Abstract:-

In Buddhist nuns in Myanmar are classified into two categories according to their previous marital status. The first category comprises those who have become nuns while young and unmarried and, thus, sexually inexperienced. They are trained to become professional nuns by vocation. The other comprises those who were previously married or widowed, or who have left their homes to become nuns through changes of lifestyle. The former are referred to as ngebyu, meaning "ones who are young and pure," and the latter are known as tawdwet, ones who have left for the forest.

Keywords:

Nun, Buddhist, Ngebyu, Tawdwet, Yogi, meditation, and nunnery.

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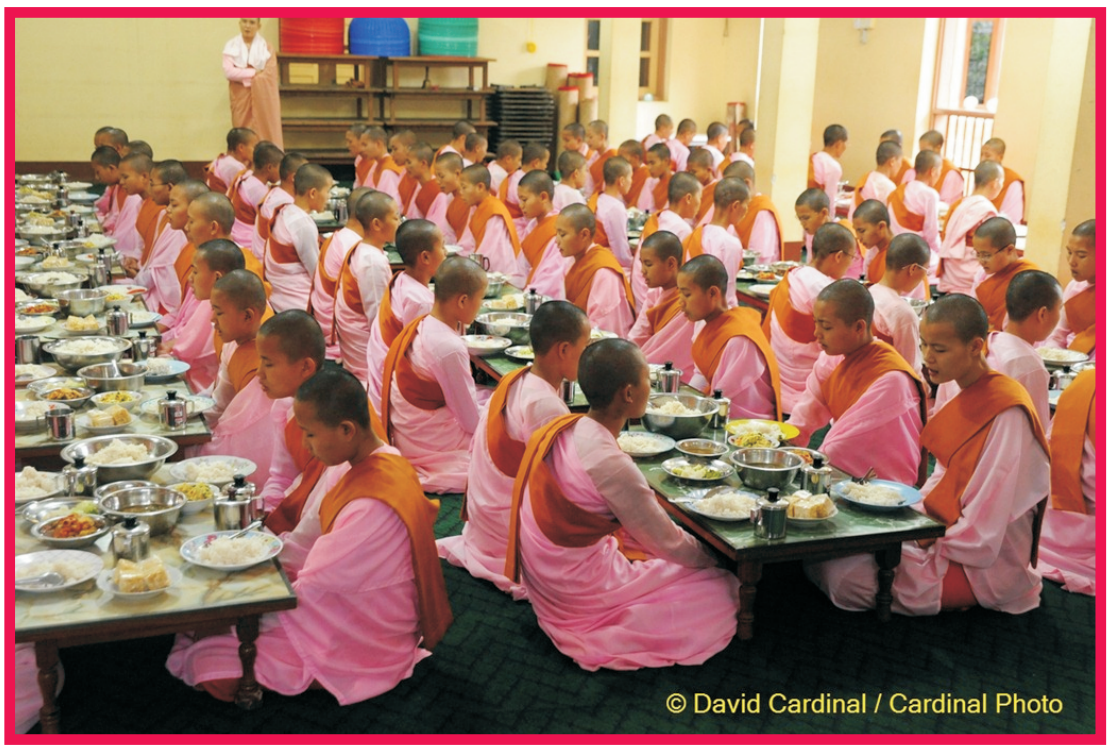
RELIGIOUS ROLE OF NUNS IN MYANMAR



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INTRODUCTION

Certain religious roles and functions have traditionally been closed to women. One not them is officiating at a public ceremony. That ceremony taken for granted that monks officiate at religious ceremonies because of their superior religious status in the Sanga. However, it is not technically impossible for a nun to officiate a ceremony, such as one that involves the giving out of the five and eight precepts and the recitation of major prayers. It is conceded that those who keep few precepts, but it is not socially acceptable for a nun to take up such a significant religious role that puts her in so public a domain. In theory, the problem does not concern the ability of the officiate, but her religious status and qualifications.

I have witnessed, for example, a young male novice who observes ten precepts officiate and confer the five precepts upon a lay congregation. If such a procedure is acceptable, then it should be possible for a nun who observes eight precepts to perform the same role. However, because the issue concerns social approval for granting religious authority to women, its acceptance depends upon whether the monks, the laity, and even the nuns themselves are willing to abide by such a precedent. When people asked, Burmese people expressed apprehension about allowing important ceremonies to be handled by nuns who observe only eight precepts. Monks displayed obvious displeasure at such a suggestion, and nuns themselves seemed rather hesitant about such a possibility, although among them were very competent ritual specialists who were equipped with knowledge in regard to every ritual procedure.

Preaching is another area of religious importance that is exclusively monopolized by monks in contemporary Myanmar. In spite of the presence of famous female preachers in ancient Buddhism, Burmese nuns have not continued this legacy. In a country where mass media are not highly developed, preaching is a powerful method of communication, and eloquent preachers attract thousands of devotees far and wide. There are even monk preachers who are more popular than film stars or politicians, for example, and they are often feared for their ability to easily mobilize the populace. Buddhist nuns seem to be obstructed from preaching because of social pressure, and incidents of them preaching in public are rare. In Sri Lanka, however, it is reported that there are many nuns who are acknowledged preachers, and an increasing numbers of nuns in many places have taken up the role of public speaking.

