

Sri Lanka – Myanmar Historial Relations



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Introduction

One of the earliest references to Buddhism in Myanmar is in the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa where mention is made of the two missionaries, Sona and Uttara sent by Emperor Asoka to Suvannabhumi at the same time Arahata Mahinda came to Sri Lanka. Suvannabhumi has been identified as Lower Burma. According to both Sinhalese and Burmese historical records, however, direct religious and cultural relations between Sri Lanka and Myanmar began in the 11th century.

Although India was the country of birth of the founder of Buddhism, Sri Lanka soon became an important centre of propagation of the Dhamma after Thera Mahinda's teachings took a strong foothold in the country. Writing down of the Tripitaka in the 1st century B.C. and its translation into Pali in the 5th century CE, the Sinhala commentaries on the Tripitaka coming down from the time of Thera Mahinda gave Sri Lanka an unparalleled position in the propagation of the Buddha's teaching in Pali, the lingua franca of the then Buddhist world. In addition, Sri Lanka was the land that possessed the unbroken lineage of ordination continuing from the time of Thera Mahinda and the associated religious scholarship. Furthermore, Sri Lanka was the site of sacred relics, the most important of which was the Tooth Relic of the Buddha.

Anuradhapura, the Sri Lanka capital had been a major metropolitan city since the 9th century B.C, the largest city, south of Indraprastha (modern Delhi), according to recent carbon dated archeology (Deraniyagala, S. U., 1992). Anuradhapura by the 4th – 5th centuries CE. with the three monastic institutions, Mahavihara, Abhayagiri and Jetavana, attracted Buddhist travellers on the sea route as well as on the land route to Southeast Asia and East Asia up to China. They stopped over in Anuradhapura, facilitated also by Sri Lanka's strategic position in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka had established itself as the religious metropolis of Southeast Asia from an early period.

Relations between Sri Lanka and Myanmar yielded mutually beneficial results. Myanmar Bhikkhus mastered the Tripitaka introduced by Sri Lanka, adopted the Sinhala form of ordination, and being inspired by Sinhala painting, art and architecture, created their own forms with a local flavour. In turn, Sinhala Bhikkhus received Higher Ordination back from Amarapura and Ramanna Bhikkhu lineages which contributed immensely to the educational, cultural and religious revival in Sri Lanka during the 18th and 19th centuries which paved the way for the development of the international Buddhist movement in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Direct links between Sri Lanka and Myanmar

Direct links between the two countries intensified after the king of Pagan Anawrahta (Anuruddha 1044-1077) conquered in 1057 Thaton (ancient Saddhammapura) in Ramannadesa (Lower Burma). The Culavamsa records that King Anuruddha requested King Vijayabahu I (1065-1120) to send him the sacred Tooth Relic, the proudest possession of Sri Lanka. The former is said to have enshrined a miraculously produced replica of the sacred Tooth Relic beneath the Shwezigon pagoda, the construction of which is ascribed to him by tradition. King Anuruddha also sent four envoys to Sri Lanka to bring the Tripitaka. Not too long thereafter, King Vijayabahu, according to the Culavamsa, sent envoys with gifts and a letter written with his own hand in Pali to Anuruddha, seeking his assistance to defeat the Colas. But before help came, Vijayabahu had defeated the Cholas, and in 1071, sent a religious mission, requesting for learned Bhikkhus to restore the Sangha in Sri Lanka which had suffered a setback due to the Chola invasion. Thus with twenty senior Bhikkhus who arrived from Ramannadesa (Lower Burma), Higher Ordination was re-established in Sri Lanka. Some scholars argue that these were Sinhala monks who had fled Sri Lanka during the Cola rule, and were living in Ramannadesa. A good reason for this argument is the fact that the Higher Ordination conferred on Sri Lankan monks on this occasion has not been described by the place of origin as Siam Nikaya, Ramanna Nikaya or Amarapura Nikaya, or as Sinhala Sangha when Sri Lanka monks conferred Higher Ordination on Burmese monks or as Lankavamsa as in the case of Thai, Cambodian and Lao monks (Hema Goonatilake 2001, 2003).

