



Charisma, Power(s), and the *Arahant* Ideal in Burmese-Myanmar Buddhism

In this article, I explore the notion of charisma and moral power in contemporary Myanmar and focus on the qualities of charismatic monks who have become the object of public worship in recent decades. By unraveling different manifestations of their power(s), I locate the appeal of an *arahant*, a religious ideal that continues to be the central focus for people's devotional worship. In order to understand the social implications of power deeply engrained in Myanmar's religious and political culture, I explore vernacular terms that pertain to notions of authority, power, and influence that are relevant in social life in Myanmar. I also refer to the granting of honorary titles to monastic figures and its social implications in the backdrop of an achievement-oriented monastic environment, and a state policy that fosters its image as the patron of the *Sāsana*.

KEYWORDS: charisma—moral power—*arahant*—*weikza*—*Sāsana*

REYNOLDS (2005) has drawn our attention to the fact that the notion of charisma and power has its own share of problems when it comes to cross-cultural applicability, unnecessarily reinforcing the dichotomy between the sacred and profane, the human and the spirit world, Buddhism and spirit cults, and so on.¹ Power in traditional societies such as Myanmar is deeply engrained in religious and political culture, and requires a moral and other-worldly dimension in understanding its exertion in society. Moreover, in Myanmar, notions of power are much more transient and unstable compared to the Western concept of institutional authority or democratically invested power within the modern confines of the nation-state. Politics and religion may be intertwined as far as temporal power is concerned, but the ultimate notion of power in people's aspirations is still very much part of the cosmic world view.² I will not be drawn into the debate on secular politics for the purpose of this article, but I highlight the danger of compounding further misunderstanding by not paying enough attention to what takes place in the field of religion.³

In this article, I explore the notion of charisma and moral power in contemporary Myanmar and focus on several charismatic monks who have become the object of public worship in recent decades. I also return briefly to WEBER (1948), who first introduced the concept of "charisma" as a means of understanding society. Despite the already-mentioned concerns for the culturally specific, I use the term "charisma" here because it is a useful point of reference in an attempt to draw out certain features of power exercised by local actors, in this case Buddhist monks, and understand their "power" in relation to other kinds of power(s) manifest in Myanmar society. "Charisma" for Weber was not only about an innate power or intrinsic quality of a specific individual; it also involved a relationship created and sustained in order to uphold power by his or her loyal followers. Thus, in a wider context, I examine the role of lay devotees who worship and uphold their monastic heroes, and that of the government which is wary of religious figures who attract too much devotion, as well as the attempt to both appease and control them.

To start with, WEBER distinguished the notion of "charisma" broadly into two types (1948, 295–96): the institutional charisma that has its authority invested in an institution or organization, and a primal form of charisma invested in an individual



FIGURE 1. A nun receiving her weekly alms in the form of uncooked (raw) rice from her lay donor. (Photo taken by Hiroko Kawanami)

endowed with extraordinary qualities that can potentially overthrow the former type of power. Some of the charismatic monks I allude to in this article represent both the institutional authority of the Sangha and exceptional personal qualities, although some more than others, and these case studies represent a general spectrum of their varied moral appeal. I hope to show that the ideal of an *arahant* (literally the “worthy one”; the Buddha being the primary example) goes beyond the confines of individual and society, reflecting the popular beliefs of local Buddhists who seek extraordinary figures and are in constant search for an awe-inspiring mystical power that transcends their ordinary human existence. By unraveling different manifestations of power(s), I hope to locate the appeal of an *arahant*, a religious ideal that continues to be the central focus of people’s worship. Subsequently, I hope to broaden the discussion about the notion of charisma and power, and unravel the very source of people’s devotional worship in the totality of Myanmar society.