In practice, Burmese nuns do preach and teach people about Buddhist ideas and philosophy, but mostly in informal and private settings. They preach inside nunneries, for example, as well as in peoples' houses. They preach to villagers whenever they visit for alms and, as a consequence of these Dhamma talks, village girls are persuaded to join the nunnery. Nun preachers also visit prisons and preach to female inmates or go to hospitals to console the patients, but these are limited activities performed in restricted circumstances. Learned nuns are experienced at public speaking since oration is part of their education and, being enthusiastic audiences at the monks' sermons, they usually have a good number of Buddhist anecdotes in their repertoires.

However, most of the learned nun informants visibly shrank from the idea of preaching in public. They were worried about what their prospective donors would think and what their public image might be. Some said, "Nuns should be modest and reserved. It is the role of monks to preach, not nuns." They anticipated that audiences would not like them to talk in public; besides, they explained there was no tradition for them to preach. Daw Yusanda, however, one of the few to break out of the customary pattern, preaches regularly during the rain retreat (July to October) at one of the most important pagodas in Rangoon. Most of her themes concern ethics and moral behavior for Buddhist women, and for that reason she may be tolerated. Nevertheless, it still requires much courage on the part of nuns to break out of the traditional mold and to have the confidence to speak out in public at all. In this context, it is significant that Daw Yusanda has set such a precedent.

Daw Yusanda was born in 1943 in a small village in Pandaong township. She accompanied her renunciant mother into the nunnery and became a nun herself at the age of seven. She received a formal Buddhist education at Daw Nyanasari's nunnery school in Rangoon and passed the state Buddhist exams up to the fourth level. When Hiroko Kawanami met her, she had passed two subjects of the Dhammasariya exam and was studying for the third. She was also a keen meditator and had been practicing meditation for six years. Influenced by a senior monk who taught her how to deliver sermons, she started preaching at the main Shweidagon pagoda in 1976 on every full and new moon day during the Buddhist Lent. She also traveled around the country delivering sermons and preaching in a variety of public venues. Her topics concerned the social behavior of women, the moral deterioration of society, and other ethical and religious topics. Today, she continues to administer and teach at her nunnery school in Rangoon, which has more than sixty students and five teacher-nuns. In spite of general worries on the part of the nuns for their director, Daw Yusanda has been fairly well accepted by the general public, and a large audience, composed mostly of women, goes to listen to her sermons. Daw Yusanda manifests confidence and humor, and is beautifully eloquent. Her popularity derives, in part, from her sermon topics, which support the traditional values and morality of Buddhist women; in this way neither the general audience nor the monks are threatened by her presence. She is not a radical or a liberal but, on the contrary, is a suitable conveyer of conservative values as transmitted to lay women. And this task is clearly regarded as more easily done by a nun than by a monk.

Finally, one of the essential religious roles expected of monks in Myanmar is to chant magical prayers called paritta. Traditionally, people invite monks to their homes on special occasions to chant one or two of the eleven paritta believed to bring them protection from evil spirits. Such ritual chantings are

conducted for newborn babies at the time of childbirth, or at a son's initiation ceremony. Other occasions for recitation are certain life crises and life transitions such as at weddings, funerals, and serious illnesses or injuries, as well as during the Burmese New Year in April. These days, nuns are increasingly invited to peoples' homes to chant paritta prayers because of the growing reputation of their beautiful recitation and their increasingly strong voices. They are also popular for their accessibility and friendly, easy manners. Nuns are invited to Buddhist functions such as funerals and boys' initiations to assist and complement the monks. Their presence as ritual specialists has come to be acknowledged and supported because of their intricate knowledge of the details of all manner of ceremonial procedure. Moreover, they give practical advice to lay donors on such things as how to conduct a ceremony according to the donor's budget, what to buy and prepare, which monks to invite, and how to address them. In such roles they have come to be indispensable for the lay donors who no longer have the expertise traditionally associated with village elders. These events and religious occasions also provide the nuns with important donation income, which is essential for their daily upkeep.

Since Burmese nuns observe only eight precepts, they are not subject to, for example, prohibitions against cash transactions. In contrast, however, monks and novices have achieved a state of detachment in this regard, the result of traditional canonical rules and regulations prohibiting them from handling money. Nuns, who often find themselves in a position to handle money on behalf of the monks, are routinely needed as treasurers or caretakers of monastery administrations. In recent times, nevertheless, more nuns have aspired to ten-precept status, which allows them renunciation of money. This position is regarded as akin to that of novice monks, and would allow them to spend more time on meditation and their spiritual development.

