orders, Precept-observing nuns, Eight Precepts, Ten Precepts, Initiation, *bhikkhunī*, *mettā*, *Paṭṭhāna* recitation, Social engagement, Women in Buddhism

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# 1 Introduction

Myanmar is a country located in mainland Southeast Asia with a population of about 55 million people. The population is multi-ethnic and 135 ethnic groups are officially recognized as Myanmar citizens, but the majority population (about ninety per cent) are known to be Buddhist, predominantly of the Theravāda tradition. This Buddhist tradition is represented by a significant number of vocational monks and nuns, and the monastic community plays a significant role in supporting people's religious and moral life. The monks provide spiritual leadership and disseminate the teaching of the Buddha, while the nuns assist them in ceremonies and guide the lay followers in Buddhist morality. As of 2024, more than half a million vocational monks and 72,000 nuns were registered with the Department of Religious Affairs of the Religious Ministry in Myanmar (Myanmar Department of Religious Affairs 2024).

Currently more than 4,000 'independent' nunneries operate across the country where Buddhist nuns reside together and study the Buddhist scriptures and Pāli language. Sixty percent of nuns reside in Yangon, Sagaing, and Mandalay where there are prominent nunnery schools akin to Buddhist seminaries Myanmar (Myanmar Department of Religious Affairs 2024). The majority of Myanmar nuns observe Eight Precepts and live according to their communal norms and monastic rules. There has been a steady increase in the number of young women who become nuns in the last few decades as well as those from ethnic minority groups such as Shan, Kachin, Palaung, Kayin, Arakanese, Mon, and Chin. This phenomenon is aimed at disseminating Buddhism and socializing the ethnic population into Myanmar culture, instigated by the Myanmar government since the early 1990s. As a result, nunnery schools supported by subsidies from local authorities were founded in ethnic self-administered zones and in remote regions previously denied educational opportunities for ethnic minority children.

In Myanmar, Buddhist nuns are commonly called *thila-shin*. *Thila* is the vernacular equivalent of the Pāli term *sīla*, connoting discipline, virtuous conduct, and purity. The term *shin* in this context means the 'one who upholds' *sīla*. Hence, in one word, *thila-shin* signifies a Buddhist female practitioner who is disciplined and virtuous. There are normative monastic rules that govern their daily lives, which imply celibacy, no solid food after midday, no pleasurable activities like singing or dancing, or putting on vanity items such as cosmetics or flowers (Kawanami 1990: 19). Once initiated, the nuns are fully committed to these observances, which are fundamental to their religious identity as monastic members. Buddhist nuns, just like monks, are also entirely sustained by monetary and material donations offered by their lay supporters. These practices distinguish Buddhist nuns from lay women who occasionally take these virtuous vows (Falk and Kawanami 2017–2018: 83).

While older women may see renunciation as a spiritual vocation freeing them from domestic exploitation and social mores, the younger generations of Myanmar nuns increasingly see it as an opportunity to become independent and educated in the scriptures. They aspire to study the scriptures in the hope of becoming teachers in the dhamma and also in the hope of making active contribution to the dissemination of Buddhism (*sāsana*). In this respect, becoming a Buddhist nun is no longer regarded just as a retreat or escape from society, but as an alternative life to practice their Buddhist faith and achieve spiritual self-fulfillment.

## **2 The position of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar**

In Myanmar's founding Constitution of 1947, the civil rights of all vocational religious practitioners were limited. The lack of civil rights remains unchanged under the current Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (Myanmar Ministry of Information 2008: Article 392, a). Hence, vocational nuns are treated in the same category as monks; however, the legal and political provisions for a Buddhist nun manifest various ambiguities in practice.

### **2.1 Legal and political status**

Following the Constitution, Buddhist monks and nuns in Myanmar as well as vocational members of other religions are not allowed to vote or participate in political activities. This implies that vocational religious persons are deprived of their civil rights in Myanmar (Falk and Kawanami 2017–2018). And yet, a Buddhist monk or a nun over eighteen is issued a monastic identity card by the Myanmar government, which grants him/her special privileges to travel the country without any of the usual restrictions applied to non-monastic citizens. On the other hand, a Buddhist nun can inherit property like a lay woman and continues to be bound by secular rights and obligations often imposed by her family members. Hence, unlike a male monastic, a female's religious position in relation to society is unaffected by her becoming a monastic and expectations linger in the form of filial piety towards her parents. In contrast, a male's legal status changes completely when he becomes a monk as he comes directly under the jurisdiction of the Vinaya: the monastic rules and regulations of the sangha. Therefore, while a monk can renounce all secular rights including inheritance and social duties, a nun's renunciatory position remains incomplete as a monastic.

### **2.2 Inside or outside the *sāsana***

Politically speaking, Myanmar nuns occupy an ambivalent position as they are treated as outside the sangha, but at the same time they are often co-opted as part of it in state functions and ceremonies. In comparison to monks, who are acknowledged as state-sanctioned sangha members, Myanmar nuns are not officially ordained *bhikkhunīs*.

Nonetheless, so-called ‘precept observing’ nuns are referred to in official documents as the ‘descendants’ of *bhikkhunīs* (Myanmar Ministry of Information 2008). Such a term of reference signifies that although not being accepted as inside members of the sangha, they are somewhat seen as affiliated with the lineage of *bhikkhunī*. Moreover, alongside monks and male novices, Buddhist nuns are registered with the Department of Religious Affairs of the Home and Religious Ministry. This is evidenced in a nun’s passport page and other official documents that display her Buddhist title in the Pāli language rather than in her vernacular lay name. This indicates a high degree of integration of Buddhist nuns into the national monastic organization and shows that their religious status is somewhat endorsed by the Myanmar state and subsequently accepted as part of the monastic community.