Sinhala Bhikkhus Taught Pali Language through Sinhala Script

King Kyanzitta of Myanmar (1084-1113) who succeeded King Anuruddha's son, Sawlu (1077-1084), too maintained good relations with Sri Lanka. He received nine Buddha relics sent by the Sri Lankan king which he enshrined in several stupas. He undertook the task of collecting and revising the Tripitaka (3rd Swehsandaw Inscription, Epigra. Birm. I, part II, p.163). Gordon Luce has shown that this period was one of intensive scholarly work with the assistance of a large number of Sinhala Bhikkhus to carry out the task of teaching Pali through the Sinhala script (Pali has no script of its own). Translation from Pali into Mon initially, and later into Burmese was done on a large scale. Luce has also added that all versions of the Tripitaka from that time right down to the edition issued by the Sixth Buddhist Council in 1956 have strictly adhered to the Sinhala version (Luce, Gordon, 1969).

There is evidence to show that Kyanzitta's son Rajakumar mastered Pali and the Tripitaka under the guidance of Sinhala Bhikkhus, and played a leadership role in the revision of the Tripitaka in close collaboration with Sinhala Bhikkhus. It is important to note here that within a century after the launching of the intensive Pali studies programme, assisted by Sinhala Bhikkhus, Pagan had become an important centre of Pali scholarship as evident from the composition of the famous Pali grammar Saddaniti by the Burmese Bhikkhu Aggavamsa.

Sinhala Bhikkhus transformed the cultural landscape of Pagan

The Mon dominance over scholarship in Myanmar until then, was soon replaced by Sinhala Theravada. Tantric Mahayana elements gave way to Theravada. The Abeyadana temple which was built by Kyanzitta's first queen, a Bengali princess with Mahayana inclinations, has distinct Tantric elements while the Nagayon, just a hundred yards away, was a Theravada temple built by the king, soon after 1090 (BBHC, Vol. II 1961, p. 280). Religious thought, art, architecture and literature in the subsequent centuries were all shaped by the Sinhala form of Theravada. Mahayana as well as Hindu elements, especially noted in iconography were soon absorbed to suit current Theravada tastes, often becoming merely decorative (Strachan, P., 1988, p. 10)

Luce has pointed out that the two literary sources that influenced the early Pagan artists, including Rajakumar, the son of Kyanzitta were the Jatakas and the Mahavamsa. The walls of the Myinkaba Kubyauk-gyi Temple of Rajakumar are adorned with illustrations of the Jatakas and scenes from the life of the Buddha. A brief description of the painting is written in ink below each panel.

It appears that at a time when illiteracy was widespread, artistic portrayal in paint with some writing inside the temple was the quickest and the most effective medium of propagating the new faith.

Rajakumar appears to have studied the Sri Lanka chronicle, the Mahavamsa, as is evident from the walls of the Myinkaba Kubyauk-gyi Temple that have pictorial illustrations of a large number of episodes covering the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka up to the reign of King Vijayabahu, the contemporary of King

Anuruddha and Kyanzittha. The scenes in these pictorial illustrations include: the Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka, Emperor Asoka and King Devanampiyatissa, Asoka's message and the gifts for Devanampiyatissa's coronation, Devanampiyatissa's meeting with Thera Mahinda and Theri Sanghamitta's arrival in Sri Lanka carrying the Bodhi tree. On another wall are the scenes from the life of the Mahavamsa hero, Dutthagamini, namely: his elephant Kandula, he is given the name Abhaya (fearless), Abhaya wants to go out and fight the enemy, when his father forbids him, he sends his father a woman's dress making the father angry, King Elara and the number of villages he administers and his justice bell is rung by a cow when his son drives his chariot over a calf. Elsewhere are the scenes relating to the activities of King Vasabha, Siri Sanghabodhi and the physician-king Buddhadasa (Hema Goonatilake 2006).

This historical exposition on Sri Lanka under the guidance of Sinhala Bhikkhus marks the beginning of historiography in Myanmar. It is significant that the Burmese chronicles such as Mahasammatawamsa, Rajawamsa and Sasanawamsa were directly modelled after the Mahavamsa (Hla Pe, pp. 52).

Burmese King's marriage to a Sri Lankan Princess

According to the Burmese chronicle Hmaman Yasawinkyi, Alaungsithu (1112-1167 A.C.), King of Burma (contemporary with Parakramabahu I (1153-1186), visited Sri Lanka, married a daughter of the Sinhalese king and returned with an image of Maha Kassapa Thera who was highly venerated at the time in Sri Lanka. The Burmese king also appointed an ambassador to Sri Lanka. There is no reference to the Burmese king's marriage to a Sri Lankan princess in Sri Lankan sources. Both Burmese and Sri Lankan sources, however, agree on the appointment of a Sri Lankan ambassador in Burma whose reporting later ended the friendship between the two kings. The Culavamsa records that the Burmese king caught sight of a letter addressed to the King of Cambodia in the hands of the Sinhalese envoys, and suspecting that they were envoys sent to Cambodia, seized them and punished them. He also immediately stopped Sri Lanka's lucrative elephant trade with foreign countries, and captured the elephants, money and vessels of Sinhalese envoys.

