

The Making of An ‘Inside Enemy’: A Study of The Sky-Blue Sect in Myanmar¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism in Myanmar, commonly known as *thathana* derived from a Pali term *sāsana*,² is the religion of the majority people, which functions as a linchpin of the country’s national identity and retains a privileged position in its constitution. However, due to Buddhism being closely intertwined with people’s moral values, the state has imposed narrow strictures on the monastic community to make use of the moral authority of monks and wield wide influence over the majority Buddhist population. Meanwhile, the conservatism of Myanmar sangha generally is sustained by its focus on specific aspects of canonical and commentarial knowledge, stipulated in the national monastic curriculum and *Pathamapyan* (annual examinations conducted by the state). The form of rote learning focused on passing the examinations has also limited monastic students to engage in critical and open discussions, confining them to accepting a ‘purist’ form of doctrinal Buddhism, and subsequently forming an elite segment of scholarly monks who make major decisions in regard to monastic matters in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

In this essay, I examine Mòpyar Gaing: a Buddhist sect that came to prominence in the upper region of Myanmar in the 1980s, and its founder monk U Nyana was later taken to the state sangha judicial court following accusations of heresy.³ Since then U Nyana has

¹I am grateful to Professor Rupert Gethin and Ven Anālayo for their valuable comments on the early version of the article. I also thank the four anonymous reviewers who have given me astute comments and suggestions that helped me to re-examine and improve some sections of my argument. This article was developed as the result of presenting sections of earlier versions at the International Burma Studies conference in Singapore on August 2, 2014 and at the conference of International Association of Buddhist Studies (IABS) in Toronto on August 22, 2017.

²In transcribing Burmese terms, I used John Okell’s method of conventional Burmese transcription with accented heavy tones but removed most tonal marks for simplicity sake. For Pali words, I followed the Romanized version adopted in Buddhist texts rather than those commonly used in Myanmar transcription and listed them in the Glossary.

³I first came to hear about monk U Nyana when I arrived in the mid-1980s to conduct fieldwork in the Sagaing monastic community, where he had some lay following. However, due to his imprisonment and his later status as a ‘public enemy’, it was only in 2019 that I could finally interview him in person. In regard to methodology, I used interdisciplinary approaches to reveal the complexity of disputes

been arrested on several occasions on different charges and spent almost a total of twenty years in prison until his final release 2016. His first arrest took place in the early 1980s, which coincided with the implementation of General Ne Win's purification policy that imposed direct control over the internal affairs of the sangha with a wider aim of restricting the proliferation of heretical groups in the Buddhist community.⁴

Mòpyar Gaing literally means 'sky-blue sect', a reference to the blue coloured clothing worn by U Nyana and his followers. He gained notoriety for propagating the concept of 'this-worldly karma', which posed a challenge to the traditional beliefs in karmic causality by negating the concept of rebirth and samsaric existences of 31 realms widely believed in Myanmar. He was not the first monk to challenge normative Buddhist teachings in Myanmar Buddhism, or even the first to reject the existence of these realms of existence; but his logical explanations of his doctrinal position fired the imagination of progressive individuals, both lay Buddhists and monks. He wanted Myanmar Buddhists to reflect on their actions and take responsibility for the social conditions in which they strived rather than blindly follow a set of beliefs and standard Buddhist practices. However, the popularity of his views and his defiant stance led him into repeated conflict with the sangha establishment. As a result, U Nyana served three lengthy prison terms: 1983-1986, 1991-1998, and 2010-2016, mainly on charges for spreading 'false views.' Buddhism has not been a static religious tradition and is known to have developed discursively over the past millennia, via shifting interpretations and polemical debates within and among its many sub-traditions. Internal debates over what is authentic and what is not have been integral to this process, more so in the conservative Theravada circles. For example, Abeysekara (2002) identified internal struggles within modern Sri Lanka's sangha over what constitutes an 'authentic' Buddhist tradition, contended for by various

concerning U Nyana by examining relevant sections of Buddhist scriptures as well as sangha judiciary sources in Myanmar. Nonetheless, it was very important for me as a trained anthropologist to meet and interview U Nyana in person as well as his monk follower U Vicittasarabivamsa in order to find out if the general description about Mòpyar and its doctrinal views in official documents were what he really said and believed in. In these interviews, I followed the Lancaster University guidelines on ethics in research and anonymised the names and identifiers of informants unless they requested not to be. U Nyana and his follower monk U Vicittasarabivamsa, however, both expressed their wish not to be anonymized.

⁴In May 1980, General Ne Win's government convened the Sangha Convention of All Buddhist Gaing for the Purification, Perpetuation, and Propagation of Theravāda Buddhism, and in the name of 'purification', streamlined the sangha and imposed direct control over its monastic members. Only nine *gaing* or Buddhist sects have since become officially recognized by the state.

factions within the sangha as each saw itself as the ‘true’ custodian of the Buddha’s teaching. Similarly, factionalism has always been rife in the Myanmar’s sangha, with tensions surfacing whenever a charismatic monk or a leader of an influential group propounded novel views; and such tensions have often ended in schisms in the monastic community.

The Burmese term *gaing* is used to describe a sectarian grouping or association, derived from the Pali word *gana*, but it has different connotations from the term *nikāya*, more commonly used in Sri Lanka, implying a ‘collection, ‘assemblage’ or ‘sect’.⁵ In fact, *gaing* may roughly denote any of three distinct phenomena in Myanmar: an ordination lineage; a grouping led by a Buddhist monk or a charismatic layperson; and a social movement known for its dissenting beliefs and practices. At times, monks or laymen – some casting themselves as *weikza* (a figure believed to have supernatural powers) and others as *setkyamin*, who is a prophetic figure propagating a millenarian vision to reform the order through his *gaing*. Such internal rivalries, although a source of threat to the communal unity of monks, have also given the sangha a kind of ‘resiliency’, which Mendelson saw as enabling monks to ‘adopt new directions and emphases during periods of change’.⁶ In contemporary Myanmar, however, the term *gaing* has come to be used in a more derogatory manner, especially by conservative monks and also by Buddhist apologists intent on imposing conformity and suppressing unorthodox interpretations and sectarian groupings.⁷

It can be stated that the uncertainty accompanying recent political reforms and major social transformation since 2011 have contributed to intra-communal tensions and the rise of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar society, on the pretext that the *sāsana* is under imminent threat. These narratives emphasize the threat coming from global Islam with an intention to decimate Buddhism, however during the mid-19th century, the major threat was seen to come from the British colonial rule and its secularizing policies that gave rise to strong nationalistic feeling among Buddhist monks. Although most communal

⁵Ferguson (1978, 73) described the term *gaing* as ‘a meeting or chapter of monks, as differentiated from the Sangha as a whole or the individual monks, [though] it can refer to an assemblage of any kind’.

Mendelson (1975, 28) translated the same term as ‘monkish faction’ to reflect its implication of divisions within the sangha. Carbine (2011, 83), whilst talking about the group identity of Shwegyin sect in Myanmar, has stated that its leaders have at times used the more inclusive term *gaing* in place of the official designation *nikāya*, but have also used both terms interchangeably.

⁶Mendelson (1975, 70-71).

⁷Patton, Thomas (2018, 115-116).

transgressions by monastic members today are dealt by sangha judicial committees in their respective townships, the country's new social and political environment has allowed an extension of state control over a range of religious activities, through utilizing state channels and institutional mechanisms.⁸ Past decades of socio-political upheaval and development, and widely perceived moral decay have also led to a collision between religion and politics in Myanmar. In this changing political environment, the case of U Nyana, a Buddhist monk with unorthodox views and a defiant attitude, offers us a unique opportunity to examine the specific socio-political processes by which certain people and religious groups are become condemned as 'deviant' or even 'anti-Buddhist' due to the threat they are imagined to pose to the country's national security.

2. MÒPYAR GAING: HOW DID IT START?

The founder of Mòpyar Gaing, U Nyana, was born in 1938 in Pakhokku in the Magway Division in central Myanmar. He became a novice at the age of 14 and was ordained in



U Nyana; photo taken by the author
on September 12, 2019.

1957 at Nandarama Monastery in Pakhokku, his hometown. As a monk, he was educated at several monasteries in Mandalay, including the prestigious Masoyein Kyaung-taik, and passed the state *Pathamapyan* exams up to *Dhammacariya* degree level, which officially accredited him to teach the dhamma. He then spent several years in the quiet backwater of the Minwun Hill between Sagaing and Mingun hill ranges, where he is said to have had a special spiritual experience as he deeply contemplated on the words of the Buddha.

It was around this time that rumours started to circulate in the locality about an *arahant* – a monk with superhuman qualities – which came to the attention of U Saw Myet, a divisional officer of Department of Religious Affairs in Sagaing town, then the administrative capital of

⁸The lifting of censorship in 2013 brought political monks and lay activists out onto social media platforms who engaged in public debates about the state and religion, and as a result, contributed to rising intra-communal tension and the rise of Buddhist nationalism.

the Sagaing Division.⁹ Meanwhile, U Nyana, in his own admission, had achieved a heightened level of awareness during intense meditation.¹⁰ He started to distribute pamphlets to prominent monk teachers in the area stating that the historical Sakyamuni was not able to disclose the ‘true’ dhamma and it was his mission to do so. This event took place in 1981, when the new purification policy came into effect, and the divisional office in Sagaing was given the responsibility to monitor and report on more than 3,000 monks living in and around the Sagaing and Minwun hill ranges. U Nyana was reported to the Sagaing Township’s sangha committee, and a tribunal was held in which senior monks from the locality decided that he had committed one of the *pārājika* offences by claiming to be an *arahant*.¹¹ This offence, however, involved ‘deliberately lying about one’s spiritual attainments’, but the scriptures expressly exclude those who claim attainments through over-estimation of themselves. Therefore, technically speaking, whilst one may be censured for ‘wrong views’ (Pacittiya 68), there is no *pārājika* offence related to ‘wrong views’ in the Buddhist monastic rules. Despite such an argument over details, in 1983, U Nyana was sentenced by the divisional court to three years’ imprisonment under the Ne Win’s government.