### **2.3 The *bhikkhunī* ordination issue**

Despite the fact that Buddhist nuns in Myanmar today are no longer ordained *bhikkhunī*, some local scholars have stated that *bhikkhunī* existed in Myanmar until about the thirteenth century. Stone inscriptions are listed from the Pagan period as evidence of their high religious status, with their public activities described in monastic terms, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Than Tun 1988). A Myanmar monk scholar describes how these female practitioners served the sangha and states the presence of female ascetics practicing austerities in the forest tradition (Rawe Htun 2001). However, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not these women were fully ordained *bhikkhunīs*.

The *bhikkhunī* issue became public knowledge in Myanmar when a precept nun went to Sri Lanka and became ordained as *bhikkhunī* in 2003. This caused much consternation in Myanmar because she became ordained without the permission or knowledge of the sangha. The case was taken up at the highest level of the monastic tribunal and the executive committee of monks came to a decision that the *bhikkhunī* order could not be revived in Myanmar. As a result, all discussions on the nuns’ full ordination were closed and *bhikkhunī* were made illegal in Myanmar (Kawanami 2007: 233). Today, Myanmar nuns remain reluctant to opt for a fully ordained status and go against their teachers who are not ordained and disrupt the monastic hierarchy. Nonetheless, the *bhikkhunī* ordination debate has led to a general recognition of the strength of Theravāda conservatism and revealed the reluctance of the majority Buddhists to change the status quo in Myanmar society.

## **3 Joining the nuns’ community**

In Myanmar, many female candidates seem to choose monastic vocation against the wishes of their families and do much soul-searching before committing themselves to the life of a Buddhist nun. Once decided, however, she must undergo a stringent process prior to the initiation ceremony, which requires a lengthy interview in front of a group of senior

nuns at the prospective host nunnery. Senior nuns ask the female candidate extensive questions to evaluate her motivation and determine her aptitude to enter a disciplined monastic life. The interrogation questions a candidate is asked are similar to the kind she might encounter if she was becoming an ordained *bhikkhuni*. Nonetheless, the context in which these questions are put to her differs as the female candidate is not being prepared for full ordination.

### **3.1 Initiation**

There are no specific rules concerning a Buddhist nun's initiation in Myanmar, but the ceremony is conducted by senior nuns who lead the procedure to grant her acceptance according to their traditional communal norms. An initiation marks the status transition of a female candidate into a monastic, and by undergoing initiation she is granted a preceptor and monastic residence as well as a Buddhist title essential to be accepted into the nuns' community (Kawanami 2013: 63–64). In the past, a nun's initiation in Myanmar was conducted in private at the host nunnery or even secretly to avoid the fierce opposition coming from her family and relatives. Renunciation was not a normative affair for a young woman even from a Buddhist family, so it was common for parents to oppose the daughter's decision to become a nun. In contrast, renunciation was publicly celebrated for a son and becoming a novice monk was considered a most meritorious event for his parents. Hence, there was a marked difference in social attitudes towards male and female renunciation in Myanmar.

### **3.2 Temporary initiation**

However, a more positive image of Buddhist nuns is emerging in recent decades due to the rising reputation of scholarly nuns and high academic accomplishments of nun students in scriptural exams. Temporary initiation has become popular especially among urban Buddhist women (Jordt 1988: 37). Parents send their teenage daughters to prominent nunneries during school holidays to learn the basic prayers and Buddhist protocol. Subsequently, initiation as a nun that used to be a private affair is now celebrated openly with family and friends. The initiation ritual has also become more structured with a presence of a monk, who officially sanctions her status change and endorses her entry into the nuns' monastic community.

A temporary nun, although her stay as a nun is not permanent, wears the same monastic robe as a vocational nun and has her head shaved. She observes the same precepts and follows the communal norms, such as celibacy and fasting in the afternoon, as a vocational nun. She must learn the chants, share the daily chores, and go out for alms gathering on a weekly basis (Kawanami 2013: 27). In this way, temporary initiation offers a female practitioner a unique first-hand experience of the nun's monastic life governed by self-restraint and abstinence practices. Such an experience also advances a lay woman's

understanding of the spiritual value of a nun's religious life, such that she is subsequently aware of her role and responsibility in supporting the nuns' monastic community that is materially dependent on the generosity of lay people.

## **4 Typology of Myanmar Buddhist nuns**

### **4.1 Vocational nuns**

The majority of Myanmar nuns join the monastic community in their early teens with an aim to become learned in the Buddhist scriptures. They devote their time and effort to scriptural learning as it provides them with a primary pathway to becoming a state-accredited dhamma teacher. The young monastic students are referred to as *ngebyu*, which means 'young and pure'. There seems to be a correlation between academic performance and moral purity exemplified by their 'virginity' and innocence, and the increasing pressure to perform well in scriptural exams puts the relevance on these qualities in becoming successful. Most prominent dhamma teachers and scholars in Myanmar today are in this category of *ngebyu* (Kawanami 2015: 299). A balanced pursuit of both scriptural learning (*pariyatti*) and the practice of meditation (*paṭipatti*) is encouraged for all monastic students and the transition from doctrinal studies to meditation seems like a natural progression in their spiritual development. However, it is rare for those practising full-time meditation to move into doctrinal studies later in their monastic life.