Later on another occasion, the Burmese captured a Sinhalese princess, sent to Cambodia (presumably for King Jayavarman VI's son) by Parakramabahu I who was pursuing trade and diplomatic relations with Cambodia which had close links with China. In retaliation, Parakramabahu I sent a fleet of ships to Ramannadesa (Lower Burma) under the command of Nagaragiri Kitti. The ships landed in Kasumi and defeated the Ramanna army. This event is recorded in the Mahavamsa and is confirmed by the Devanagala inscription of Sri Lanka.

Sinhala Bhikkhus resolve conflict between Sri Lanka and Myanmar

When relations were strained between Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) and Alaungsithu (1113-1165) of Myanmar due to problems of trade referred to above (Cv LXXXVI, GPC, pp. 114, 118), it was the Sinhala Bhikkhus who came to rescue relations. The Culavamsa says that the people of Ramanna after the breakdown of relations between the two countries following the success of Parakramabahu I's raid in Myanmar, sent messengers with letters to Sinhala Bhikkhus requesting a settlement. A settlement was thus brought about through the mediation of Sinhala Bhikkhus (For details, see Sirisena 1978, pp. 33).

Whatever the nature and the extent of the conflict between Sri Lanka and Myanmar were, the resumption of political and cultural links brought about a new wave of religious and cultural relations between Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

Myanmar Sangharaja Seeks Refuge in Sri Lanka

In spite of the political problems between the two countries, religious relations seem to have continued. Sangharaja Panthagu of Myanmar who succeeded Shin Araham left Myanmar in disgust and sought refuge in Sri Lanka in 1167 when King Narathu (1167-1170) poisoned his elder brother who was the legitimate heir to the throne in a conspiracy (GPC p. 133). The Sangharaja stayed in Sri Lanka for six years.

Sinhala Sangha established in Myanmar

Sri Lanka had become an important centre of Buddhism under Parakramabahu I that it attracted monks from all over South-east Asia. A delegation of Bhikkhus headed by Sangharaja Uttarajiva who succeeded Panthagu, visited Sri Lanka in 1170 on pilgrimage along with a Samanera by the name of Chapata. Chapata who received Higher Ordination from the Sri Lankan Bhikkhus, mastered the Tripitaka, and remained in Sri Lanka for ten years (Kalyani Inscriptions, pp. 50).

Sangharaja Uttarajiva after his return to Myanmar was hailed as the "First Pilgrim of Sri Lanka", and this indicates that Sri Lanka was considered as the fountainhead of Theravada Buddhism. Chapata returned to Myanmar along with four other monks so that they could perform ecclesiastical acts separately. The other four were Tamalinda (son of Jayavarman VII of Cambodia), Sivali from Tamralipti in Bengal, Ananda from Kancipura and Rahula, a Sinhala Bhikkhu. When Chapata refused to perform ecclesiastical acts together with the Myanmar Bhikkhus whose vinaya was thought to be not pure enough, King Narapatisithu (1173-1210) who was impressed with the Bhikkhus who received Higher Ordination from Sri Lanka gave full patronage to set up the new sect, "Sihala Sangha". Thus in 1181, the Sinhala sect of Sangha was established in Myanmar, the first South East Asian country to formally do so. (Other countries such as Siam, Cambodia and Laos followed later.) Many Burmese novices were ordained by them, and these Sinhala sect Bhikkhus were called the Pacchimigana (later

school) and the Burmese Bhikkhus were called the Purimagana (earlier school). (Later, the Sinhala monk, Rahula who was the most erudite in the team headed by Chapata, fell in love with a dancing girl in Martaban - present Molamaine - in Lower Burma and left the Order).

Sinhala Sangharaja establishes arannavasi community in Lower Myanmar

According to the Mulasasana and the Jinakalamali, a Sinhala Mahathera named Udumbaramahasami from Udumbaragiri (Dimbulagala) forest fraternity had arrived in Martaban in Lower Burma in 1331 together with twelve Mon monks who had gone to Sri Lanka to be re-ordained. The king and the people who were delighted with the monk's virtues conferred the honorific title 'Udumbarapuppha (Udumbara flower) Mahasami' on him. His fame attracted monks from afar, and two Mahatheras from Sukhothai (first kingdom of Siam), Sumana and Anomadassi were among them. They received re-ordination from the Mahasami and studied under him for five years. They went back to Sukhothai, and at the completion of ten years in the Mahasami's order, went back to Mahasami and received the grade of Thera. Udumbara Mahasami has been identified as Sangharaja Medhankara, the author of the Lokappadipakasara (Sirisena 1978, pp. 90, 95).