IDEAL TYPES

At a popular level, a Buddhist monk who attracts a large following does so due to his unique personal qualities that appeal to the general public in many different ways. WEBER saw this kind of influence as implying an open and creative

force that showed the potential for anti-structure, which was made possible by a person becoming the centripetal force, “opposed to all institutional routines, those of tradition and those subject to rational management” (1948, 52). In order to understand what is in store for charisma in Myanmar society, I refer to the so-called “ideal types” of monks and use them as a conceptual barometer to examine certain features of their power(s), and to determine the quality of their attraction. The three monks I enlist here as case studies have been chosen from a popularity survey conducted on thirty senior Buddhist nuns who may be described as monastic “connoisseurs.”⁴ These nuns are at the frontline of pious Buddhists and show their ardent support for the Sangha authority. As we will see in the next section, the monks they have chosen manifest a spectrum of charismatic qualities which reflect the spiritual ideals and general expectations of lay devotees.

The monks’ popularity derives from a mixture of charismatic qualities, talent, and outstanding communication skills that they manifest. In terms of typology, firstly, there are monks who are state-recognized scholars whose monastic life is devoted to *pariyatti*, the learning and teaching of Buddhist scriptures. They are revered for their knowledge and academic achievements. Buddhist kings and the state in Myanmar have fostered monastic education since the seventeenth century and rewarded high academic achievers in the monastic community for the purpose of legitimation. This tradition has continued under the Religious Ministry of the present regime, which administers the implementation of the monastic curriculum, the publication of Buddhist textbooks, and conducts and supervises the annual ecclesiastical examinations. Ironically, whilst the authorities promote a type of monastic elite who are primarily scholarly, they are also threatened by the wide influence that monk teachers can command through their fraternity and network of disciple monks and the reverence in which they are held. Thus attempts have been made to impose control by both rewarding as well as confining these monks to their scholarly and other-worldly pursuits.

The second type refers to preaching monks who draw large crowds by giving dhamma talks and sermons. Monks with oratorical skills are hugely popular in Myanmar (especially in a social context where mass media are not as developed) and can reach a wide audience, from illiterate villagers in the remote corners of the country to an educated Myanmar population in the diaspora. Although their intention is to preach about Buddhism and give sermons to disseminate religious and moral messages, there are also monks who have used their skills to criticize the political situation. Eloquent preachers can appeal and inspire, and even mobilize their followers to generate a mass movement; thus their very presence and communication skills can become a source of social instability.

However, a monk who is the ultimate focus of people’s devotional worship is one who is rumored to be an *arahant*, the enlightened one who is worshipped as a Buddhist saint. Although no one is completely certain as to whether he has actually attained that perfected state, a true *arahant* is said to just “radiate,” whilst he bides his time until he attains the final release from rebirth and transmigration.⁵ Such a monk represents supreme moral qualities in his enlightened state that are said to

be those of exceptional virtue and wisdom. Some of them go beyond the ordinary and human, and as a consequence are believed to be endowed with extraordinary powers, albeit disinterested in them. In reality, meeting a rumored *arahant* is nothing special since he tends to be a simple meditating monk who displays no frills or grandeur in the manner that we would expect of a powerful person. He is said to be extraordinary, nonetheless, as people subscribe to the belief that he has obtained miraculous powers through rigorous ascetic practices and intensive meditation. In fact, one rarely has the opportunity to witness his “powers” since he does not flaunt them or admit that he has acquired that highest spiritual stage—he would be defeated if he claimed to be so. Meanwhile, his supernatural powers and qualities have to conform to the normative standards and criteria in the Buddhist soteriology, which are also influenced by local criteria set out in popular beliefs and religious myths.⁶

On the one hand, an *arahant* seems to show the potential for anti-structure as envisaged by WEBER (1948) or TURNER (1969), whilst on the other, his power is all-encompassing and provides the foundation for social stability and well-being. A rumored *arahant* in Myanmar usually does not have high academic qualifications or an official rank, and resides in a peripheral region far away from the politics at the center. But his appeal goes beyond any values or prestige authorized by the institutional status or monastic authority of the Sangha. Furthermore, such a monk is able to embody a kind of cosmic microcosm for his devotees in their cosmological world view, giving them a glimpse of a spiritual pathway through which the cosmic and transcendental, and the human and spiritual worlds intersect. Even senior politicians and generals who represent military force and secular power frequently visit and seek blessings from a saintly monk in the hope of soliciting an overarching spiritual support to realize their temporal wishes in an uncertain world.