Incidentally, there are older women who become nuns later in their life called *tawdwet*. Some live in meditation centres or monasteries and help with cooking or providing domestic assistance to the monks. These nuns are usually latecomers to a monastic life and fit the negative stereotype of a nun who is old, outcast, and troubled. Indeed, many may have left home after encountering problems or abuse in their domestic life, so they are already disadvantaged at the time of their entry into the nuns' community. *Tawdwet* nuns spend their time in meditation and help with menial chores in their monastic setting but usually keep a low profile in the monastic community.

### **4.2 Medaw**

Few as they may be, there are also free-standing nuns called *medaw* who live on the fringes of society. They may be an anomaly in the nuns' community as they are neither ordained nor registered with the Myanmar government. A *medaw* commonly leads a solitary life and does not follow the monastic convention of virtuous living observed by precept-observing nuns. However, they are not disadvantaged by their status as they are known for their extraordinary skills in healing, clairvoyance, and fortune-telling (Kawanami 2015: 300). A *medaw*, which means 'respectable mother', wears a brown or yellow coloured robe to distinguish herself from the majority nuns wearing pink robe and attracts a different kind of clients who visit her to seek worldly benefits and healing. Such a nun

was usually married before taking up celibacy, so she stands in clear opposition to a 'young and pure' nun student. This implies she lacks youthful purity and education, but can draw strength from her autonomous position, staying away from monastic politics, and asserting herself as a free and independent agent of the Buddhist community.

### **4.3 Eight Precept nuns**

The majority of Myanmar nuns observe the Eight Precepts, which include sexual abstinence, fasting after midday, giving up vanity items and worldly enjoyment, as well as avoiding sleeping on luxury beds. The number of precepts is seen as a spiritual index of a Buddhist practitioner and observing the Eight Precepts appears equivalent to what a pious lay Buddhist may observe on special religious days (Kawanami 1990: 21). However, a nun's commitment to the Eight Precepts is a permanent undertaking in contrast to a temporary one of a lay Buddhist. Moreover, observing these precepts are not aimed at reducing the comfort level in her monastic life but allows the nun to develop a moral awareness and detachment from pleasurable and material things that are taken for granted in the secular world.

### **4.4 Ten Precept nuns**

Becoming a Ten Precept nun may suggest an alternative to becoming an ordained *bhikkhuni* in Myanmar, as it allows her an alternative way to enhance her religious stature in society (Kawanami 2013: 31). Few as they are, a Ten Precept nun is highly respected for her detachment and moral purity. She refrains from handling money and cash transactions and minimizes social transactions. The fact that a Ten Precept nun does not accept cash donations reverses the usual power relationship between a nun recipient and her lay donors, and as a result, her religious stature is perceived as a vast spiritual leap from an ordinary precept nun. Many Eight Precept nuns aspire to observe the Ten Precepts even temporarily and refrain from worldly transactions for a limited duration – for example, in the evenings or on special religious days. Still, the majority of Myanmar nuns are nowhere near such a detached spiritual position and struggle to make ends meet on humble cash donations.

## **5 Codes of moral practice**

In contrast to Buddhist monks whose daily activities are regulated by the Vinaya, precept observing nuns in Myanmar are not confined by rigid monastic rules and regulations. However, they have followed the codes of moral practice developed out of practical necessity and these were formulated in response to specific problems in their community. Their monastic codes of practice cover guidelines for daily behaviour in the community, roles and responsibility of senior members, as well as various ethical concerns. These were passed down from teachers to students in the nuns' community, especially in

nunnery schools where institutional discipline has been essential, providing nuns with the necessary legal references in their monastic lives.

## **5.1 National code of practice**

The most important code of practice for Myanmar nuns is called *Thiláshin Kyínwut* and has been endorsed by the state and adopted as the nuns' code of practice by the sangha in 1994 (Falk and Kawanami 2017–2018: 85–86). More than eighty instructions stipulate in minute detail the appropriate interactions nuns should undertake in relation to monks and laity. The major rules specify their duties and responsibilities in the monastic setting, and communal norms are passed down and instilled by senior nuns in their community. The actual procedure for becoming a Buddhist nun is stipulated and the code lists areas of importance in their religious work including prayer, study, ritual participation, and alms gathering.

## **5.2 Communal norms**

The nuns' communal rules emphasize self-restraint and modesty, including controlled and graceful manners in speech and conduct. A nun is admonished for raising her voice, arguing, swearing, gossiping, and chatting idly. She is also criticized for not wearing her monastic garments properly, running, or showing expansive gestures. Many of these rules aim to reduce the risk of a Buddhist nun appearing disrespectful and vulgar in public and making sure that her good moral reputation is upheld.

However, there are no rules that regulate their dress code apart from the decree issued in 1997 by the Supreme Sangha Council forbidding them to wear brown robes. Today, urban nuns can be seen wearing wristwatches, gold-rimmed glasses and shoes rather than traditional sandals, but since there are no monastic rules to regulate, these are tolerated if they do not interfere with the pious and moral image of a Buddhist nun.

## **5.3 Monastic hierarchy and institutional control**

The nuns' code of practice stipulates the duties and obligations of teachers and senior nuns in supervising junior members. Senior nuns are expected to enforce moral discipline in the community, as harmonious coexistence is regarded paramount in their monastic life. The focus is on the nuns' relationship in the community, emphasizing consideration for others and respect for seniority – for example, in the usage of respectful terms of address. Seniority is particularly emphasized in large nunnery schools where there is usually a system of checks and controls in place to deal with any problem at its early stage. Additionally, the practice of regular admonishing is an important part of a teacher's duty in guiding students and preventing them from straying from the norm. Hence, the

relationship between a nun student and her preceptor/teacher/mentor is acknowledged as the foundation in sustaining their communal harmony.