After his release in 1986, U Nyana started to wear sky-blue coloured uniform to distinguish himself from Myanmar monks who wore saffron-coloured robes, whom he referred to as the ‘yellow robe wearing lot’. In prison, he was stripped of any monastic privilege and wore a white robe, but he continued to follow the ten Buddhist precepts and was respected by inmates for upholding a monkish discipline.¹² In a recent interview in 2019, he told me that the choice of sky-blue colour had nothing to do with his prison experience, but it was just a colour that he liked. He also added that he had never referred to his group as Mòpyar or identified it as a blue-wearing *gaing*, but when his lay devotees and monastic followers started to follow his lead by wearing similar

⁹‘Division’ was the administrative designation term used in Myanmar, which became replaced with the term ‘District’ after 2010.

¹⁰Interview with U Nyana on September 12, 2019.

¹¹This presumably meant that the authorities found U Nyana guilty of the 4th *pārājika* offence. Around the same time in 1983, another monk U Suriya Mònyo Sayadaw came to the attention of state Vinicchaya committee for publicly claiming to have attained *arahantship*.

¹²Myanmar prisoners are made to wear light blue-grey uniforms. U Win Tin (1929-2014); a journalist and human rights activist, who was imprisoned by SLORC for 19 years, continued to wear the blue coloured shirt even after his release to make the public aware about the inhuman treatment and torture, as a mark of solidarity with other political prisoners still in prison.

sky-blue clothing, the label came to be applied to the group and they came to be known as such.¹³

In May 1990, the first national elections since 1960 were won overwhelmingly by Aung San Su Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), and became the leading opposition party then.¹⁴ However, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) refused to recognise the election results and reimposed its authority and direct military rule. It is said that the political repression had entered its harshest phase, and the authorities were particularly 'punitive' toward anti-government political monks.¹⁵ The SLORC's government decreed that any formation of a new *gaing* would be punishable by up to three years in prison, indicating a more direct approach and authoritarian form of sangha control. In August 1990, there was a mass gathering of monks in Mandalay to commemorate the second anniversary of the beginning of the democracy movement. A form of ritual protest by monks upturning their begging bowls against the armed forces and their families spread to Yangon and other parts of the country. As persecution started, several hundred monks and thousands of student activists fled to the Thai border. U Nyana was not actually involved in pro-democracy movement of 1988-90 or had shown any anti-government sentiments then, but the social disorder and top-down trend to impose order and control had also affected the conservative wing of monk leaders who acted as 'moral chastisers' of the sangha.¹⁶ U Nyana's non-conformist religious activities were reported by a group of senior monks in the locality and he was arrested on the premise of founding a non-state-sanctioned *gaing*; and therefore an illegal sect, which led to his second imprisonment in November 1990.

In the wake of an appeal in the late 1990s and his subsequent release, U Nyana did not relinquish his defiance and continued to challenge the sangha establishment on the grounds of its inability to provide people with correct spiritual guidance when they most needed it. He disseminated his unique teachings by giving frequent dhamma talks to the

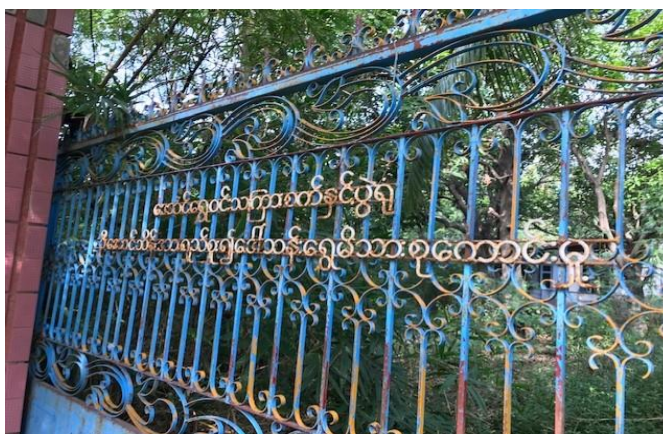
¹³Interview with U Nyana on September 12, 2019. His lay followers including Buddhist nuns and monks, and U Vicittasarabhivamsa when I met him in 2019 wore sky-blue coloured uniforms like the one worn by U Nyana in the photograph.

¹⁴NLD officially registered as a political party in December 2011, and in the 2012 by-elections won 43 of the 45 available seats, which led to a majority win in the 2015 general election.

¹⁵Matthews, Bruce (1993, 417).

¹⁶This term was coined by Bruce Matthews (Ibid., 418).

public, distributing video CDs, and publishing books and pamphlets. In 2004, a wealthy owner of a sugar company donated a plot of land in Patheingyi Township, in the eastern outskirts of Mandalay, to U Nyana. He named it ‘Mòpyar Land’, and the religious site surrounded by sky-blue painted boundary walls became the epicentre of his missionary activities.¹⁷ Once again, his sermons attracted large numbers of lay followers, many from urban centres in Yangon and Mandalay; and their gatherings alarmed senior monks in the locality. In November 2008, the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (Naingandaw Thanga Maha Nayaka Aphwè, or MaHaNa for short) announced that they would take action against any writings, re-interpretations, public preaching or forms of dissemination that they regarded as counter to the orthodox teachings of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar. Following this, a group of senior monks from nearby monasteries in the Chanmyathazi Township, famous for the Mahamuni Buddha temple in Mandalay, officially denounced Mòpyar Gaing to the MaHaNa, on the grounds that U Nyana’s teachings were *adhamma-vāda* or ‘anti-Buddhist’, which posed a grave danger to the purity of Myanmar Buddhism. In 2010, MaHa Na issued an order denouncing him, and U Nyana was arrested by the civil authorities for the third time, once again on the account of ‘spreading false views.’



Main gate to the Mòpyar land confiscated by the Myanmar state; photo taken by the author on September 20, 2019.

3. *MICCHĀ-DITTHI*: CONTESTING REBIRTH

The doctrine of rebirth has been a topic of extensive debate in Buddhist circles from the Buddha’s time in ancient India down to the present day as it has been in the court case of U Nyana. However, it is widely believed that the Buddha himself did not engage in debates related to rebirth as he sought to avoid unnecessary disputes within his circle. According to the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, Ajita Kesakambalī – one of the six important

¹⁷The plot of land, a little less than an acre in Patheingyi Township, was confiscated by the state after his arrest in 2010. Since his release from prison in January 2016, U Nyana has been fighting a court case to reclaim the land.

teachers in ancient India – was a ‘materialist’ who saw himself as composed of the four elements of earth, water, fire and air, and argued that when at the end of his ‘material’ life, all these elements would dissolve including the working of the mind. Ancient materialist such as Ajita himself did not believe in the benefits of offering gifts to enhance one’s spiritual position and thus any such worldly actions would have no consequences at all. In this respect, the denial of rebirth can be seen as a nihilistic stance in which one’s actions in the present does not have any moral meaning or consequences.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Rupert Gethin has pointed out that the ‘right view’ in the ‘Eightfold Path’ that states actions have consequences, is not specifically a Buddhist view, but a common view shared by ancient Indian traditions and religious thinkers. Moreover, he adds to this that it is not clear as to what extent the ‘right view’ that states actions have consequences must be linked to rebirth.¹⁹ At the same time, Anālayo Bhikkhu describes how early Buddhists ‘had to defend the *doctrine of rebirth* when facing those who rejected the idea of any form of survival after death’.²⁰ The 62 *vatthus* (grounds for arriving at a particular view) discussed in the Brahmajāla Sutta provide some insight into what the Buddha and his inner circle considered to be misinterpretations or incorrect ways of reasoning, pointing to the dangers of clinging onto a rigid viewpoint such as ‘eternalism’.²¹ Gethin meanwhile reveals that the Buddhist scriptures ‘from the Brahmajāla Sutta to the Madhyamaka’ have tended to ‘reduce all views to either annihilationism or eternalism’.²² To resolve this impasse, the concept of *anatta* – denoting a perception that everything about the self is essentially impermanent – has emerged as a middle way between these extremes.

Following the Mòpyar sangha tribunal in 2011, Myanmar sangha presented a report to the Department of Religious Affairs, in which the issue of *micchā-ditthi* (literally, ‘wrong view’, but usually translated as ‘false view’) is discussed. In the report, U Nyana’s understanding of ‘this-worldly karma’, stating that there is no rebirth and

¹⁸Fuller, Paul (2005, 19).

¹⁹Email correspondence with Rupert Gethin, on July 21, 2020.

²⁰Anālayo Bhikkhu (2018, 45). See also Harvey, Peter (2013, 59-60).