Sinhala Bhikkhus in Ava

By 1312, Ava (Ratanapura) had become the capital of Upper Myanmar. Around 1429, two Sinhala Bhikkhus Srisaddhammalankara and Sihala Mahasami, having been received by the king of Ava with great honour had settled down there. They joined the band of Myanmar scholars there, among whom Ariyavamsa Thera was the most outstanding. He is best known for his sub-commentary of the Abhidhamma. The Sasanavamsa (pp 102-104) gives a vivid description of the rigour of scholarship during this time including an anecdote of how Ariyavamsa Thera presented his writings to the assembly of Bhikkhus on every uposatha day, and how even the slightest error was pointed out by visiting Bhikkhus like in modern academic seminars. This is indicative of the tradition of rigorous religious writings introduced by Sinhala Bhikkhus and continued by the Burmese, resulting in a vast collection of authoritative texts, both in Pali and Burmese language.

Myanmar Bhikkhus re-ordained by Bhikkhus ordained in Sri Lanka

King Dhammaceti (1472-92), formerly a Mon Bhikkhu who had become King of Pegu (present-day Bago) in Lower Burma received Bhikkhu education in one of the many Sinhala Sangha monasteries in Ava. The Kalyani Inscriptions (1476) record that the King, determined to raise the state of the Sangha, led a reform movement. He chose 22 senior monks to go to Sri Lanka and receive Higher Ordination from 17th to 20th July 1476 under the leadership of Mahathera Vidagama. The King of Sri Lanka during this time was Buvanekabahu VI. When

the Myanmar Bhikkhus returned after receiving Higher Ordination, King Dhammaceti had an ordination hall (sima) consecrated for the purpose of performing ecclesiastical acts. This hall was known as Kalyani Sima because these Bhikkhus had received their ordination on the Kalyani river in Sri Lanka. After three years, King Dhammaceti organized an ordination ceremony for the entire order of Myanmar Bhikkhus to receive re-ordination with the assistance of two Bhikkhus with ten years after upasampada to serve as preceptor (upajjhaya) and teacher (acariya) found among those who had received upasampada in Sri Lanka at the beginning of the century. This re-ordination practice spread rapidly and a total of 15,666 Bhikkhus received Sinhala form of re-ordination in hundreds of ordination halls constructed for the purpose. They were termed Sihala Sangha.

Dhammaceti invited monks from Lower Burma, Arakan, Ava, Toungoo, Shan kingdom, and Sukhothai and Chiangmai in Siam and Cambodia to come and take their ordination again (Maung Htin Aung, p. 101). Thus in Burma, it was firmly held for centuries that ordination in its purest form existed in Sri Lanka.

Myanmar King's desire to possess the Sacred Tooth Relic

King Bayinnaung (1551-1581) of the Toungoo dynasty who united the whole of Myanmar was a great patron of Buddhism, constructed monasteries, repaired the Shwedagon pagoda and held mass ordinations at the Kalyani Sima. He is specially known for the construction of the Mahaceti pagoda in Pegu (Bago). He made several offerings to the temple of the Tooth in Kandy by providing for lights to burn in the shrine and had sent craftsmen to beautify the building. He had even sent a broom for use there made from his own and his chief queen's hair. Being determined to possess the Tooth Relic of Kandy with the intention of becoming the greatest monarch in the world, he even made an attempt to purchase a replica of the relic at a very high cost through the Portuguese who burnt it in Goa. Both the Burmese King and the Portuguese believed it to be the authentic one after the Portuguese captured it in Jaffna. Thirteen years after that attempt failed, the Burmese King sent envoys to Sri Lanka requesting for a princess in marriage. As a wedding present, Don Juan Dharmapala of the Kotte kingdom sent a princess together with a tooth which he assured was the authentic relic in Kandy. In 1576, the princess and the tooth arrived in Myanmar and were received with the highest honour. The tooth was deposited in a jewelled casket beneath the Mahaceti pagoda. The Tooth Relic never left Kandy and the King of the Kotte kingdom never had a daughter!