Minor offences such as petty theft or personal squabbles are dealt within the immediate circle of nuns in the nunnery; but if it is a major violation such as sexual transgression, the nuns involved are asked to move out of the nunnery immediately. New entrants including temporary nuns are closely monitored by senior members to minimize events that could disrupt and bring harm to the nunnery. However, the rule of collective responsibility often obliges the offender's supervisor or preceptor to be punished together on the grounds of duty neglect. The responsibility may also fall on the institutional head, who is the abbess in imposing discipline on all the resident nuns. In this way, Myanmar nuns take every measure to curb internal disputes and potential trouble that could be detrimental to the united front of the nuns' community.

## **6 Socialization into monastic culture**

In their daily transactions, a nun in Myanmar is addressed as *saya-lei* (junior teacher) or *saya-gyi* (big teacher) in the case of a senior teacher or abbess. Such a term of address signifies that a Buddhist nun is treated as a non-gendered monastic as she is no longer addressed with a female suffix *má*, such as in the case of a lay female teacher addressed as *saya-má*. This example suggests that a Buddhist nun is no longer defined by a conventional feminine gender and is treated as an asexual and other-worldly member of the monastic community. This also implies that a Buddhist nun who has left her secular feminine identity is no longer confined to social norms and expectations placed on a woman. Her religious identity in turn replaces her former identity by adhering to a moral and virtuous ideal, which obliges her to merge her personal interests with the collective goal of the monastic community. (For more on gender and Buddhism, see [Gender and Buddhist Doctrine](#).)

### **6.1 Agency and interdependence**

The notion of 'agency' is relevant here since once initiated as a nun, the apprentice has to dispel selfish traits and yet is expected to show some initiative in finding whatever tasks need to be done in her new monastic environment. Saba Mahmood referred to 'agency' to indicate the capacity 'to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles, whether individual or collective' (Mahmood 2005: 8). Normally, a transformation seems to happen once she accepts the moral discipline and culture of a monastic community and becomes a willing participant in serving it. Thus, practices in humility, service, and altruism are utilized to give a deeper meaning to the new entrant in realizing her religious goals. The notion of interdependence is also instilled in the monastic training, and every nun is expected to help and support other nuns, especially

those who are younger, older, weaker, or infirm, to achieve harmonious coexistence in the community.

## **6.2 Chanting and cultivation of devotion**

Collective chanting is a fundamental practice in the nuns' daily routine. In the morning, they offer fresh water, food and flowers to the Buddha altar and chant in unison in front of the altar. This is regarded essential in enabling junior members to learn the correct breathing and rhythm and allows them to cultivate a strong sense of faith and devotion. The nuns focus their worship on the Three Jewels – the Buddha, his Dhamma, and the Sangha – and call upon the virtuous attributes of the Buddha in their collective recitation. Such an act of worship is repeated many times a day, which is meant to surrender one's ego and develop a strong sense of devotion towards the Three Jewels. Every class in the monastery begins with students collectively making obeisance to the Three Jewels and addressing the teacher in gratitude. Every meal starts with a collective chanting that sends out blessings to those who have offered them food and extolling the Buddha's virtues. Through such frequent demonstrations of devotional chants, the nuns become socialized into the monastic culture and cultivate their faith in the Three Jewels.

## **6.3 Enhancement of feminine virtues**

Mahmood (2005: 6–8) has suggested that women's subordination to traditional feminine virtues, such as shyness, modesty, and humility, are the necessary condition for an enhanced role in their religious life. These 'virtues' also give them a fundamental meaning to their religious identity. For example, Myanmar nuns commonly fold their arms in front of their chest when standing or while doing their walking meditation. This posture is explained as a gesture to express their shyness and humility. The monastic dress they wear also shows their feminine ideals in show of modesty and self-constraint. Every feature of it is aimed at preserving the essence of feminine virtues and the notion of honour surrounding them (Jordt 1988: 37). It has been mentioned by Mrozik (2002: 8) that the way a person dresses or carries herself serves as a marker of her moral character. Hence, a nun does not wear short sleeves or transparent material for clothing since modesty is paramount, and her upper sleeves cover up her wrists and her lower robe comes down to hide her ankles. The common practice of placing a shawl over her chest may also have some significance in protecting her inner virtues.

## **6.4 Preserving traditional cultural values**

As exemplified in the eighth precept, Buddhist nuns have renounced the traditional cultural norm that encourages women to adorn themselves to enhance feminine beauty and general attractiveness. Thus, once initiated, nuns give up all vanity items and ornaments and do not adorn themselves with flowers or put on perfumes and fragrant creams. On

the other hand, nuns play an important role in preserving the cultural values associated with the image of womanhood in traditional Myanmar. That is, against the backdrop of modernity and a society undergoing rapid change, Myanmar nuns preserve conservative values associated with the traditional feminine (Falk and Kawanami 2017–2018: 87). It seems they find religious meaning in preserving many of the conservative implications of what a Myanmar woman should be (except for the removal of hair). And in this respect, their conservative dress code and feminine virtues preserved in their monastic attire transmits the ideal of traditional feminine in Myanmar society.

