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BUDDHIST CONTACTS WITH MYANMAR (Traditional and Textual Aspect)

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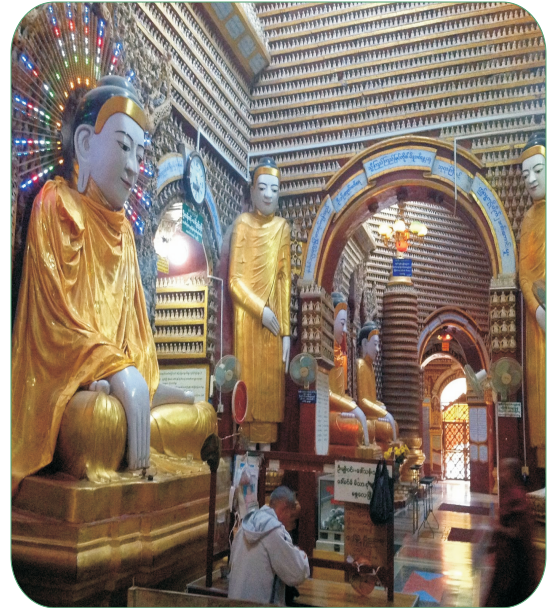
ABSTRACT

In the pre-historic times, various primitive peoples—mostly from the long valley of Yangtze Kian migrated down to Myanmar from time-immemorial. Such early waves of migration of Mongoloid peoples swamped the whole Myanmar since Neolithic period while the Negritos—black dwarfs with woolly hair, flat nose and thick lip who still survive in the northern Malay Peninsula were the earliest inhabitants of the long coastal strip of Myanmar. The latter is known in linguistics as Austronesian (Indonesians) a sub-family of Austric Super Family. Next to Austronesian was Austroasiatic which include Mon-Khmer speakers who entered Myanmar. Consequently, the Austronesians proceeded southward to southern islands. Hence the term in linguistics Austronesian, languages spoken in to southern islands. Austroasiatic is a linguistic term, meaning languages spoken in mainland of south Asia extending from central India in the west to the shore of Vietnam in the far east and from Yunnan in the north to Nicobar island in the south.

KEYWORDS :Buddhist Contacts , time-immemorial, linguistics Austronesian.

INTRODUCTION

The third wave of migration into Myanmar were numerous members of Tibeto-Myanmar. The Shans and other allied ethnic groups belong to Thai-Chines sub-family reached Myanmar much later than Tibeto-Myanmar and Mon-Khmer speakers. In addition to these major waves of migration in the remote past, there were constant flows of smaller groups by smaller tribes speaking different languages and dialects. Despite the difference in languages



and dialects between each other, all the ethnic groups or the indigenous peoples of Myanmar belong anthropologically to only one common race “Mongoloid”.

Obviously, the Mons who belong to the Mon-Khmer stock of Austroasiatic sub-family were the oldest inhabitants of Myanmar who had contacts with India from very early times and were pioneers in wet-rice cultivation. Perhaps they had introduced to India that art of wet-rice cultivation and in exchange the Indians brought them the faiths of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other cultural elements which they passed on to their neighbours. (Rice & Religion by G.H.Luce, JSS Vol. 53/2) Significantly, the Mons played a prominent role as the major agent in spreading and propagating the Indian civilization in Indo-China including Myanmar in the

historic past.

The Pyu who came to Myanmar earliest of all among members of the Tibeto-Myanmar sub-family also had contacts with India from very early times. They established their kingdoms in central and northern Myanmar contemporary with the Indianized states of Mon and Khmer which flourished from 1st to 6th centuries A.D.

With the coming of the most advanced Myanmar into the fertile areas of central Myanmar in the 9th century A.D, the existing Pyu and Mon peoples surviving at those places were naturally assimilated by the majority Myanmar who founded their famous kingdom of Bagan known as Arimaddanapura after the destruction of the Pyu kingdom of Sri Ksetra (Old Pyay) by the Nan Chao (Old Thai) of Yunnan in 832 A.D. The brilliant Myanmar kingdom of Bagan flourished with high culture from 11th to 13th centuries A.D. during which Mon and Myanmar combined their strenuous efforts in developing Buddhism to its height by the first and foremost joined hand attempts of King Aniruddha and his mentor Mon saint known as Shin Araham.

Trade with India brought Buddhism from southern India. By the A.D. 4th century, many in the Irrawaddy valley had converted to Buddhism thereby Theravada Buddhism flourishes in Myanmar. With reference to stone inscriptions, palm leaf inscriptions and court chronicles tell us that Buddhism has introduced to Myanmar not once but many times.