Some nuns have attempted to become part-time ten-precept observers—on abstinence days or even for half-days in the afternoons. They often combine this state of tranquil purity with vegetarianism or eating one meal a day in order to further enhance their perceived religious position. They move towards a purer, more enhanced practice of Buddhist precepts, although still within the limited confines of their current religious setting, reveals the strong aspiration on the part of nuns for whatever higher spiritual life is available to them. Burmese nuns may consider it infeasible to become a bbikkhuni under present circumstances, but even without the security of such religious status, their yearning for higher spirituality has never been thwarted. Becoming a ten-precept observer provides them with an ideal environment to concentrate fully on their own spiritual progress.

There are several nuns who observe the ten precept rules in Myanmar. Daw N. is one of them. For a scholarly nun, she became a nun fairly late—after graduating from Rangoon University—although previously she had been very religious and had meditated during the holidays for many years. She was determined to become a nun, but her family was very much against it. Her father was very angry at first, but because of her determination he gave her his consent on the condition that she not go out on alms-round. He was a very wealthy gold merchant and, in order to provide her with a comfortable lifestyle as a nun, he decided to give her full material backing. Her mother and six brothers and sisters also gave her much support, and, because of their efforts, she was able to take her vocation very seriously, studying the Buddhist scriptures earnestly and passing all the state exams with high marks. By the time she completed her studies and became qualified as a Buddhist teacher, her scholarly reputation was well established. She became known as a skilled meditator, and her reputation was further enhanced when she became known as a rare ten-precept nun who did not receive any cash from her donors. People spoke of her good kamma to have such a wealthy and supportive family. Ironically, her reputation of purity and detachment intensified the fervor of donors wanting to give to her through her lay assistants.

As noted, however, in order to become and stay a ten-precept nun, a nun must have either a wealthy family background, or a highly successful academic career so as to be able to attract numerous benefactors who can give her solid financial backing. It may be paradoxical, but in order to maintain the position of detachment suitable to following the ten precepts, a nun must have sufficient resources and stable material support to be able to afford the luxury of this high status. Such a nun must also have a reliable secretary or a nun-assistant to attend to her daily needs, especially when money is donated. But nuns of such high status are rarely in a position to be looked after as much as monks are, since they usually cannot attract sufficient attention from the laity to be attended to on a full-time basis. Furthermore, such nuns themselves frequently act as financial and treasury assistants to ten-precept monks, and having assistants of their own would be an odd fit in normative Burmese monastic structure.

In contemporary Myanmar, there is another useful category for women who wish to leave the householder's life without becoming fully committed to a life as a monastic, and that is to become a yogi. The position of yogi is normally for a lay practitioner, male or female, who observes the eight precepts and practices meditation in a religious compound, a meditation centre, or a monastery or nunnery, for a temporary or semi-temporary period. Becoming a yogi provides one with a quiet religious life that affords more time and freedom to concentrate on personal spiritual advancement. Old women in Burma who become freed from their responsibilities as mothers and wives generally choose to spend their time as yogis rather than become nuns. In this respect, the old stereotype of Buddhist nuns being "widowed old ladies" is less and less based on fact. The appeal of the yogi lifestyle is due, firstly, to the fact that, as the educational standards of nuns continue to rise, being a nun is increasingly regarded as a "professional" religious career, sometime older women may be less inclined to pursue. It is due, secondly, to the difficulty women have in

deciding to renounce fully so late in their lives, and to adapt to the lifestyle of full-time alms-women. Thirdly, some of the older yogis find fasting in the afternoon strenuous, as they cannot consume the large amounts of food in the morning that professional nuns are used to consuming from an early age. And finally, being a yogi allows a woman to maintain her normal relationships with her family and, at the same time, gives her a pretext to stay away from family conflicts, as she routinely moves between meditation centers and home, meditating for certain periods of time and then returning home to rest. Theoretically, the religious status of a yogi is equivalent to that of a nun who observes the same eight precepts, for example, refraining from sex, food after midday, and worldly pleasures and secular matters. Nuns, however, regard yogis as mere lay women, not as proper renouncers like themselves, since "yogis are still attached to their hair." Nuns regard the hair as an important symbolic demarcation between themselves and yogis, between those who are true members of the monastic community and those who are not. Having said that, many monasteries and nunneries accommodate old and infirm parents of monks and nuns who live as yogis.

CONCLUSION:

In my conclusion, in Myanmar the activities of women are two categories: as nuns and yogis. Burmese nuns do preach and teach people about Buddhist ideas and philosophy, but mostly in informal and private settings. They preach inside nunneries, for example, as well as in peoples' houses. They preach to villagers whenever they visit for alms and, as a consequence of these Dhamma talks, village girls are persuaded to join the nunnery. Nun preachers also visit prisons and preach to female inmates or go to hospitals to console the patients, but these are limited activities performed in restricted circumstances. Burmese yogis observe only eight precepts, they are not subject to, for example, prohibitions against cash transactions. In spite of these positions, however, the majority admitted that the religious position of a nun is spiritually higher than that of a yogi. Perhaps it can be said that the distinction between yogis and nuns was less clear in the past, but as the religious importance, ritual skills, and educational standards.

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