## **7 Sustenance of monastic life**

It is commonly said that a Buddhist household in Myanmar would set aside a quarter of its income for religious donations to the sangha. Even a poor family would keep an amount of rice grains to offer to the monks who come on their daily alms round. However, a nun's relationship with her lay donors is fundamentally different from that of a monk due to the absence of an official sanction of her monastic status. That is, it is a customary practice to donate to a monk, but it is up to the prospective lay donor to decide whether they want to become a regular benefactor to a nun. There is also a disparity regarding the amount of token offerings monastic members receive for attending religious functions, and evidently nuns receive less than half the amount of what monks receive in monetary terms. This implies that a monk can live reasonably well by attending a few ceremonies a month, while a nun who is invited to fewer functions has to sustain her religious life on much less donation income.

### **7.1 Relationship with lay donors**

Since the economic life of a nun is not as secure as that of a monk, a nun with no rank may struggle to sustain her monastic life (Carbonnel 2009: 267). Thus, it is essential to secure regular donors so that she can devote herself to matters of religious importance, but it implies a long-term commitment and heavy responsibility on their part. Meanwhile, every monastic member may have special qualities that appeal differently to a potential donor and the donor's decision to support a nun is affected by her individual qualities and qualifications. Such factors include her academic credentials, reputation of the nunnery school to which she is affiliated, her social background, personality or charisma, kin distance from the lay benefactor(s) and so on. Once a lay person decides to become a regular benefactor, it is the donor who instigates the relationship and decides on which nun to support or how the relationship should be as well as on the amount of donations, frequency of support, and the terms on which the relationship is conducted. Generally speaking, prominent scholars and nun teachers in Myanmar are supported by regular donors and they can overcome the economic disadvantage suffered by ordinary nuns.

## **7.2 Alms gathering**

Lay Buddhists may donate sporadically to the monastic community to mark a special life event such as a birthday or a memorial, but a regular transaction between monastic members and their lay donors is essential in cultivating a sense of their complementary roles. Alms gathering in particular is a symbolic act for monastic members in such regular transactions, as it makes them aware of their recipient role in allowing the lay donors accumulate merit.

Monks go collecting alms every morning, walking barefoot from house to house where local donors await them to offer cooked rice, curry, and other prepared food. In contrast to monks who collect alms in total silence, nuns recite blessing chants and suffuse their donors with loving-kindness (see [section 8.2](#)). Nuns go on alms gathering every week according to the lunar calendar and are offered rice grains and cash (Carbonnel 2009: 269). However, even regular alms transactions are becoming more impersonal and perfunctory in urban centres, as the sense of neighbourhood ties is diluted and a familiarity of monastic members affiliated with local monasteries does not exist like it does in small provincial towns or in rural communities.

## **7.3 Rural support for the monastic community**

Myanmar is still predominantly rural, and agricultural villages have been the main source of support to the monastic community. Nuns travel during the winter harvest months to visit their rural donors and stay in villages for a couple of weeks. During these visits, they are offered staple food such as rice grains, onions, garlic, oil, lentils, chili, and so on to take back to their nunneries. There is a strong sense of commitment shown by rural folks to support monastic members who are often recruited from their own communities. People show a deep engrained sense of reverence, and there still exists a custom in villages to ask a nun to adopt an infant symbolically so that the child's growth and health would be safeguarded. A nun becomes the child's guardian during his or her formative years, and this often develops into a regular benefactor–beneficiary relationship in his or her adult life (Kawanami 2013: 154).

When nuns visit these communities, they give consultations and assurances to rural folks, listen to village disputes and settle them. Monastic members travel extensively so they bring valuable news from other regions in a country where media activities are limited. The rural population, whose movements are usually confined to their locality, hear about harvest in other areas, prices of commodities, news of epidemics and calamities, and are informed about forthcoming ceremonies and religious events so that they can make decisions regarding their next religious offering. In this way, Myanmar nuns play an

essential role as intermediaries in fostering the continued support of their supporters and enhance the close relationship between the monastic community and its rural benefactors.

## **8 Religious work of Buddhist nuns**

Buddhist nuns perform both religious and secular roles in society; they are involved in a variety of work in serving the monastic community as well as the laity.

### **8.1 Devotional work**

One of the main religious activities of Buddhist nuns can be described as 'devotional work'. They conduct various types of domestic work in the monastic community and find spiritual meaning especially in serving the sangha. In performing menial roles regarded as 'secular' or the work of the laity, their performance becomes an act of giving (Cook 2008: 12). Thus, conducting menial work and domestic chores bring them meritorious returns alongside other religious work. The nuns also pay attention to the general welfare of the monastic community, and their role is replicated in many nurturing and caring roles they undertake in relationship to the monks. For example, a nun may act as an 'honorary mother' to a specific monk or novice and serve the sangha by way of cooking for him, as well as taking care of young novices and infirm elderly monks. Scholarly nuns and students may spend less time serving the monks, but ordinary nuns actively seek out such a servile role because this type of selfless work instils a deep sense of spiritual meaning for those who see devotional acts as a meritorious way to contribute to the sustenance of the Buddhist community.

### **8.2 Recitation of loving kindness**

In their monastic training, Buddhist nuns develop compassionate qualities that become an integral part of their religious identity. They confer loving kindness called *mettā* to acknowledge people's act of generosity and foster goodwill in their social transactions. They send out *mettā* in their blessing stanzas whenever something is offered to them. This is performed in a short formula or sometimes recited as a whole blessing sequence in the Pāli language. On their weekly alms gathering, the nuns chant the blessing formula and recite in unison as they pass a row of lay households. There is a symbolic exchange between the nuns and their lay donors who receive merit in return for their offering of rice grains. By their public display of gratitude, the nuns instil a sense of wellbeing on the part of lay benefactors and serve as a medium of goodwill and loving kindness. In other words, their blessing chants encourage generous acts on the part of lay benefactors and ensure the flow of goodwill from society.