²¹Digha Nikaya (I 12, 29). The first four, for example, extrapolated the *ditthi* of eternalism. These included 18 beliefs about the past and 44 beliefs about the future.

²²However, the Brahmajāla Sutta includes several instances of equivocation, which do not fit the notions of annihilationism or eternalism. Gethin, Rupert (2004, 23).

karmic actions have no consequences, is described as *micchā-ditthi*.²³ However, by declaring him as ‘possessor of wrong-view’, the sangha did not label him as a ‘heretic’ or excommunicate him by charging him as a ‘non-Buddhist’. Nonetheless, his viewpoint was considered a major threat to social order since not believing in rebirth would discourage majority Buddhists from conducting good deeds and hinder them from achieving the spiritual progress stipulated in the Noble Eightfold Path. Thus it was concluded that acting upon *micchā-ditthi* would result in unwholesome actions, followed by the accumulation of bad karma, which in turn would be manifested in low rebirth or no rebirth at all. However, the denial of rebirth for U Nyana implied that there were no consequences beyond death, not that there was no moral meaning at all in this life, but simply because there was no certainty that there would be any life after this one.

Amongst many so-called ‘anti-Buddhist’ groups and individuals listed as having propagated ‘wrong views’ in Myanmar’s modern history, the monk Shin Ukkattha (1897-1978) was probably one of the most prominent.²⁴ In his early monastic career, he pursued a traditional route to becoming a dhamma teacher in the sangha, trained in Pali grammar, Abhidhamma and Vinaya at prestigious monasteries in Mandalay. However, in the 1920s he was given the opportunity to study and work in India, where he was influenced by Theosophy and Communist ideas popular amongst students and intellectuals at that time. He also developed an interest in secular education, which led him to combine modern learning methods with the dissemination of *sāsana* on returning to Burma. Like other progressive monks of his time, Shin Ukkattha came into conflict with the sangha establishment as he advocated the delivery of a broader kind of education in Buddhist monasteries. His book *Lu-the Lu-phyit Pyatthanā (Die as a Human and be Reborn as a Human)*, published in 1958, propounded his central teaching: that anyone can be reborn as a human being in the next life, regardless of their unwholesome actions or bad karma in this one, since Darwinian evolutionary theory showed that the human stage of evolution could not be reversed. He argued that Buddhists should not be ‘entangled in the bondage of religions through hope of heaven or fear of hell’.²⁵ The views expressed in this book led to his arrest in the following year, but it was only in 1981, three years after his death, that the circulation of the book

²³In contrast, *sammā-ditthi* (right view)’, alongside ‘right intension’, are listed in the context of Noble Eightfold Path under *paññā* (wisdom) as a pathway to understand the Four Noble Truths.

²⁴Janaka, Ashin (2016, 117-119).

²⁵Janaka, Ashin (2016, 150).

became banned when the state sangha trial labelled it as *micchā-ditthi*.

For each case involving ‘wrong views’ that was brought before the MaHaNa, the sangha committee produced a detailed report for the Department of Religious Affairs, referencing large numbers of passages from the canonical texts and commentaries to make clear that the defendant was indeed *adhamma-vati* (a possessor of anti-Buddhist views). For instance, in the case of Mòpyar Gaing, the tribunal report listed 52 counts of *micchā-ditthi* and 20 additional ones against U Nyana personally, all described as going against the official teachings of Theravada Buddhism.²⁶ Although there is no positive evidence that U Nyana was influenced by the views of monk Shin Ukkatha, his main teachings, published as *Pyitsupan (Paccupanna) Kammavāda Buddhābathā (The Buddhism of the Present Karma Doctrine)*, similarly reject some of the main canonical teachings of Myanmar Buddhism: rejecting the karmic causality of reward and retribution, and shifting the emphasis to the ‘here and now’. It cannot be denied that his doctrine challenged the status quo as it made people consider the possibility of instigating changes in the present world. On the other hand, there is a widely shared religio-cultural understanding that life continues beyond a single physical life, and this sense of continuity from the past to the present and then to the future permeates the worldview of Myanmar Buddhists. U Nyana’s emphasis on the futility of worrying about the karmic effects that might or might not affect a person in the future was therefore challenging to those who were brought up to believe in a doctrine of causality called *paticca samuppāda*, or ‘dependent origination’, that everything has a cause and effect. The ‘dependent origination’ explains how there can be rebirth without believing in a soul, and underpins people’s everyday moral framework since the karmic seeds generated during their lifetime are believed to bring a new being into existence in the next, and thus encourages wholesome deeds to be conducted whilst discouraging unwholesome ones.²⁷

4. U NYANA’S VIEWPOINTS

U Nyana, however, did not deny rebirth outright, as some would have expected him to. His main point was that people should not waste their time conducting merit-making activities or worrying about the afterlife, since there was no way of confirming its existence. He cited a story in the *Apannaka Sutta* from Majjhima Nikaya, in which the Buddha preaches to householders who have been exposed to contradictory views held by various teachers – some who denied rebirth, and others who affirmed it – but he does not provide them with

²⁶The State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, official report no. 17, 2011.

²⁷See Mahānidāna Sutta (The Great Causes Discourse) DN 15.

any concrete answer.²⁸ He explained to me that, after becoming immersed in the practice of meditation, he lost all interest in speculating about the afterlife; and from that point onward, he focused on spreading the message that people should not blindly believe in the notion of rebirth. U Nyana also wrote that there could be another life for some people, but there was nothing else for him.²⁹ His rejection of the higher celestial realms and lower hellish abodes seemed to have risen directly from the insight he gained from his intense meditation experience, through which he came to believe that the death of his physical body would be his actual end.

In a Myanmar TV interview in 2017,³⁰ U Nyana explained that, even if an unwholesome act is carried out by someone with a bad intention, and its immediate effect (e.g., an injury) shows that it was indeed unwholesome, the perpetrator does not necessarily reap karmic retribution in this life, since there is no guarantee that the ‘fruits’ of his bad action would ‘ripen’ immediately in its actual working. The monk went on to state that violence is commonly inflicted on the poor and vulnerable in society, but the aggressors often do not suffer any negative karmic consequences; it is the victims who get beaten up and suffer the resultant pain, not the ones who beat them who become traumatized. Worse still, he said, the aggressors who inflict harm end up achieving their aim by further intimidating and abusing the victim. It may be *hoped* that such evil persons would eventually suffer the consequences of their violent actions, but due to some good deeds performed in the distant past, they might even enjoy pleasure and success in this life.³¹ The point U Nyana was trying to make on that occasion was that the karmic law does little to redress social injustice, but often magnifies the victims’ suffering by encouraging an acceptance of one’s fate in this world, however bad it may be, and moreover discourages confronting their problems at the very source.

In another conversation with me, he questioned the second Buddhist precept, against stealing. His rationale was that this precept has to be understood differently in a contemporary social context in which, despite people trying to live their life as good Buddhists, their private property and land are easily taken away by multinationals and the state (he was probably referring to his Mòpyar Land, which was confiscated by the state). He reasoned that if people’s hard-earned money was heavily taxed or their property easily confiscated without reason, then there was little point in diligently observing the second

²⁸MN 60.

²⁹Nyana (2005, 22).

³⁰DVB Burmese TV Channel, ‘Interview with U Nyana’, January 5, 2017.

³¹A similar viewpoint can be found in the Mahakammavibhanga-sutta (MN 136).

precept, which only seemed to result in more exploitation. He even went so far as to reject the twelve chain of events described in the ‘dependent origination’, since in his view, the belief in it merely endorses the status quo, and disincentivises change and disempowers people.

The first charge was brought against U Nyana in the early 1980s when it was reported that he had claimed to be the only one who understood the ‘salvific’ truth, for which he devised the term *ariya*, and explained the state to mean ‘moral purity’, in that he had been liberated from ignorance and *samsāra*. More specifically, he defined it as a kind of supreme insight, which could not be attained by blind faith or through traditional Buddhist practice.³² He contrasted *ariya* against *sacca* in the Four Noble Truths, claiming that the latter manifested only some features of the ultimate truth. In other words, when explaining the Noble Truths, *tanhā* or ‘craving’ (literally, ‘thirst’) is usually described as the origin of *dukkha* (suffering), an attachment of which that subsequently results in rebirth. Hence the effort of trying to extinguish craving only generates more *upādāna*: i.e., ‘clinging’ to the cause of one’s suffering.³³ Although the route to achieve *nibbāna* (nirvana) is generally shown in the fourth Truth, which is the Eightfold Path based on the three-fold practice of *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom), U Nyana argued that *nibbāna* cannot be achieved through these pathways. He explained that instead the ‘real truth’ was found in the four stages of spiritual development as one progressed from being a stream-winner to an *arahant*, and that the entry point into the ‘stream’ was especially important.³⁴ In U Nyana’s understanding, anyone who could enter the ‘stream’ is at least on the way to achieving a higher level of *paññā* that is beyond any ‘judgment’ of right or wrong, and thus on the correct path to becoming truly liberated. He also specified that enlightenment could be attained if people firstly focused on improving their Buddhist morality, and that observing the Five Precepts was not only the most essential practice for any Buddhist, but also more important than observing a whole elaborate set of monastic rules that had been designed to keep the monastic community of the sangha intact.

Since U Nyana has practised meditation for most of his life, even while in prison, it is conceivable that, in Buddhist terms, his understanding of reality could have

³²Nyana (2005, 88-89).