Sri Lanka's connection with Arakan

When Buddhism suffered a set-back in then Myanmar, Burmese Bhikkhus had fled to the then kingdom of Rakkangadesa or Arakan (Rakhine within present-day Myanmar) which was considered a part of Burma because of the common race and language. Arakan is best known for the Mahamuni Buddha image believed to be cast in the 2nd century A.C. which is probably the oldest in Burma. (This image, now in Mandalay was brought from Arakan by King Bodawpaya

after his conquest of Arakan in 1784.) Arakan too had close relations with Sri Lanka. There is evidence that around the time of the founding of Maruk-U, the last capital of Arakan in 1433 which is described as the Golden Age of Arakan Theravada Buddhism, many copies of the Tripitaka brought from Sri Lanka were placed near the image of Mahamuni. One of the temples built by Arakan king, Minbin (1531-53 CE) known as Andaw, had enshrined a replica of the sacred Tooth Relic from Sri Lanka. One of the religious buildings constructed later by another king, Narapatigyi (1638-45 CE) was Pitakataik, a library to house the Tripitaka brought from Sri Lanka (Harvey, pp. 313). The Portuguese historian Queros mentioned that the major temple they destroyed in Trincomalee around 1620 was headed by a Buddhist monk (Mahaterunnanse) from Arakan indicating the presence of Arakan monks in Sri Lanka at that time.

Efforts to bring back upasampada from Arakan

With the arrival of the Portuguese and the imposition of their Christian faith on the people of Sri Lanka in a most brutal manner, Sri Lanka witnessed the darkest period in the history of Buddhism in the country. King Vimaladharmasuriya I (1592-1605) being unable to find five Bhikkhus to conduct an upasampada ceremony, sent a mission to Arakan requesting for Bhikkhus to come over to Sri Lanka to confer upasampada on Sinhala Samaneras. A group of Bhikkhus from Arakan headed by Nandicakka arrived in Sri Lanka and held an upasampada ceremony in the Udakukkhepa Sima on the Mahaveli river at the landing place called Ganthambatittha (Gatambe, Kandy) within a boundary drawn on the water (Culavamsa 94 15-22) in 1596 (Malalasekera, 1994, p. 268). This revival inaugurated by Vimaladharmasuriya I did not last long. Due to continuous fighting against the Portuguese until their expulsion in 1656, political instability and the lack of royal patronage since then, Buddhism faced further decline. Within less than a hundred years, Vimaladharmasuriya II (1687-1707), decided to follow the example of his grand uncle, and sent a request to Arakan to send Bhikkhus. Thirty three Arakan Bhikkhus with Thera Santana as the head arrived and performed upasampada on thirty three Samaneras at the same Ganthambatittha in 1697 (Culavamsa 97 8-15).

Belief of the existence of pure Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar

Not too long after the reign of Vimaladharmasuriya II, the Sangha had further degenerated, and the first King of the Nayakkar clan, Sri Vijaya Rajasinghe again solicited help from the Dutch in 1740 to bring over monks from Myanmar. The yacht 'Constantia' left Colombo with an embassy from Kandy headed by Doranagama Muhandiram on 23 February 1741. Due to a series of mishaps, they could not reach Pegu in Lower Burma, as planned, and after a year, returned to Colombo. Dutch sources reveal the King's persistent desire to get monks from Arakan "where the Buddhist religion was pure and orthodox", and since the internal wars continued in Arakan, the Dutch convinced the King finally to accept the proposal to send envoys to Siam.

The establishment of Siam Nikaya and Politics of exclusion

After the establishment of Siam Nikaya in 1753 by Siamese monks headed by Upali Thera, Ven. Sitinamaluwe Dhammajoti of a non-Goyigama caste received upasampada from Upali Thera himself. A large number of leading non-Goyigama low-country pupils of Saranankara as well as pupils of Ven. Sitinamaluwe Dhammajoti, such as Vehelle Dhammadinna, Bovala Dhammananda, Karatota Dhammarama and Saliele Maniratana also received upasampada from the Sangha hierarchy of Siam Nikaya in Kandy.

However, a royal decree promulgated by King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe in 1762 prohibited upasampada ordination to non-Goyigama castes (National Archives 5/63/157/9), an order that was not in keeping with Vinaya rules. The decree claimed to prevent undignified practices such as taking off robes to wrap around the waist when greeting the king. (Malalgoda, *Ibid*, p. 89). The decree also claimed that the monks even after receiving upasampada, continued to be engaged in their former vocations such as devil dancing, drum beating and fishing, laundering and serving laymen. This king of Nayakkar (South India) origin may have also been influenced by residues of strong caste prejudices which his household brought from Hindu South India. (Only members from "high caste" families were ordained in the Christian churches, both in India and Sri Lanka at that time. Even today, Dalits who make up more than 75 percent of the Catholics in India have less than 5 percent of priests.)