### **8.3 Intermediary roles**

The Eight Precept nuns are allowed to handle cash. This ability to engage in monetary transactions makes them indispensable in their supportive roles to the sangha since monks are prohibited from handling money. In fact, nuns mediate much of the economic exchange between the monastery and society, and act as treasurers and bookkeepers of monasteries, often being summoned to help procure goods and prepare for ceremonies (Cook 2008: 17). By taking on such roles, Myanmar nuns make themselves useful in acting as a monastic intermediary and distance monks from what the nuns see as the corrupting influence of the outside world.

On many occasions Buddhist nuns perform a bridging role between sangha and society. For example, they instruct lay people to pay respect to the sangha by showing how to prostrate themselves and use respectful honorifics in addressing monks. They also teach children moral norms and respectable behaviour towards elderly members in society. At times, nuns even mediate in solving domestic problems of their lay donors and resolving their situations by preaching the importance of following the Buddhist ethics. By taking on various intermediary roles, Myanmar nuns make themselves indispensable in disseminating the moral foundations of Theravāda Buddhism.

## **8.4 Ritual roles**

The nuns' intermediary function extends to ceremonial roles in assisting the officiating monk. At Buddhist ceremonies, nuns sit in the front of lay congregation facing the monks and take the lead in chanting relevant prayers and prostrate themselves at the right moment. Their vibrant chanting voices add another level of authenticity to the ritual, as nuns complement the authoritative presence of the monks. Senior nuns may know every sequence of a Buddhist ritual but do not take initiative to lead it by themselves. This is due to the convention in Myanmar that considers conducting a Buddhist ritual to be the prerogative of a monk, the sangha having assigned such a role on him.

The eleven protection prayers called *Mahā Paritta* are recited at ceremonies concerned with significant rites of passage. The most chanted *paritta* in Myanmar are the *Mangala Sutta* (Discourse on Auspiciousness) and the *Mettā Sutta* (Discourse on Loving-Kindness). These two *parittas* are recited on almost all religious and meaningful occasions, such as weddings and funerals, memorials, childbirth, birthdays, wedding receptions, and consecration ceremonies (Samuels 2005: 343). The nuns learn them by heart and their powerful chanting voices attract significant public attention. Their presence is sought after at various rites of passages to facilitate the ceremonial procedure and ensure a smooth ritual operation.

*Paṭṭhāna* recitation is another important ritual conducted on special occasions for the Buddhist public. Its popularity in Myanmar derives from a widespread belief that the Buddha's words become revealed in its recitation, invoking his protective and magical

powers. Nonetheless, *Paṭṭhāna* is a lengthy doctrine, and its recitation requires skills and stamina that take up almost a week to complete reciting. Traditionally in Myanmar, it was recited only by experienced senior monks, but in recent decades Buddhist nuns have started to conduct *Paṭṭhāna* recitation events by forming a group of chanters and taking turns to complete its long recitation. The popularity of *Paṭṭhāna* recitation by the nuns shows that the public have come to accept that nuns can also generate the magical power of the Buddha in their powerful recitation.

## **8.5 Preaching**

Buddhist nuns in Myanmar commonly give dhamma talks and instruct morality to the laity, although it is not normative for them to preach in public. Nuns, whenever visiting homes of their supporters, encourage people to do meritorious deeds and instruct them to abide by the precepts. Some nuns visit prisons to preach to female criminals about how to achieve better rebirth and others go to hospitals to console terminally ill patients. Moreover, helped by the latest technology, the younger generation of nuns have started to address the wider audience via social media and even through video conferencing. And yet, social prejudices persist, and Myanmar nuns are generally reluctant to face a large crowd and preach on a public platform. There is also a general concern about granting such authority to Buddhist nuns in Myanmar, which derives from an opposition to allow a woman to sit on the raised golden throne traditionally preserved for monks when preaching.

## **8.6 Social welfare work**

Social welfare activities are another area that monastic members are commonly involved in with their engagement with society. Some nuns find spiritual value in actively engaging with the disadvantaged and vulnerable. However, the Myanmar government did not encourage monastics members to engage in secular activities and even hindered the private sector to be involved in any social welfare type of work until the late 1990s (Thant 2020: 265–266). Moreover, people viewed social work as a poor distraction from the monastics' religious work such as scriptural learning and introspective contemplation, and the caring for the old and disabled customarily fell on the family and extended kin. Hence, when nuns contribute to the running of old people's homes or orphanages, they are criticized for being too involved with mundane affairs, so many are reluctant to take up social work as a full-time undertaking for fear that they could lose respect. It is also difficult to receive monetary support and donations from the Myanmar public for a social welfare type of work. Nonetheless, monastic members involved in welfare activities fulfil an essential role in recognizing the needs of those who receive no protection from families or support from local authorities. In this respect, the nuns work with the disadvantaged and vulnerable fill a social vacuum that is not accommodated within their kinship network or by the state.

Meanwhile, the general perception of welfare work by monastics seems to be changing following the disaster caused by the Asian Tsunami of 2004 and Cyclone Nargis in 2008, and more specifically their perception has changed drastically since the major earthquake in 2025. Many monks and nuns have been seen helping with relief activities, collecting donation funds and transporting food and essential supplies to those affected through their monastic networks. There are also changing donation practices among people in Myanmar. Customary donations that were offered only to monastic members are now being directed to helping victims of such disasters and providing another pathway to accumulate merit for lay donors.