Buddhism is believed to have been introduced to Burma by missionaries sent by the Indian emperor Ashoka in the third century B.C. Tradition, basing itself upon the Sinhalese chronicle, the Mahavamsa, attributes the origins of Buddhism in Myanmar to the mission of Sona and Uttara who, in the 3rd century B.C., came to Suvannabhumi, usually identified with Thaton, on the Gulf of Mottama. Some modern scholars dispute this point. But even if tradition is to be ignored, there can be no denying that Buddhism was already flourishing in Myanmar in the 1st century A.D., as attested by the archaeological evidence at Peikthanomyo (Vishnu City), 90 miles southeast of Bagan. Buddhism was also an invigorating influence at Thayekhittaya, near modern Pyaymyo 160 miles south of Bagan, where a developed civilization flourished from the 5th to the 9th century. No doubt that Buddhism has shaped all important elements of people of Myanmar for generations and Myanmar has many long backed contacts with Buddhism accorded with traditional literally and archeological accounts.

The first contact of Myanmar with Buddhism

The first contact of Myanmar with Buddhism was associated with the legend of the Shwedagon Pagoda which is now brightly situated in Centre Yangon, the biggest and a leading growth city in Myanmar. In accordance with this legend, Myanmar had contacted with Buddhism even in the lifetime of Buddha himself. In the year of Maha Sakarit 103 (597B.C), while the Buddha was in a *Phalasammappatti* meditation which is a reflecting the spiritual processes gained after enlightened or liberated from all defilements and staying with the enjoinderment of peace at the foot of Rajayatana Lin Lun tree (present at the south of Bodhi-tree) in the Uruvela Forest near the Nerajara River, (present near Bodhgaya, Bihar state, India) two merchant brothers Tapussa and Bhallika of Ukkalapa village of Ramannadesa (present Yangon) came to worship the Buddha. The brothers offered the Buddha honey cakes and the Buddha preached the Dhamma (the truth which he founded) to them. At their request the Buddha gave them eight sacred hairs from His Head as His relics to venerate. On their return home, they enshrined the Sacred Hairs in a Ceti (pagoda) presently known Shwedagon-pagoda which had built on the hillock, then called Simguttra. This legend is mentioned in the Shwedagon stone inscription present lies at the north-west corner of the pagoda, set up by King Dhammazedhi (AD 1472-1492) of Hanthawaddy Kingdom.

The second contact of Myanmar with Buddhism

Maha Thera Shin Gavempti was one of the Buddha's main disciples but he is not frequently mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures. It was believed according to purely Mon tradition that in the year Maha Sakarit 111 (577 B.C), in the 20th Vasa of Buddha, the Buddha himself visited the Kingdom of Thaton (Sudhammapura) which is listed Suvannabhumi as well according to Burmese traditional accounts in the Kingdom of Ramannadesa after having been entreated by Maha Thera Gavampati, who was later invited to participate in the First Buddhist Council. The king and people of that place had converted to new faith, Buddhism by the preach of Buddha himself. This account has no record except some historians' personal views on connected stories about it mentioned in the historical book of some pagodas around Thaton and its neighbouring places. Nonetheless, the story of Buddha's visit to Thaton-city is widely recognized by Burmese Buddhist scholars whom have been criticized by modern Burmese and western scholars that the views is emerged from their personal partialism which is the much admirations to make a contact of Myanmar with Buddhism as possible as early date and aspiration to the religion as more veneration and practice as ever before. Any way such belief and acceptance which mostly show in the books of some pagoda's history, make the readers more devotion, veneration and adoration on the religion and its teachings for their spiritual and material progresses.

The third contact of Myanmar with Buddhism

In the Maha Sakarit year 123 (577 B.C), again in the 20th Vasa of the Buddha, Punna, a merchant from Sunaparanta, went to Savatthi in India on business and there heard a discourse of the Buddha. Having won faith in the Buddha and the teachings, he took ordination as a monk. After some time, he asked the Buddha to teach him a short lesson so that he could return to Sunaparanta and strive for Arahatsip. The Buddha warned him that the people of Sunaparanta were fierce and violent, but Punna replied that he would not allow anger to arise, even if they should kill him.

In the *Punnovada Sutta* ('Advice to Venerable Punna') the Buddha instructed him not to be enticed by that which is pleasant, and Punna returned and attained Arahatsip in his home country. He won over many disciples and built a monastery of red sandalwood for the Buddha. According to some chronicles of Myanmar, the Buddha made the prediction that at the location where the red sandalwood monastery was, the great king Alaungsithu of Pagan would build a shrine. He then sent flowers as an invitation to the Buddha and the Buddha came, accompanied by 500 Arahats, spent the night in the monastery, and left again before dawn.

Traditional record continued, "The Buddha stopped at the river Nammada close to Saccabandha Mountain. Here the Blessed One was invited by the Naga King Nammada to visit and preach to the Nagas, later accepting food from them." Furthermore, Namanta Naga and his friend Hermit came to pay homage to the Buddha and requested to have some kind of his representation for them to worship. Thus, the Buddha left two footprints, one at the foot of the Minbu Hill Range and the other a little higher up on the hill. These footprints are well known far and wide as Shwe Set Taw ('Golden Footprints'). These footprints, still visible today, were worshipped by the Mon, Pyu, and Myanmar kings alike.