³³*Tanhā* is described to include both craving for eternal life and for its complete cessation, but it can also become the object of more craving. See Williams, Tribe, and Wynne (2012, 32-33).

³⁴Nyana (ibid., 30-31).

developed beyond an ordinary person's experience. Indeed, the intensity of his practice could have led him to the realm of *ariya-bhūmi*, where one is completely freed from 'defilements'.³⁵ Patrick Pranke noted that the notion of 'awakening within one's current lifetime' was not particularly unusual in the nineteenth century Burma, and pointed out a passage in the *Sāsanavamsappadīpaka* stating that 'should anyone choose to take up the practice of *vipassanā*, it is surely possible that that person could attain *arahant*ship in a single lifetime'.³⁶ Nonetheless, despite earlier accusations that U Nyana had claimed to be an *arahant*, he was adamant in a recent conversation with me that he had never proclaimed himself to be one.³⁷ Meanwhile, he has written of his special ability to teach the noble way (*ariya pyet-the lan*), as someone who is exceptionally noble and virtuous in his intentions, citing as evidence of that in a number of converts he made in prison, including some criminals from other faiths. He said his desire to disseminate his ideas was spurred on by the hope that everyone would eventually become 'virtuous' and live in peace and harmony with one another in Myanmar. U Nyana further specified that if only people could understand the 'true' teaching of the Buddha, there would be no more ethnic conflicts or intra-religious tension in the world; and that it was of the utmost importance to question the causes of the so-called three poisons – ignorance, greed, and hatred – rather than blindly following the Buddhist conventions.³⁸

It is noteworthy that the Mòpyar sermons present a curious mixture of fundamentalist and progressive ideas. On the one hand, they reveal an attempt to recapture the original intentions of the Buddha by seeking to understand why he uttered particular words in particular contexts; but on the other, seen through the lens of Theravada doctrine in Myanmar, they also appear far-fetched in their unorthodox interpretations. It seems likely that U Nyana's emphasis on 'this-worldly karma' has a wider aim – that is, beyond focusing on the 'here and now' – of enabling people to live fuller lives, unmarred by either the fear of karmic retribution or the burden of serving the sangha in the hope of achieving a better afterlife. His 'this-worldly karma' is thus rooted in a wider vision that Myanmar people can be empowered by freeing themselves from religious fatalism, blind faith, and

³⁵Anālayo Bhikkhu states that if he had truly achieved the realm of *ariya-bhūmi*, an ariyan would not say such things. Email correspondence with Anālayo Bhikkhu on August 28, 2020.

³⁶Pranke, Patrick (2010, 459).

³⁷U Nyana, in a telephone conversation on February 3, 2017, said he had never professed to be an *arahant* and did not have any special powers that might prove that he was one – and added that if he had, he would not have been in prison for so long.

³⁸Nyana (2005, 32).

cultural constraints, which appears to be confirmed by his emphasis on the importance of cultivating insight, being introspective about one's actions, and reflecting deeply on one's own decisions.

5. MODERNIST BUDDHISM OR MISINTERPRETATION OF THE DOCTRINE

Some of U Nyana's ideas may appear to resonate with those of the Thai reformist monk Buddhādāsa (1906-1993), who rejected the implications of karmic law, Abhidhamma and the later commentary of Visudhimagga in his attempt to demystify Buddhism, and return its focus to the original words of the Buddha. Both monks shifted their emphasis from the transcendent 'other-worldly' to 'this-worldly' in their quest to break down so-called fixed views that have confined people to socio-religious conventions.³⁹ However, unlike Buddhādāsa, who reduced all supernatural conditions and non-empirical entities described in the scriptures to human psychological states, U Nyana was neither systematic nor thorough in his critique of conventional Buddhist teaching in Myanmar. And although the extinction of suffering in the 'here and now' was important, unlike Buddhādāsa who advocated a utopian vision of 'dhammic socialism' and subordinating politics to the *dhamma*, U Nyana did not challenge the political status quo nor articulate any overt social vision or activism in his sermons.⁴⁰ Moreover, there is no evidence that U Nyana had ever heard of Buddhādāsa's work – or, indeed, about Santi Asoke: a blue-robe-wearing breakaway Buddhist sect in Thailand whose founder, Phra Bodhirak, was deeply influenced by Buddhādāsa.⁴¹ All questions of influence aside, what is remarkable about U Nyana is how *comprehensively* he denounced mainstream Buddhist teachings and conversions, to a degree that few monks had done in Myanmar since Shin Ukkattha, almost half a century earlier. As well as questioning whether Abhidhamma was a later addition to the Pali canon, U Nyana went so far as to question whether the historical Sakyamuni ever taught Abhidhamma himself, and subsequently undermining almost everything that is accepted as normative teaching of Buddhist doctrine in Myanmar today.

³⁹See Jackson, Peter (2003, 3); Swearer, Donald (1989, 7).

⁴⁰U Nyana does not mention or refer to the concepts of *citta wāng* (non-attachment) or *suññatā* (emptiness), which were fundamental themes for Buddhādāsa in his understanding of the world (Swearer 1989, 7).

⁴¹Phra Bodhirak is also outspoken in his criticism of the monastic practice of Thai sangha, calling for a return to the authentic words of the Buddha (Swearer 1989, 3).

The principal concept expressed in U Nyana's *Pyitsupan Kammavada Buddhabatha* (*Present-Karma Buddhism*) is that human life does not necessarily continue after death, and that the notion of karmic causality should therefore only be applied to this life. Even if there were life after death, he said, good actions would not always lead to good consequences; nor would bad ones lead to rebirth in hellish realms. In his most recent interview, U Nyana was adamant that the belief in karma attached people to their past actions, even to the point of trapping them in a fear of reaping bad consequences.⁴² Accordingly, he saw people confined to a dualistic morality of right and wrong, in which the constant pressure to earn more merit only increased their mental and financial burdens. In this respect, his Mòpyar teachings have placed the practice of *dāna* under scrutiny, since making offerings to the monastic community practically has direct implications for the donor's social status and reputation – in apparent contradiction to the Buddhist teaching of getting rid of the ego and not seeking social acclaim or any reward. U Nyana has often expressed his view that one should be generous just for the sake of it, and for no other reason. In a previously mentioned TV interview, he stated that if one had any material surplus, one should give to the poor and social deprived rather than to the sangha, as it was more important if the generosity was intended to improve the lives of others rather than trying to achieve a better rebirth in an inconceivable future. Reasonable as they might appear to bystanders, such arguments in Myanmar were seen as an attack on the traditional practice of offering *dāna* to monastics, and thus as threatening to the interdependent relationship between the sangha and the Buddhist laity, as well as to the basic premise of Buddhist worship centred on merit-making activities.

6. WHO WERE/ARE U NYANA'S FOLLOWERS?

U Nyana's anti-orthodox teachings attracted a large following of students and urban devotees in the 1990s, and seemed to have appealed to those who sought a modern adaptation of Buddhist teachings to their everyday lives. His followers dressed in the same sky-blue coloured clothes to indicate their nonconformist position and expressed their loyal affiliation to U Nyana's group. Some were attracted to his disciplined conduct and his openness to engage with them in discussing various issues about Myanmar Buddhism. Others were impressed by his inner resolve and commitment to his 'doctrine' despite the continuous harassment and long-term imprisonment by the authorities. When Mòpyar was officially denounced in 2007, the names of its 425 lay devotees were made public, who were made to sign a declaration that they would no longer engage in Mòpyar-related

⁴²Interview with U Nyana on September 12, 2019.

activities.⁴³ The majority of these supporters were from provincial towns in Upper Myanmar, in the regions of Sagaing (38 percent) and Mandalay (16 percent), while 6 percent came from Bago District where U Nyana currently resides. Clusters of followers were from Kyaungu town (n=37) near Monywa, Wutlet (n=24) near Shwebo, Pinleibu (n=20) near Kawlin, and Amarapura (n=15) near Sagaing. It is noteworthy that more than one-third of U Nyana's followers were from Yangon (n=94) and Mandalay (n=63), the two largest urban centres in Myanmar today.⁴⁴ Compared to the general demography of Myanmar, his devotees were urban and relatively well educated, and almost 10 percent of them having university degrees; and 90 members (21 percent of the total) were female supporters.

Several of the elderly residents in Sagaing Town remembered U Nyana as a softly spoken monk and a serious meditator. Other residents over the age of 60 told me that they had heard about U Nyana and the 'sky-blue wearing sect', but were reluctant to talk about them or had a skewed view of their general membership. Some of my informants casually commented that Mòpyar's members were ex-communists and were simply 'crazy.' Nonetheless, the former members I met and interviewed intermittently between 2014 and 2019 appeared to be mentally stable and coherent, and none of them were openly critical about the government or the state appointed monks for their dealings with the Mòpyar Gaing. In fact, many of them were well-educated and had become interested in U Nyana's unique interpretation of the Theravada doctrine through reading his books and pamphlets, or through listening to his sermon recordings. His followers included musicians, artists, writers, engineers and civil servants, educated monks, students and even a retired chairman of a township council who had been in service during U Ne Win's Socialist government. The former chairman said that, after having been an agnostic most of his life, he found the 'true' dhamma when he read a booklet written by U Nyana. In my interview with him, he stated that the main point advocated by Mòpyar was to focus on the present life and be content with it rather than worrying about the next.⁴⁵ He added that the Buddha did not actually teach about rebirth, and yet people focused too much on the whereabouts of an unforeseeable afterlife and on making offerings to the sangha.