## **9 Monastic education for Buddhist nuns in Myanmar**

From the earliest days, social prejudice and hostility existed towards the nuns who pursued monastic education. Dhamma teachers and masters of the scriptures were predominantly monks and not many were open-minded enough to accept the notion of providing women – especially nuns – with advanced scriptural knowledge.

### **9.1 Monastic education**

It was only around the turn of the twentieth century that nuns were allowed to sit in the scriptural exams conducted by the Myanmar state and receive state accreditation to become qualified dhamma teachers. Today, monastic students study three main Buddhist subjects in Myanmar, which are Pāli grammar, Buddhist philosophy (especially Abhidhamma), and monastic rules and regulations of the Vinaya. The principle of progression is incorporated into the monastic curriculum, but learning the Buddhist scriptures becomes difficult unless one has a good grounding in the Kaccāyana grammar, providing the basis for Pāli comprehension in reading the scriptures.

In their monastic curriculum, the study of Abhidhamma occupies a central place in Myanmar and students start by memorizing scriptural passages, chanting verses, and reciting parts relating to mind and body as listed in the Abhidhamma texts (Kyaw 2015: 413). But it is only at an advanced level that students start to reflect on the deeper meanings of key concepts and come to appreciate the knowledge base that they have already built. The methods and approaches differ widely in particular lineages and schools. And yet good teachers attract monastic students regardless, and those who can offer a systematic pedagogical method are much sought after, especially by students at advanced levels.

Presently, the Department of Religious Affairs of the Religious Ministry stipulates scriptural learning for nuns at five levels, which are the elementary *Abhidhamma Visudhimagga*

examination, *pahtama-nge* (primary stage), *pahtama-lat* (intermediate stage), *pahtama-gyi* (advanced stage), and *dhammacariya*. Annual scriptural exams are conducted at each of these levels and, having passed the three volumes assigned to a *dhammacariya* exam, a student is granted a title that qualifies her to teach the dhamma officially (Saruya 2020: 158).

The preparation for the scriptural exams requires a lengthy process of study and memorization, and sometimes it can take up to two or three decades to achieve this teaching qualification. Many students drop out due to ill health, fatigue, or simply not being able to withstand the relentless pressure of studying and learning. However, the performance-oriented educational system has provided the nuns with an upwardly mobile opportunity, and a channel to enhance their academic reputation. A nun can also advance her studies and take the five *Nikāya* examinations, conferring on her subsequent advance degrees. And yet, few continue studying after qualifying as *dhammacariya* as the degree in itself is sufficient to teach and/or start a nunnery school.

## 9.2 The development of nuns' education

King Mindon (1853–1878), a generous sponsor of the monastic community, was instrumental in promoting the position of Buddhist nuns and asked some of them to teach his daughters and ladies in the royal court (Dhammasami 2004: 132). From the royal capital in Mandalay, Sagaing Hill across the Irrawaddy River occupied a principal place for monastic education especially for Myanmar nuns. The first independent nunnery on record was Gutalon Gyaung ('one-cave nunnery'), founded in the mid-nineteenth century by Me Kin, a Buddhist nun originally from north-east India. This nunnery school in the Sagaing Hill produced many prominent nun teachers and students, which was also mentioned by Anagarika Dharmapāla, visiting from Ceylon in the late nineteenth century, who wrote about the advanced level of their education and the respect Myanmar nuns could command in society (Bartholomeusz 1994: 46).

When the Myanmar state allowed the nuns to sit in the government scriptural examination around the turn of the twentieth century, it opened a new opportunity for Myanmar nuns to focus their educational efforts. The nuns residing in nunneries around the Sagaing Hill played a central role in their academic endeavour and the first nun student from Thameikdaw Gyaung in Sagaing passed the *pahtama-gyi* level in 1915 – the third examination level and the highest the nuns were allowed to sit at that time (Kawanami 2013: 129). From the confines of the Sagaing Hill, they spread their scholarly lineage from nun teachers to students to the northern areas of Myanmar and to the former British hill station at Pyin Oo Lwin, down to central regions, and to Yangon and other towns in the lower regions. Their scholarly lineage was also transported to Nepal where the local nuns continue to wear pink robes in the tradition of Myanmar nuns (LeVine and Gellner 2007).

### **9.3 Cases of prominent nun teachers**

There are several prominent nuns who have overcome social obstacles and contributed to the advancement of the nuns' education in Myanmar. What is remarkable is that these nuns themselves often initiated the movement for advancing their monastic education and, through sheer tenacity, pried open many doors that were previously closed to them (Kawanami 2013: 136–143). Every life story of these pioneer nuns in Myanmar conveys a single-minded determination to study the Buddhist scriptures and each of their endeavours has contributed to raising the standards of nuns' monastic education and the creation of a nationwide network of nun teachers and students.