The fourth contact of Myanmar with Buddhism

Three hundred years after the demise of Buddha, when the Third Buddhist council was held during the regime of Indian Buddhist emperor the great Asoka in Buddhist Era 235 (252 B.C), foreseeing that the Buddha Sasana would spread to far off places and flourish there, Buddhist missionaries were dispatched to nine countries and nine places. According to the tradition preserved in the Sri Lankan

chronicles, Emperor Asoka sent missionaries to preach the teachings of the Buddha outside India. At that time his son and daughter went to Sri Lanka to teach the Buddha-Dhamma. Also two monks named Sona and Uttara were sent to Suwanabhumi (mostly identified to Thaton, Lower Myanmar) to spread the teachings. Maha Thera Sona and Uttara accompanied by three arahants came to Suvannabhumi (Thaton) in Ramannadesa to carry out missionary work there. This was the foremost textual evidence which claims the Buddhist faith introduced to Myanmar.

The fifth contact of Myanmar with Buddhism

In the Buddhist Era 930 or A.D.386 during the reign of King Mahanama of Sri Lanka who was a contemporary of King Thiligyaung of Bagan of Myanmar Mahar Thera Buddhaghosa who was a native of Gotha village in the Kingdom of Rajagahan came to Sri Lanka at the invitation of his mentor Maha Thera Revata. Mah Thera Buddhaghosa resided in Maha Vihara of Sri Lanka and he translated Tipitaka written in Sinhala into Magadhi (widely accepted as Pali). Maha Thera Buddhaghosa stayed in Sri Lanka at the invitation of his mentor Maha Thera Revata in order to translate the *Tipitaka*. Having completed the translation, Buddhaghosa came to Myanmar and presented King Dhamapala of Thaton the translation of the Tipitaka. This event marked the arrival of the Buddha's Words in Myanmar. He brought the set of Tipitaka to King Dhamapala of Thaton in Ramannadesa as his translated work in Magadhi. That was the earliest recorded account by which the written Tipitaka has first been introduced to Myanmar.

The earliest archeological evidence found in Pyu-cities in central Myanmar

Buddhism flourished at the Pyu City Kingdoms in the forms of both Theravada and Mahayana according to the recent archeological evidences. By virtue of the artifacts excavated from archaeological sites such as Sri Ksetra, Beikthano, and Halin show that at that time Mahayana Buddhism co-existed with Theravada Buddhism. Other places where Buddha Sasana flourished were Rakhine Vesali (Western Myanmar) and Ramanna Desa (lower Myanmar).

From the A.D. 4th century onward, the Pyu built many Buddhist stupas and other religious buildings. The styles, ground plans, even the brick size and construction techniques of these buildings point to the Andhra region, particularly Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in present-day southeastern India. Some evidence of Ceylonese contact is seen by the presence of Anuradhapura style "moonstones" discovered at Beikthano and Halin. By perhaps the 7th century, tall cylindrical stupas such as the Bawbawgyi, Payagyi and Payama had emerged at Sri Ksetra. This is the earliest archeological discovery where Buddhism was widely practiced by ancient people of Myanmar.

The arrival of written Tipitaka in Tampadipa (Bagan)

When Anawrahta became king in A.D. 1044, a learned monk from Thaton by the name of Shin Arahan went to Bagan kingdom (Central Myanmar) probably to propagate the true Buddhist religion. The great King Anawrahta was not satisfied with the teachings and practices of the Ari-Buddhism which had been flourishing since long time and intending upon purifying Buddhism which was prevalent in Bagan and therefore welcomed Shin Arahan with open arms. After the first meeting with the latter, the advance for Tipitaka from Thaton kingdom was achieved and completed. From that time onwards, Theravada Buddhism flourished and rooted firmly in Myanmar.

There is no doubt that King Anawrahta's greatest and most lasting achievement was the introduction of Theravada Buddhism to Upper Burma (Myanmar) after his conquest of the Thaton Kingdom in 1057. Supported by royal patronage, Theravada form Buddhism gradually spread to the village level and became its highest achievement for so far, although Tantric practices, some Mahayana

form of Buddhist practices, Brahmanic beliefs, and animist practices remained entrenching at all social strata. The establishment of Theravada Buddhism as the dominant religion of Myanmar did not preclude the existence of other schools and beliefs.

Buddhism pervades every aspect of people's life in Myanmar and the religion perhaps has more of a hold on Myanmar than any nation in the world. Myanmar in modern time is filled with temples, pagodas, monasteries and monks. Even the poorest villages maintain a temples and a community of monks. There is a proverb that states, "To be Burmese is to be Buddhist."

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