Non-Goyigama Samaneras organize their own upasampada

As a result of this royal decree, there were many scholarly Non-Goyigama Samaneras who were denied upasampada. They were thus compelled to organize their own upasampada ceremonies. The first such upasampada ceremony was conducted in Totagamu Rajamaha Vihara in Telwatta in the Southern Province in 1772 under the patronage of Ven. Vagegoda Dhammakusala Mahathera of the Siam Nikaya together with nine other monks. Since the validity of the sima of the first upasampada was disputed, a second upasampada ceremony was held in Tangalla, Ketantota in 1778 under the patronage of Ven. Induruwe Indajoti, also of the Siam Nikaya. The same group of monks received upasampada again. Both upasampada ceremonies were strongly disapproved of by the Sangha hierarchy of the Siam Nikaya in Kandy.

Since the non-Goyigama monks did not gain recognition from the King and the Sangha establishment in Kandy, they now looked for the authorities of another Buddhist country (Malalgoda p. 97). Welitara Gnanawimalatissa (1769-1834) who was residing in Ambagahapiti Vihara (Ambarukkaramaya), Welitara boarded a ship from Galle harbour in March 1798 along with 5 Samaneras and 2 lay devotees, and made a tedious journey lasting 2 years and 2 months.

The Buddhists in the Maritime provinces who were denied access to a valid ordination lineage, got wealthy laymen to finance an expedition to Burma with the hope of founding a new monastic lineage. Earlier, Dines De Zoysa Wijayasiriwardhana Jayatilake Sahabandhu of Welitara, a leading headman in the area had become Gnanawimalatissa's chief patron and had offered his own residence Ambagahapitiye Walawwa to the temple.

It is relevant to note here that Welitara Gnanawimalatissa had received novice ordination from Welivita Saranankara Sangharaja himself at the initiative of Ven. Bowala Dhammananda who had obtained upasampada in 1753 in Kandy, and who had a succession of pupils of the Mulgirigala parampara (pupillary succession) (Buddhadatta, 1950, pp. 20).

Founder of Amarapura Nikaya receives upasampada

Welitara Gnanawimalatissa Thera and his team arrived in Amarapura, the then capital of Burma in May 1800, and King Bodawpaya (1782-1819) himself welcomed them and assisted them during their stay there. The Samaneras received upasampada from Burmese Bhikkhus under the leadership of the Burmese Sangharaja, Nanabhivamsa at the Suvannaguha Sima in 1800 (Malagoda, *Ibid*, p. 98). The others who received upasampada were Venerables Madampe Uttamadheeratissa, Kosgoda Vipulatissa, Brahmanawatte Jinapalatissa, Bogahawatte Jayatujinatissa, and Waturegama Dhammadharatissa. The Sasanavamsa, written in 1861 by the Burmese monk Pannasami, the tutor of the then reigning king Meng-dun-Mang has recorded this event in detail.

Establishment of Amarapura Nikaya

Welitara Gnanawimalatissa Thera was conferred by the King of Burmese the title "Rajaguru Mahanayaka" with a royal act of appointment dated 31st January 1802. The Sinhala Bhikkhus returned to Colombo in March 1803 with five senior Burmese Bhikkhus, headed by Aggasara Thera, carrying the Tripitaka texts, commentaries, sub-commentaries, grammar, prosody and a letter from the Sangharaja to the Sri Lankan monks. Soon after their arrival, they established an udakukkhepa sima (a flotilla of boats moved together to form a platform on the water) on Madu river at Balapiti Modara. On Vesak Full moon Day of 1802, under the presidentship of Aggasara Thera, the most senior of the Burmese monks, upasampada was conferred on many Samaneras who had not received upasampada until then. This marked the formation of the Amarapura Nikaya, as distinguished from Siam Nikaya.

The British Governor Sir Edward Barnes approved the Mahanayaka title conferred by the King of Burma to Gnanawimalatissa Thera and gave formal recognition as the Mahanayaka of Amarapura Nikaya in May 1826.