Other Mòpyar followers I interviewed were critical of the conservative sermon styles of the sangha and said that U Nyana's teachings were more modern and relevant to their everyday lives. One male follower said that he did not like to observe the deferential

⁴³*Pyitsupan Kammavada Bodapatha Thanidana Mahasawdana* (2008).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Interview in Sagaing, January 28, 2014.

protocol for addressing monks, and having to say, *tinba hpaya* ('Yes, my lord') every time in response to their utterings and prostrating himself in front of monks every now and then. In contrast, they said that U Nyana did not care for such formalities and they could sit and talk on the same level. Some told me that U Nyana often invited his followers to question and challenge him; others were attracted to his free thinking, and to his unconventional method of discussing the dhamma. Thus, although U Nyana appeared as a maverick monk unlike any other Myanmar monk, he attracted followers who wanted to interrogate Buddhism's normative beliefs and engage in discussions. U Nyana himself did not propose any specific programme for social reform or advocate a radical vision for remedying social ills, but he allowed people to think beyond their conventional understanding of Myanmar Buddhism. One middle-aged male informant said that *Sayadaw* (this is how U Nyana is generally addressed) is inspiring and helpful because he leads people to contemplate the Buddha's words by inviting them to participate in discussions about the dhamma in the present moment. The same informant also criticised the sangha establishment for being rigid and out of touch, and for delivering standardised sermons epitomising a kind of Buddhism that confined people to a sense of powerlessness.

In 2006, the Vinicchaya Committee at the state level officially condemned one of U Nyana's supporters, a monk named U Vicittasarabhivamsa, for colluding with another monk U Kheminda in spreading 'false views' in their meditation instruction. It was followed in 2009 by another accusation that U Vicittasarabhivamsa was spreading *adhamma-vāda* (anti-Buddhist doctrine) by rejecting the notion of karmic causality. When I interviewed him, U Vicittasarabhivamsa said that he became a follower of U Nyana after he read one of *Sayadaw's* publications that highlighted the uncertainty of our afterlife. He emphasised that it was important to live one's life to the best of one's ability without worrying about the next one, a position similar to U Nyana's. U Vicittasarabhivamsa, as the honorary suffix of *a-bhivamsa* (higher lineage) suggests, is a learned monk scholar, who had passed the most advanced levels of the state *Pathamapyan* as well as the difficult *Sakyāsīha* examination, and held teaching positions at several monasteries in the Kachin state. At the time I met him, he had been an ordained Buddhist monk for 35 years. However, he confessed to me that one of the reasons he had decided to join the Mòpyar group was that he could no longer bear the oppressive sangha politics that had negatively affected his monastic career and Buddhist learning.⁴⁶ Specifically, he said he was initially idealistic and had many good ideas for inspiring monastic students and modernizing the teaching methods in monasteries, but whenever he suggested new innovations to senior

⁴⁶ Interview with U Vicittasarabhivamsa on September 21, 2019.

monks, they would join forces to make him feel small and marginalise him from decision making roles. Eventually, their inflexible and authoritarian ways made him depressed and withdrawn. He said that during those dark years, long before he had met U Nyana in person, he came across some of his writings that had opened up a new world for him. In the early 2000s, he could no longer bear wearing the yellow robe, so changed to the sky-blue coloured robe of Mòpyar. Soon after, U Vicittasarabhivamsa turned away from society and went into hiding in the remote wilderness to escape arrest, and it actually took more than ten years for him to finally meet U Nyana in person after the latter's release from prison in 2016. Since then they have been in regular contact with U Vicittasarabhivamsa publishing several booklets in defence of U Nyana's 'this-worldly karma' doctrine, and also becoming the spokesperson for asserting that Mòpyar teaching is indeed the *ariya dhamma* ('true' doctrine).⁴⁷

Another of U Nyana's monk followers expressed similar sentiments: that he had wanted to teach Buddhism in a more constructive way and engage in open debates, but had his efforts hampered by a lack of free thinking among abbots and dhamma teachers in senior positions. He saw himself as progressive in his interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine, and wanted to promote modernist interpretations of Theravada Buddhism that made the Buddha's teachings more relevant to contemporary needs. Similarly, a lay follower of U Nyana who had moved to Singapore told me that traditional Buddhist teachings gave him no spiritual guidance in his life, as they addressed neither corruption, poverty, nor exploitation that was prevalent in Myanmar society. A similar sentiment was propounded by the award-winning author Myint Win Maung (also known as AZ) in his

⁴⁷Vicittasarabhivamsa, U. *Bodathathana Thamain-ahman*. (2019); *Nyeinchan-ye Tayà Akweapyà* (2019). In *Bodathathana Thamain-ahman*, U Vicittasarabhivamsa reiterates the viewpoint of U Nyana that the Buddha did not preach Abhidhamma and its contents do not represent the Buddha's words being reworks in later Buddhist Councils. It is noteworthy that modern Western scholarship dates the origin of Abhidhamma to the 3rd century BCE; a few hundred years after the Buddha's passing. However, Abhidhamma studies in Myanmar have occupied a central position in the country's monastic education since King Mindon's reign in the mid-19th century, and any challenge to its authenticity or severing its connection to the Buddha constitutes a major religious offence in the country. The verses in *Patthāna* (the last book of Abhidhamma), for example, are regarded to be exceptionally potent, believed to be the 'words of the Buddha', and is recited on important ceremonial occasions. U Vicittasarabhivamsa's other book *Nyeinchan-ye Tayà Akweapyà* defends U Nyana's teaching of *Pyitsopan Kammawada* as the true doctrine.

publications although he never openly confessed to being one of Mòpyar's supporters.⁴⁸ His book *Post-Modern hnit Ponnya Kriya Wut-tu Se-ba (The Post-Modern Ten Kinds of Meritorious Deeds)* published in 2009 proposed a triadic relationship among the ten meritorious deeds, 'this-worldly karma', and the postmodern age. He explained how postmodernist ideas were introduced into Myanmar through art, music, literature, and architecture even before the country's reopening to the outside world in 2011, and how new communication technology such as the social media and the influx of global information were affecting the ways of thinking of Myanmar people.⁴⁹ In this new environment, U Myint Win Maung advocated the importance of accepting other cultures and religious values as a prerequisite for the construction of a democratic society, and emphasised the importance of moral action now.⁵⁰

Unwittingly, perhaps, U Nyana advocated a type of 'engaged Buddhism' by laying emphasis on 'this-worldly karma', which appealed to those who yearned for fundamental changes in Myanmar's socio-political environment. Moreover, many of his followers revealed deep frustration with the sangha establishment and saw conservative senior monks blocking their pathway to achieving social liberation, and they sought in U Nyana an alternative type of vision more fitting to their contemporary needs.

7. PERFORMANCE-ORIENTED CULTURE AND DOMINANCE OF PARIYATTI BUDDHIST MONKS

The disenchantment that many of his followers expressed towards the conservatism of the scholarly echelon of sangha may be the result of a performance-oriented exam culture that has permeated the monastic community, with the study of Buddhist texts focusing primarily on the passing of annual exams and acquiring Buddhist degrees and titles granted by the state and private Buddhist associations. Importantly, also, secular subjects are not included in Myanmar's national monastic curriculum and rarely taught

⁴⁸Several of U Nyana's devotees told me that I would understand their leader's teachings if I read U Myint Win Maung's above-mentioned book.

⁴⁹Myint Win Maung articulated Buddhist concepts that are relevant to modernist ideals in Myanmar. He wrote, 'postmodernism is about the original freedom, diversification, and the reorganisation of human existence, which has always been diverse and irreverent in many ways' (the author's own translation). He also described *bhavana* as a practice that brings practical benefits to society if people focused on activities such as fundraising for good causes, improving health care, fostering education, alleviating poverty, preserving the environment, dealing with global warming, and so on. (2009, 40-42)

⁵⁰Myint Win Maung (2009, 33).

in *pariyatti* focused monasteries (*sathin-daik*), unlike in other Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia or in Sri Lanka today, and this likely means that scholarly monks in Myanmar are less familiar with broader secular issues compared to their monastic colleagues elsewhere.

Looking back in history, scriptural exams for Myanmar's sangha since the seventeenth century were conducted under royal command as a means of ensuring a high standard of monks' ethical conduct.⁵¹ Especially, through the study of Vinaya, it was hoped that monks would become aware of their moral duties as well as the public retribution if they violated the monastic rules and regulations. King Badon (Bodawpaya) (r. 1782-1819) in the eighteenth century initiated various reforms in his grand scheme to establish a strong and stable Buddhist state. In this, he 'purified' the sangha as it was regarded the king's duty to impose unity and discipline on the monks when their disputes threatened to fragment the monastic community. He also proclaimed Buddhist orthodoxy by declaring that "only one form of Buddhism should be practiced in his realm".⁵² Following in the footsteps of his grandfather, King Mindon (r. 1853-78) made Vinaya a specialized exam subject, and promoted the study of Abhidhamma, which became the main segment of *Pathamapyan*. The sangha establishment initially resistant to being examined for their scriptural knowledge, eventually came to accept the process of promoting scholarly monks through academic performance and *Pathamapyan* became a means through which they achieved wider recognition and upward social mobility. After the loss of Buddhist kingship in 1885 and under the British colonial rule, Turner has described how hundreds of Buddhist lay associations sprung up in the early twentieth century to promote Buddhist scholarship that had gone into decline and preserve the *sāsana*.⁵³ *Pathamapyan* resumed in 1895, and with the exception of the warring years in the 1940s, continue to be conducted annually to maintain the standards of Buddhist scriptural learning, under the auspices of several state Ministries.⁵⁴

As we have seen, a large part of monastic life in Myanmar have come to centre around formal scriptural examinations whereby the state and the sangha, and Buddhist

⁵¹The tradition of *Pathamapyan* was first introduced in 1638 by King Thalun (r. 1629-48).