#### **9.3.1 Daw Dhammasari (1878–1971)**

Daw Dhammasari in Mingun was one of the pioneer nun scholars in twentieth-century Myanmar. She went to Ceylon to study the scriptures and was known for her linguistic expertise in Sinhala, Pāli, and Sanskrit. She became publicly known for her close association with a monk scholar U Vicittasara-bhivaṃsa (1911–1993). This monk commonly known as Mingun Tipitaka Sayadaw was one of the most erudite monk scholars, who left a significant mark on modern Myanmar Buddhism by playing a major role at the Sixth Buddhist Council. Daw Dhammasari acted as his personal mentor and they often talked about advanced philosophical issues, which was witnessed by the Australian author Marie Byles (1962: 68). Daw Dhammasari remained influential to him throughout his monastic life, earning the title *Tipitaka Medaw*, the 'honorary mother of the Tipitaka monk'. Consequently, she elevated the general image of nuns by her advanced scholarship and wise association with a highly learned monk.

#### **9.3.2 Daw Malaryi (1880–1984)**

From a young age, Daw Malaryi's main motive for becoming a nun was to study the Buddhist scriptures; however, few monks in the early twentieth century were willing to teach a nun student. Nonetheless, once initiated as a nun, she searched far and wide and came across Thiyanga Sayagyī, who had been a prominent monastic scholar with a distinguished title in Buddhist studies but had disrobed in the political turmoil following the deposition of King Thibaw by the British. By the time she met him, he was married and settled with his family in a remote village. Daw Marlayi persuaded him to come and live in the Sagaing Hill where she was about to start her nunnery school, called Thameikdaw Gyaung. Thiyanga Sayagyī moved to the area in 1910 and devoted his remaining life to the education of Myanmar nuns. He is still remembered as the 'Father of Myanmar nuns' education' by them. Young nuns and students who heard of the reputation of Daw Malaryi's nunnery school came to study even from far-away places. Daw Malaryi was a popular nun teacher and taught and lived until the ripe age of 104, producing one of the most established lineage of scholarly nuns in modern Myanmar.

### **9.3.3 Daw Nyanasari (1897–1976)**

Daw Nyanasari wanted to become a nun from a young age but her parents were fiercely opposed to her decision. When she turned seventeen, she ran away with her female accomplices in the middle of the night, cut off her own hair and fled to a nunnery where a sympathetic abbess promptly initiated them. After the initial shock of what had happened to their daughter, her parents, who were very religious, gradually came to accept their daughter's decision. At that time, Sagaing Hill had already established its name as an important educational centre for Buddhist nuns and Daw Malaryi was widely known as a prominent dhamma teacher. Daw Nyanasari went to her nunnery school and pleaded with Daw Malaryi to take her in as a student. Once accepted, she threw herself into learning the scriptures and, within a few years, she sat the government scriptural exams and earned her teaching qualifications.

In her later years, Daw Nyanasari went to Yangon, then the capital city, to play a more prominent role for Myanmar nuns. In 1947 she founded Thameikdaw-daya Thúhkítaramá Myan Aung Thiláshin Sathin-daik in Yangon, which soon attracted aspiring Buddhist women from all over the country. Once established as a leading Buddhist seminary for nuns, her interest moved to social welfare work, and she took an active role in providing education to orphans and children from poor families (Thant 2020: 268). In 1975, for her service to society, the Myanmar government granted her special privilege and a free pass for domestic travel. She passed away in 1976 at the height of her fame, but her nunnery school, now commonly known as Daw Nyanasari Thiláshin Sathin-daik in her honour, has become one of the largest nunnery schools. There are currently more than fifty branch nunneries operated by its graduate nun students all over Myanmar.

### **9.3.4 Daw Zanaka Malini (1949–2025)**

Daw Zanaka Malini was initiated and trained at the previous nunnery school of Daw Nyanasari. Having completed her monastic education, she took this scholarly lineage back to the Sagaing Hill with two dhamma teachers Daw Kusalawati and Daw Pawanatheri, and founded a branch nunnery called Sakyadhita Sathin-daik in 1998 (Saruya 2020: 161). The nunnery was founded on the 'one-pot' system, a system she inherited from that of Daw Nyanásari's nunnery in Yangon, where teachers and resident nuns were trained to share their resources and allocate chores to maximize their time for study and learning. Under the guidance of the prominent monk teacher U Tiloka-bhivaṃsa, otherwise known as Insein Sayadaw, the nuns learned how to improve their learning methods of Abhidhamma; and through the hard work of a group of nun teachers working with the abbess, the nunnery grew rapidly and became known for the high academic accomplishments of its nun students. By 2024, it had 300 resident nuns and five branch nunneries started by its graduates, which included the Buddhist College for Nuns in Yangon. However, the main nunnery school in Sagaing was destroyed by the earthquake on 28 March 2025, and Daw

Zanaka Malini, the abbess, perished under collapsed buildings. In its aftermath, however, its nun students and graduates came together to support their injured nun teachers, and the remaining resident students from Sagaing all reallocated to Pyin Oo Lwin for the foundation of a new nunnery school.

## **10 Conclusion**

Building on the personal struggles of their nun predecessors, Myanmar nuns have become successful in raising the number of nun students who pass the scriptural exams and in establishing their scholarly network throughout the country. Their success is evidenced in the rising popularity and changing perception of Buddhist nuns in society, supported by the high reputation of scholarly nuns circulated in the social media and through the donors' network. Buddhist nunnery schools in Myanmar have also multiplied almost tenfold in the last decades, and there is an increasing number of nun teachers who become established as state-sanctioned *dhammacariya*. However, although monastic education has allowed Myanmar nuns an upward and mobile channel to overcome various obstacles that have previously hindered their general progress, the religious position of Buddhist nuns remains ambiguous as they are not officially ordained. This points to the fact remains that Myanmar nuns are still 'betwixt and between' the spiritual world of ordained monks and the secular domain of lay donors.

## **Attributions**

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