The first monastic college in Southern province

One of the greatest contributions made by Welitara Gnanawimalatissa Thera was the opening of a pirivena (monastic college), Ambagahapitiye Pirivena the first in the Southern Province, about the same time as the Parama Dhamma Cetiya that opened in 1845, and before the commencement of Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara Monastic Colleges. Gnanawimalatissa Thera was assisted in the academic activities of the Monastic College by his pupil Beratuduve Dhammadharatissa (who succeeded him as Mahanayaka) and another pupil Kahawe Gnanananda. Ambagahapitiye Pirivena, registered in the Department of Public Instruction with a new name Sugatasasanodaya Pirivena soon became an illustrious seat of learning.

More Sri Lankan monks received upasampada in Myanmar

A second mission to Burma was undertaken by Bogahapitiye Dhammajoti Thera, a pupil of Bogahawatte Jayatujinatissa who received upasampada in Amarapura along with the founder of the Amarapura Nikaya. With assistance from his teacher and financial help of Mahavidanamudali Kornelis de Abrew Rajapakse Seneviratne of Galvehera Walawwa, Bogahapitiye Dhammajoti left for Burma in 1806. Four other samaneras and two laymen joined him and set sail from Galle port. They received upasampada at the Suvannaguha Sima from the Sangharaja Gnanabhivamsa from whom the founder himself had received. When they prepared to depart Burma, the Burmese Sangharaja handed over to Bogahapitiye Dhammajoti, many Dhamma books including the Veda Vinicchaya, a Burmese text which he later translated into Pali.

There were several other monks who subsequently went to Burma and received upasampada. Attudave Dhammarakkhitatissa Thera, another pupil of Bowala Dhammananda Thera, left with two Samaneras Polwatte Saranapala and Kirinde Dhammananda. They also received upasampada at Suvannaguha Sima in Amarapura from Sangharaja Gnanabhivamsa. When they left Burma, they carried a letter from Sangharaja Gnanabhivamsa written in Pali for Ambagahapitiye Thera (Buddhadatta, Ibid, pp.39).

Sri Lankan monk receives upasampada in Kalyani Sima in Myanmar

Kataluwe Gunaratanatissa Thera (1752-1832), also a pupil of Bowala Dhammananda Thera, left for Burma in September 1807 accompanied by Ven. Bogahawatte Jayatujinatissa who had received upasampada in Amarapura together with Ambagahapitiye Thera in Burma. When they reached Ramannarattha (Lower Burma), they were received by the provincial ruler and were directed to the Sanghanayaka of Pegu (present day Bago). The provincial ruler went to the capital Amarapura and got the permission from the King as well as from the Sangharaja to conduct the upasampada ceremony at the Kalyani Sima which was established over 300 years earlier by those Burmese monks who received upasampada on the Kelani river in Sri Lanka. In March

1809, Kataluwe Gunaratanatissa Thera together with seven Sri Lankan Samaneras received upasampada under the Sanghanayaka Medhananda Dhaja at the Kalyani Sima. Kataluwe Gunaratanatissa Thera returned to Sri Lanka in June 1810 and established in Dodanduwa the Lanka Kalyani Vamsa Nikaya, a branch of the Amarapura Nikaya.

Founder of Swejin sect visits Sri Lanka

Mahathera Jagara, founder of the Swejin sect in Myanmar (so named after his birth place in Myanmar), the writer of several Dhamma and Vinaya books, together with four senior Burmese monks and four laymen arrived in Galle harbour in 6 April 1878. They were the guests of Samson de Abrew Wijegunaratne Rajapakse family at Mahakappina Walawwa in Welitara. After visiting the Temple of the Tooth, Sri Mahabodhi and other Buddhist sites, the Burmese monks spent seven months in Welitara teaching Dhamma and Vinaya. The Upasampada was conferred at a grand ceremony at a Udakukkhepa Sima, and hundreds of monks were lodged and served with alms in specially constructed buildings at the Mahakappina Walawwa premises. For the service rendered by Jagara Mahathera, he was honoured with the title 'Siri Saddhammavamsapala Jagara Mahathera'.

Culaganthi Nikaya founded

Welitara Gnanatilake Thera of the Ambagahapitiya succession, who had obtained upasampada in 1871, wished to re-ordain under a visiting group of monks of the Maha Ganthi Nikaya of Arakan, headed by Ukkanvamsa Maha Sangharaja in 1886. Welitara Gnanatilake Thera was awarded the Mahanayaka position of this new Culaganthi Nikaya, and became its founder. He subsequently wrote 18 Sanna texts.