⁵²In order to achieve this, the King appointed a 'supreme guardian' of the *sāsana* and a committee of monk judges who adjudicated on monastic disputes and tried monks who did not follow the Vinaya. Okudaira Ryuji (2018, 168).

⁵³Turner, Alicia (2014, 35).

⁵⁴Kawanami, Hiroko (2013, 169).

lay enthusiasts collaborated in the scheme to promote them.⁵⁵ Hence, the learning and teaching of Buddhist scriptures for monastic members became focused primarily on passing the annual examinations, also resulting in new scholastic lineages and alumni groups of prominent monasteries, as well as scholarly groupings and hierarchies in the monastic community. Rote learning and memorization of select canonical passages became essential in passing exams rather than in-depth scriptural study or having a comprehensive knowledge of the texts in question. As noted by venerable Khammai Dhammasami, if they were not part of the examination syllabuses, ‘even basic Buddhist texts such as the Dhammapada or Mahavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka’ were not studied,⁵⁶ which seemed to have resulted in a piecemeal knowledge of Buddhist texts. Moreover, once Buddhist scholasticism came to be regulated by national monastic syllabuses, students became even further confined to a narrow set of doctrinal knowledge, alongside ‘normative interpretations of the canonical and exegetical texts’ without developing a general understanding of them.⁵⁷ And yet, degrees granted by the state and prestigious titles awarded on the basis of having passed these scriptural exams attracted lay followers as well as their material support, which in turn further enhanced their monastic reputations and positions in the sangha hierarchy.

In their daily scriptural learning in monasteries, complete obedience is expected by their teachers and mentors, and monastic students rarely contradict them or question their authority as to what they are memorising or even why. There are obviously voices that state that the lack of critical training in Myanmar’s monastic education does not imply their lack of critical thinking, since the level of ‘criticality’ is informed by social and political conditions.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, monastic students generally find it difficult to express their original thoughts and are reluctant to engage in open discussion in the monastic setting. Moreover, senior monks who serve on the MaHaNa are selected on the basis of their academic degree titles and scholarly reputation, thus being highly learned scholars and sangha leaders, they are the least likely type of monks who would question or challenge the government policy. In the meantime, the sangha judicial process endorsed by the state most recently in the early 1980s has provided an official mechanism through which these scholarly monks have come to suppress unusual

⁵⁵Khammai Dhammasami (2004, 153). *Pathamapyan* is conducted annually by the government and the Sakyasiha and Cetiyanana examinations are administered by private Buddhist associations.

⁵⁶Ibid., 56.

⁵⁷Kyaw, Pyi Phyo (2015, 412).

⁵⁸Kyaw (Ibid., 419-420).

doctrinal interpretations that might trigger dissension or disunity within the sangha.⁵⁹ In particular, the opinions of *vinaya-dhara*, who are the scholarly monks with a special expertise in the Vinaya, are most influential and highly sought in sangha tribunals. Huxley has described them as, “They talk and think like lawyers, even if the vinaya in action lacks some of the features which we nowadays expect from a legal system.”⁶⁰ Thus, *vinaya-dhara* are legal experts tasked to interpret the collective intention of the sangha to preserve the Theravada orthodoxy and remove any interpretations or elements that may appear to threaten the ‘purity’ of Myanmar Buddhism.

The government’s attempt to impose surveillance over monastic affairs relied heavily on these learned monk scholars and state accredited dhamma teachers, who were intent on preserving the orthodoxy of Myanmar Buddhism. The so-called *pariyatti* monks, or the monastic scholars, devoted their whole vocational career on learning and teaching the scriptures, and in contrast to *patipatti* monks who practiced or mainly instructed meditation, they have political leverage. Nominated by their monastic peers firstly in their local communities, *pariyatti* monks (normally abbots of large *sathin-daik*) have been co-opted by the secular authorities to make important decisions regarding monastic affairs in each of its administrative tiers of the state organisation. They have also been the main arbitrators in the monastic judiciary system, making them coalesce into an influential group of standard-bearers for Buddhist orthodoxy, and exercising authority over almost every matter of monastic affairs in contemporary Myanmar, despite asserting their ‘above the worldly’ a-political position.

8. THE MONASTIC JURIDICIARY SYSTEM IN MYANMAR

In pre-colonial times, monastic transgressions were settled within different monastic fraternities and hierarchies, and royally appointed monks were specifically tasked with the responsibility of settling monastic disputes.⁶¹ However, the British colonial government during the early twentieth century, in their attempt to control ‘unruly

⁵⁹Khammai Dhammasami describes how the monastic scholarship in Myanmar, which advocated the ‘pure orthodox Theravada tradition’ led to the withdrawal of Sanskrit language from its national monastic syllabuses (2004, 129-30).

⁶⁰Huxley, Andrew (1995, 47).

⁶¹Alexey Kirichenko lists five types of monastic hierarchies or groupings that had self-regulatory features; large monasteries complexes; local *gaings*; elite monasteries of royally appointed abbots and monk scholars backed by Thudhamma Council; translocal reformist *gaings*; and new ritual communities exempted from the jurisdiction of local monastic hierarchies (2020, 143-146).

monks', tried to impose law and order through its colonial civil courts, but did not succeed not having any mechanism to restrain or control those sangha elements. Kirichenko, in his study, describes how the British later recognized the disciplinary function of *thathanabaing* (the primary leader of the sangha) and this led to granting his office broader rights in monastic matters, which "effectively inscribed monastic discipline (governed by the Vinaya) into the legal practice of the modern state."⁶² Competing monastic fraternities and regional monks were integrated into a single monastic order under the authority of *thathanabaing* through the work of Thudhamma Council in Mandalay, the royal city.⁶³ The Council fostered *pariyatti* monks and a new type of monastic leaders were created by passing Pali scriptural exams conducted by the government. Kirichenko states that the '*thathanabaing* project' under the colonial government preserved the ideals of centralized control of the monks and promoted a link between the modern state and the sangha.⁶⁴ The Vinaya was recognized as the only legal framework for monastic behaviour and the project became "vital for the later unification of the *sangha* in postcolonial Burma under Gen. Ne Win".⁶⁵

It was in the early 1980s that Ne Win's government re-established an overarching monastic judiciary to oversee sangha affairs directly as part of an attempt to implement a state system of direct surveillance over monastic affairs.⁶⁶ Since then, under the state sangha organization, monastic representatives – both monks and nuns – have worked closely to enforce law and order with the secular authorities at each regional tier (divisional, township, and ward/village). Meanwhile, abbots of influential *sathin-daik* and well-known dhamma teachers (*sachay saya*) have retained a high level of gravity in exercising their influence in local monastic affairs as well as in attracting material support from wealthy patrons and regular donors. Customarily, any transgression by a monk in Myanmar is dealt with within his monastic affiliation by his preceptor/teacher or the abbot, or at times by a collective body of senior monks in the monastery. When the case cannot be settled within the monastery of affiliation, it is resolved through mediation of senior monks within that particular scholarly lineage, made possible by

⁶²Kirichenko (2020, 152).

⁶³Charney, Michael (2006, 18).

⁶⁴Kirichenko, 154.

⁶⁵Ibid., 155.

⁶⁶Ikuno argued it would be incorrect to conclude that the purge of monks that followed was the result of political intervention alone since widespread cooperation within the sangha establishment lent momentum to the elimination of unwanted heterodox elements in the monastic community (1982, 56).

their close teacher-disciple network.⁶⁷ When such a self-regulatory mechanism within monasteries or lineages does not work, the monastic offender or disputes are brought to the township-level sangha council, and an ad-hoc Vinicchaya committee is set up by nominated abbots of influential monasteries in the locality. If the case is considered a major transgression, it could be sent to a sangha court in a larger administrative district. It is thus noteworthy that despite government attempts to impose direct control over sangha affairs, local monastic communities have resorted to various self-regulatory systems to solve their internal problems.

Hence, the state appointed monks are not always invited by Township sangha councils to act as judicators of monks' transgressions in the locality, and monastic leaders at Township levels have retained autonomy over how they conduct their internal affairs. Only difficult cases involving major disputes between Buddhist fraternities or *gaing*, or those concerning non-*sāsana* properties and complicated heritage, are brought before the sangha judiciary at the state level.⁶⁸ However, some of these major cases involving doctrinal disputes have come to be appropriated by senior scholarly monks who patrol the threshold to control the 'other-worldly' boundary and report any unorthodox ideas or dissenting voices through these official channels established by the secular authorities.