The significance of the formation of Amarapura Nikaya

All these sub-divisions of the Amarapura Nikaya which emerged over the decades, were mainly created by the monks' eagerness to improve the educational conditions in different provinces in the country. The monks in the Amarapura Nikaya, not being a part of a wealthy feudal elite, admitted pupils from a wide social strata – both class and caste. This was similar to the situation under Welivita Saranankara Sangharaja before the introduction of the Siam Nikaya, and of course similar to the original Sangha during the Buddha's time. The Amarapura Nikaya monks inspired the construction of temples and the establishment of many monastic colleges with patrons from all over the country. The Amarapura Nikaya eventually gave rise to a generation of scholar monks. The key contributors to the religious debates of the 19th century came from the Amarapura Nikaya. Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera became the central figure with his unrivalled debating skills.

The establishment of the Amarapura Nikaya was also significant because it marked a change in the social dynamic of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. For the first time, a monastic lineage had been created not through royal patronage of a Sri Lankan king – mainly centred in the Kandyan region - but through the collective action of a dedicated group of Buddhist laymen in the Southern province.

Formation of Ramanna Nikaya

A second Nikaya of Burmese origin, the Ramanna Nikaya was to follow in 1861, approximately 60 years after the formation of the Amarapura Nikaya. The key figure was Ambagahawatte Saranankara.

Born in a village in the Southern Province, Ambagahawatte Saranankara was ordained as Samanera on 15th June 1847, and received upasampada from Malwatta Temple of the Siam Nikaya in Kandy on 15th May 1856 as a pupil of Ven. Bentara Atthadassi. Both the teacher and the Samanera were not happy at the way they were treated in dealing with the upasampada. On 10th October 1860, Ambagahawatte Saranankara together with four others who had also received upasampada from Siam Nikaya set sail from the Galle Fort for Myanmar. They received upasampada on the 25th February 1861 from the monks presided by Sangharaja Gneyyadhamma Munivara of Ratanapunna Vihara in Mandalay under the patronage of King Mendung in Mandalay. Ambagahawatte Saranankara was ordained as Indasabhavara Gnanasami After having spent about a year under their Burmese preceptors, they proceeded to Kalyani Sima in Pegu in Ramanna to renew their ordination and returned to Sri Lanka on 18th August 1862. A month after Ambagahawatte Thera's return, Ven. Puvakdandawe Pannananda left for Burma with five others, all pupils of the latter's teacher and eight of pupils' pupils. They arrived in Pegu in early 1863 and received upasampada. These two groups of monks under the leadership of Ambagahawatte Thera with the participation of 24 monks, performed the first upasampada ceremony of the Ramanna Nikaya on four Samaneras on 12 June 1864. It was performed on the Gneyyadhammabhi Munivara udakukkhepa sima in Mahamodara, Galle.

In the same year, a monastic centre was established at the Mula Maha Viharaya, Payagala where Ambagahawatte Thera resided. This temple became the educational centre for the growing numbers of Samaneras who ordained in the Ramanna Nikaya. This temple later came to be known as the Dharmagupta Pirivena. Ambagahawatte Thera was appointed the Mahanayaka of the Ramanna Nikaya on 15th February 1880.

Monk with upasampada from Burma ruled Assam

There is an interesting aside to the Sinhalese monks ordained in Burma. Waturegama Dhammadharatissa Thera who received upasampada in 1800 in Burma along with the founder of the Amarapura Nikaya in Sri Lanka, ruled the

kingdom of Assam for a brief period. Waturegama Thera who stayed behind in Burma after receiving ordination went to Assam (which was under Burma then), and became popular as a teacher of Buddhist monks there. He was subsequently invited by the King there to serve as his religious advisor (Rajaguru). When the British army from Calcutta attacked the kingdom of Assam in 1824, the King entrusted the affairs of governing the kingdom temporarily to the Waturegama Thera, and entered the battle. When the King was killed, his ministers unanimously decided to appoint the Thera as the King of Assam. When the victorious British demanded Assam to surrender, the Thera who detested human destruction, dissuaded the ministers from going to war, and settled for peace. The British desirous of showing their gratitude, wanted to grant any of the Thera's wishes. The only wish he had was to be sent back home to Sri Lanka safely.

Conclusion

The cultural, religious and political relationship between Myanmar and Sri Lanka spans a period of around thousand years. The relationship has been mutually beneficial for both countries on many fronts. It is a good foundation to strengthen the friendship between the two countries. With the rise of Asia as the centre of economic, political and cultural focus in the world, we can together make Buddhism again the unifying force in Asia as well as across the new globalised world at a time when Buddhism is being widely spread in the Western world. We can together make Buddhist Thought and the Buddhist Way of Life a collective reality so that the world at large could gain long lasting benefits.

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