9. VINICCHAYA AND THE IMPOSITION OF LAW AND ORDER

Naingandaw Ahtù Wini-do Ahpwé, the state-level Vinicchaya committee tasked with controlling the sangha and defining what is and what is not orthodox in Myanmar Buddhism, conducted its first tribunal in 1981. The state Vinicchaya is a committee of monastic judges, convened on an ad-hoc basis by MaHaNa, comprising a minimum of three *viniya-dhara*, who are equipped with the highest knowledge of the Vinaya, and Pali canonical and commentarial texts.⁶⁹ The sangha judges investigate *adhamma* or religious offence cases to decide whether the defendant's monastic conduct is *avinaya*,

⁶⁷During the British colonial rule, the Buddhist monastic community retained a relative degree of autonomy in overseeing its internal affairs.

⁶⁸The Myanmar State Samgha Maha Nayaka Committee lists 655 *adhamma* cases that were brought to Township sangha judicial courts (some were then referred to the District sangha courts) between 1988 and 2015. www.mahana.org.mm/en/vinicchaya-affairs/vinicchaya-cases-of-state-from-1988-to-2015/

⁶⁹Most of these sangha judges have the title of *ā-bhivamsa* attached as a honorary suffix to their Buddhist title, implying that they have passed the notoriously difficult Sakyāsīha examination to obtain this prestigious status.

and/or if his/her unorthodox interpretations of Buddhist doctrine are indeed ‘anti-*dhamma*’. According to Ashin Janaka, only the Pali canonical and commentarial scriptures endorsed by monk scholars at the Sixth Buddhist Council in the mid-1950s are considered valid criteria for the committee’s judgments of what is correct *dhamma* and what is not.⁷⁰ Between 1981 and 2017, 21 cases were brought before the state Vinicchaya committee, of which three concerned monastic misconduct, and the rest hinged on the degree of misrepresentation or ‘false’ understanding of Buddhist doctrine.⁷¹ It is noteworthy that, however reasonable these cases of alternative interpretation of the doctrine or monastic practices may appear to bystanders, every Myanmar’s monastic defendant so far has been found guilty.

Although the initial purpose of the state-level Vinicchaya was to provide direct oversight of monastic affairs with a broad aim of purifying the sangha, these sangha tribunals have since functioned as an official channel whereby scholarly monks eliminate heretical ideas and impose their own notions of Theravada orthodoxy, by criminalising monastics who dissent from such notions in the eyes of the secular state. Although the monk judges who issued relevant judgments on the Vinicchaya committee did not have any powers of enforcement, the sangha used such opportunity to express its independent position in stating that U Nyana was holding clear ‘anti-Buddhist’ views, and posed a grave danger to Myanmar Buddhism and society. On November 15th, 2011, MaHaNa issued a statement declaring that U Nyana was *adhamma-vati* and his teaching was *adhamma-vada*.⁷² Following this, on November 28th, a public statement to expel U Nyana from the monastic community was issued by MaHaNa, and an official recommendation was made to the Ministry of Religious Affairs. On December 16th a decree was issued, and Mòpyar Gaing was officially disbanded by the Myanmar government on Instruction no. 95.⁷³ This forced its followers to sign a formal pledge to give up everything associated with Mòpyar Gaing and not to engage in its missionary

⁷⁰Janaka, Ashin (2016, 186).

⁷¹The State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, <http://www.mahana.org.mm/en/vinicchaya-affairs/>
Amongst them, there have been no *antimavatthu* cases involving murder or sexual transgression brought to the state Vinicchaya tribunals as most of these sensitive and some criminal cases of monks are dealt with at the township level.

⁷²*Adhamma* is a broader and more politically loaded term than *micchā ditthi*. In the media and wider political circles, too, especially since 2011, particular religious viewpoints that are regarded as threatening to law and order have been called *adhamma* as a means of de-authenticating and discrediting them.

⁷³The State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, official report no. 17, 2011-ká.

activities ever again. The direct charges against U Nyana were made under Chapter 15, Sections 295 and 295A of the Myanmar Penal Code, which stated that his offences included deliberate and malicious acts intended to offend the *sāsana* and religious feelings of any class, with an intent to insult *Buddhabatha*.⁷⁴ Much of the hostility directed towards him seemed to have come from his open challenge to the traditional beliefs and normative interpretations accepted by the majority of Myanmar Buddhists, and consequently the threat he posed to their religious sentiments was transformed into a criminal act.

Myanmar's penal code, based on the Indian penal code, was applied to the then-British colony of Burma in 1861, and remained the backbone of the country's criminal law as successive regimes adapted it to fit the changing political conditions. According to Cheesman, however, the original code was not used to regulate religious activities in any specific way until relatively recently; and for many decades, unorthodox interpretations of Buddhist doctrine would not have been considered a valid reason for the state to interfere with the internal affairs of the monastic community.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the rebuilding of law and order in society became an urgent priority for the military junta in the post-1988 period, after a crackdown on pro-democracy students and political monks; and this shift was bound up with an increasingly pronounced religious nationalism, culminating in the SLORC initiating not only its pro-Buddhist policies, but a comprehensive state-sponsored Buddhist-nationalist ideology.⁷⁶ Early in the present century, the Myanmar government started to apply sections of the penal code in 'softer' cases against Buddhist monks.⁷⁷ And additionally, Cheesman has described how the Myanmar concept of *ngyeinwut piya-ye* (law and order) entitled certain groups or persons in positions of authority to impose their *own* notions of order on their fellow citizens, in the name of restoring it.⁷⁸

In 2011, U Nyana became identified and labelled as 'public enemy', though this was

⁷⁴Chapter 15 of Myanmar penal code stipulates the 'Offences Relating to Religion'. The relevant sections in relation to U Nyana are the following two: 295. Injuring or defiling place of worship, with intent to insult the religion of any class. 295A. Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs. See:

https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs6/myanmar_penal_code-corr.1.pdf.

⁷⁵Cheesman, Nick (2015, 92).

⁷⁶See Schober, Juliane (2011, 88-90).

⁷⁷Frydenlund, Iselin (2019, 88).

⁷⁸Cheesman (2015, 31).

‘not necessarily an offence with any bearing’ on the real reasons he was arrested.⁷⁹ He was criminalised not only because of his defiant stance against the sangha authority, but also because his speech and conduct were seen as influencing people’s minds and ‘leading them astray’, to a point deemed threatening to the national security. In addition to sections of the penal code, U Nyana was charged under Sections 5(e) and 5(j) of the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act for disseminating ‘false views’, as well as causing disruption to the morality of the general public, under which he was sentenced to further 20 years’ imprisonment.⁸⁰

10. WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE?

As part of an NLD government amnesty, U Nyana was released from prison in January 2016. Despite many years of incarceration and his advanced age, he has resumed campaigning in favour of a ‘this-worldly’ application of Buddhism. The strength of his defiance seems to come from the unjust and severe treatment he had suffered over the decades, and this has made him into a staunch critic of the conservative sangha authority, which he said did not understand his doctrinal stance nor allowed him to engage in a fair and meaningful dialogue. MaHaNa issued a statement on December 29th, 2016, to the effect that *Pyitsupan Kammavada Buddhathā* diminished the fundamental value of Theravada Buddhism, and reiterated its official position from 2011: that the teachings of U Nyana were *adhamma-vāda* and that Mòpyar Gaing was an illegal sect.⁸¹ In fact, the treatment of U Nyana had not changed under the democratically elected government of NLD, and U Aung Ko, who was then the Minister of Religious Affairs, spoke at a press conference to publicly elaborate the position of the government: that Mòpyar Gaing was not a ‘Buddhist’ sect since its followers did not believe in either *samsāra* or the concept of

⁷⁹Ibid.,115.

⁸⁰1950 Emergency Provisions Act 5(e): He who causes or intends to spread false news, knowing beforehand that it is untrue; and 5(j): He who causes or intends to cause to disrupt the morality or the behaviour of a group of people or the general public, or to disrupt the security or the reconstruction of stability of the Union. See https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs19/1950-Emergency_Provisions_Act-en.pdf.

⁸¹MaHaNa issued a statement on December 29, 2016 to reiterate the position that there are only nine *gaing* or Buddhist sects in Myanmar according to the Sangha Ahpwé-sii Acheigan-sii myen ne; thus, Mòpyar Gaing is *ipso facto* an illegal sect. In response, U Ne Win, the lay representative of Mòpyar group, issued a statement on the following day to say that U Nyana did not insult Theravada Buddhism, and his teachings were beneficial to the wellbeing of all Myanmar people regardless of their faiths; and that there was nothing in the Constitution that rendered Mòpyar teaching illegal.

rebirth, and adding they should not even be called a *gaing*.⁸² In an interesting twist, U Wirathu, the monk who became notorious for his ‘969’ campaign against Muslim shopkeepers, spoke about U Nyana in an interview on RFA Burmese Radio.⁸³ He said that U Nyana should just keep quiet and stop using the media to promote his misleading ideas, as continuing to do so could only jeopardise the teachings of Buddhism. Regardless of his own notoriety, U Wirathu stated that U Nyana had become *thathana atwin yanthú* (an internal enemy) of Myanmar Buddhism. In fact, the term *thathana atwin yanthú* was first used by MaHaNa in its denunciation of U Nyana, and similarly MaBaTha; the nationalistic organization of Buddhist monks, also made clear of their position in his condemnation.⁸⁴ Ironically, the naming of him as ‘an internal enemy’ seems to have positioned U Nyana as if he was still an affiliate of the Buddhist monastic community, and this is probably where the contention lies. Meanwhile, despite these attacks and his exclusion from the sangha (as he was no longer entitled to hold the monastic ID card), U Nyana refuses to comply with the official verdict that his teaching was deviant or ‘false’, and continues to accuse the state and sangha for their ‘wrong views’.

Today, U Nyana is confined to a small lodging in a remote backwater of Bago region in the central part of Myanmar, supported by several donors in Yangon and Mandalay. He continues to wear sky-blue coloured clothes to distinguish himself from saffron-robed monks, and observes the Ten Precepts; adhering to a celibate lifestyle, not taking solid food after midday or touching money. Thanks to advanced communication technology and social media, he keeps in touch with his followers via online sermons and by instructing meditations. His views – although labelled as *adhamma-vāda* by both the secular and religious authorities – have not been dismissed as deviant or anti-Buddhist by the people I interviewed. His followers, both lay and monastic, continue to address him by using the honorific term *Sayadaw* and respect him as an advanced meditator who is morally superior to ordinary Myanmar monks. That is, they treat him as an extraordinary monk ascetic, who just happens to be wearing a different coloured

⁸²U Aung Ko speaks at a news conference in Yangon on January 5, 2017.

⁸³U Wirathu (1968-), a nationalist Buddhist monk spoke on Radio Free Asia (RFA) Burmese radio on January 6, 2017. In July 2013, he appeared on the cover of the *Time* magazine described as ‘the face of Buddhist terror’. He spread Islamophobic messages and supported the persecution of Rohingya; a minority Muslim group in the Rakhine state. In May 2019, a warrant was issued for U Wirathu’s arrest, and he surrendered to the authorities a few days before the parliamentary election on November 8, 2020.

⁸⁴MaBaTha is an acronym for Amyotha-batha Thathana Saungshauk-yei Apwe; translated as the ‘Association for the Protection of Race and Religion’.

robe.⁸⁵ Some have described him in the category of *lokuttara* due to his ‘other-worldly’ aspirations, doctrinal knowledge and moral conduct, and despite his teaching on ‘this-worldly karma’, they distinguish him from ‘political monks’ like U Wirathu, seen to be caught up in the *lokiya* and less worthy due to his concern with secular power and ‘this-worldly’ matters.

11. CONCLUDING REMARKS

U Nyana’s trouble started in the early 1980s when he became a convenient target of Ne Win’s sangha reform, and was arrested for claiming to be an *arahant* (which has been reputed by him). However, the nature of his ‘crimes’ changed over the years from being that of a religious nature to a political one, progressing from the *arahant* claim to him forming an illegal sect, and then to spreading *micchā-ditthi* or ‘false views’, and finally for holding ‘anti-Buddhist’ views and making him ‘public enemy’ on the grounds of national security. As his case dragged on for almost three decades, originally a doctrinal issue about *arahantship*, and U Nyana became an unfortunate victim caught between the political interests of secular courts intent on criminalizing him, and the monastic arbitrators of the sangha intent on asserting the legitimacy of their orthodox interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine. U Nyana’s original aim was to disseminate the importance of ‘this-worldly karma’ so that Myanmar people would focus on living a moral life and co-exist harmoniously with others in society. Nonetheless, his missionizing activities became the focus of public condemnation due to his open critique of normative Buddhist beliefs in regard to karmic causality and rebirth, and eventually he had fallen under the state’s criminal law for spreading ‘false views’ and misleading people. The case of Mòpyar Gaing has highlighted the complexity of plural jurisdictions in Myanmar, and how competing interests of the state and the sangha can at times converge when the issue of national security comes to the fore.

Despite trans-national movements and trans-sectarian activities in the international Buddhist community today, Mòpyar Gaing provides a unique case study which reveals that Myanmar Buddhists are still cut off from scholarly discussions or international debates that take place beyond their national borders. The doctrinal disputes that took

⁸⁵In a face to face interview with U Nyana on September 12, 2019, he said that although he wore sky-blue coloured clothes, he continued to abide by the Vinaya in the spirit of an ordained monk, adhering to the moral discipline and observing the required abstinences that defined him as a monk. Despite his emphasis on ‘this-worldly karma’, Myanmar people I spoke to consider U Nyana as an ‘other-worldly’ monk and do not see him in the category of *weikza* or *bodaw*, who are more concerned about ‘this-worldly’ matters.

place in Myanmar sangha courts in regard to ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ views, and karmic causality, or about whether rebirth exists or not, are totally legitimate subjects in international conferences and in other Buddhist contexts, and such doctrinal disputes would not have been a reason to imprison a person for many decades as was in the case of U Nyana. Many Myanmar politicians in the post-independence era have assumed a religious role as ‘defender of *sāsana*’ often to enhance their political reputation and impose control over the monastic community.⁸⁶ But the distinctiveness of Myanmar Buddhism and law nexus we have seen here is that the state and the sangha have legally colluded in their decision to condemn a Buddhist monk and make him a scapegoat in advancing their respective agendas and protect their notion of Theravada orthodoxy on the pretext of imposing law and order.⁸⁷

Having said that, the sangha courts in Myanmar have generally managed to remain independent and stay above state intervention since the monastic disputes and tribunals are doctrinal based on the interpretations of Vinaya, and Pali canonical and commentarial texts. In the case of major transgressions, the recommendations made by the state Vinicchaya committee have been accepted and endorsed by successive military regimes via the Department of Religious Affairs. It has to be mentioned that the rules of Vinaya have not been designed to serve a political power or the ruling state since they are after all not the source of divine law like Quran in Islam. Besides, Buddhist monks, not like Muslim *imams*, are neither appointed by God nor have inherited the Buddha’s authority to implement the monastic law. The 47 monks comprising the MaHaNa may have been appointed by the government, but monk judges in the state Vinicchaya committee act on behalf of the Buddhist community and in the interest of the *sāsana*, and not necessarily for the state. Hence, there is a fundamental conflict of interest between these monks and the state, which may explain the conflicting attitudes towards the treatment of U Nyana, whom many still consider a Buddhist monk.

As Myanmar society undergoes further secularisation, rapid economic development, and major political changes, a diversity of voices have emerged from the Buddhist community, ranging from the conservative Buddhist nationalism of MaBaTha to the anti-

⁸⁶Prime Minister U Nu (r. 1948-62) was probably the most famous ‘defender of the *sāsana*’. See Kawanami, Hiroko (2016, 35-37)

⁸⁷It is noteworthy that high-ranking officers who work in the Department of Religious Affairs in Myanmar’s Religious Ministry are mostly former monks and there exists a close sharing of religious interests and concerns with monastic arbitrators in the government’s dealing with monastic transgression cases that are reported to the state Vinicchaya committee.

orthodox teaching of Mòpyar Gaing. The former has reflected a strong concern among Buddhist monks to preserve Buddhist morality from the corrupting forces of modernity, and that Buddhist women be protected from other faiths especially from global Islam, whereas the latter has tried to reinterpret the doctrine to keep abreast of changing social realities. Whilst the mainstream sangha focuses its efforts on collectively preserving the orthodoxy of Myanmar Buddhism, notably by appropriating the notion of *adhamma-vāda*, Mòpyar Gaing has emerged as a response to the hegemonizing ideology of *Buddhabatha*, appealing to the deep frustration expressed by many with the conservative sangha establishment and the political status quo.

Future research could examine the extent to which U Nyana's doctrine of 'this-worldly karma' has affected some of the beliefs of Myanmar Buddhists and whether his ideas have had some relevance for the actions of engaged Buddhists there. However, unlike Buddhādāsa, U Nyana himself was not an activist who tried to instigate sangha reform or promote human rights and economic justice in society. Neither did he encourage political activism or show the kind of spiritual leadership that might render Buddhism meaningful to contemporary Myanmar life. In many ways, he was a 'traditional' Buddhist monk and a serious meditator, interested primarily in the internal workings of the mind rather than in the external political realities that affected people's daily lives. Thus, he shared the other-worldly values of *lokuttara* with the scholarly monks in the sangha echelon who were mainly preoccupied by doctrinal matters focused on the individual quest to free themselves from the cycle of *samsara*.

Glossary (Romanized version for Pali terms)

adhamma-vāda (anti-Buddhist doctrine)

adhamma-vati (a person who holds 'anti-Buddhist' views)

anatta (illusory nature of the self, not-self, having no soul)

antimavatthu (*pārājika* offence that involves expulsion from the sangha)

arahant ('worthy one', one who has eliminated all the worldly roots that underlie the fetters, he will not be reborn)

ariya ('not ordinary', noble, pure, exalted)

ariya-bhūmi (a realm of *ariya*)

avinaya (anti-*vinaya*, against the monastic rules)

bhāvāna (mental cultivation)

dāna (generosity, donation)

lokiya (this-worldly, mundane affairs)

lokuttara (the other-worldly)
micchā ditthi (wrong view)
nikāya (assemblage, group, collection)
paññā (wisdom)
pārājika (‘defeats’, major four rules for an ordained monastic that could lead to exclusion from the sangha if violated)
pariyatti (doctrinal study and learning of Buddhist scriptures)
patipatti (the practice of meditation)
paticca samuppāda (dependent origination)
sammā-ditthi (right view)
samsāra (endless cycle of rebirth)
sāsana (Dispensation of the Buddha, the doctrine)
vatthu (grounds for arriving at a particular view)
vinīya-dhara (scholarly monks with an expertise in the vinaya)
vinicchaya (judgement, monastic trial)

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