The traditional oppositional typology of monks has been that between the detached forest dweller (Pāli: *āraññāvāsīn*) and the engaged village/town monks (Pāli: *gāmaāvāsīn*), that is, between the monastic practitioners who meditate and those who are associated with doctrinal learning and ritual. Nonetheless, the kind of oppositional rivalry between the forest and town monks once described by FERGUSON (1978, 69) is changing in the contemporary Myanmar scene. Perhaps the situation is different in Thailand where the forest monks have maintained their autonomous ascetic culture away from the hegemonic intervention of the political center (KAMALA TIYAVANICH 1997). Many forest monks and ascetic practitioners in Myanmar were purged in the 1980s, forcing them to disrobe or escape to the Thai borders as a result of the purification policies of the state. Furthermore, encroaching secularization as well as achievement-orientated values permeating the monastic community in recent decades have brought many bright young men from rural villages to study in renowned monastery schools in Mandalay and Yangon, and in educational centers in Pakokku and Sagaing. As a result, we can no longer clearly distinguish between the wandering ascetics in the forest and sedentary ritual specialists in towns.

Today the annual ecclesiastical exams supervised by the Religious Ministry, and also held by many private Buddhist associations, have helped to change the general climate in the monastic community. Scholarly monks and nuns attract much attention, and are seen as monastic role models who represent the virtuous ideals of the *Sāsana*. The emphasis on academic achievements over other religious qualities such as rituals and mystical skills has fundamentally affected the relationship between lay benefactors and their monastic beneficiaries. Whilst more and more monks and nuns concentrate on the vocation of *pariyattī* and contribute to spreading the dhamma under the national banner of *Sāsana-pyū* (dissemination of the *Sāsana*), fewer monks today meditate full-time in the ascetic tradition. Some may meditate by default, such as due to illness or old age, but the practice does not generate donations or endow them with as much social uplift as monastic learning. Meanwhile, *padīpattī* (Pāli: *patipattī*) (the practice of meditation) or the vocation of meditation (Pāli: *vipassanādhura*), especially that of Vipassanā, has been eagerly taken up by lay practitioners who vent their daily frustration and disenchantment in their collective practice in meditation centers (see JORDT 2007).

Consequently, few monks remain in the forest and fewer *arahants* have been discerned in recent times. Although the last two famous *arahants* passed away in 2003 and 2004, the spiritual prototype continues to survive in the collective memory of Myanmar people. They are still eager to seek out and meet another *arahant* in their lifetime, and the ascetic ideal continues to inspire, command, and provide direction to both monks and laity. Therefore, the “centrality” of a monk’s position highlighted by TAMBIAH (1984, 26) continues to be relevant even amongst the most renowned scholar-monks in the *ganthadhura* tradition (those who have devoted themselves to “a career of study”). After their accomplishments in their scholastic careers, the ideal of the virtuous detachment of an *arahant* is embraced by some of them, perhaps as a way to navigate through a sensitive political environment, as we will see in the next section.

THE SCHOLAR (INSEIN YWAMA SAYADAW)

U Tiloka Biwuntha, commonly known as Insein Ywama Sayadaw, is a scholar-monk who represents all the relevant features and qualities of a learned *pariyattī* monk. He is a renowned teacher who presides over a large monastery school in Yangon that accommodates over one thousand student monks.⁷ He was born in 1939 in Lower Myanmar, in Nyawunbintha village, Zalon district, of the Irrawaddy division. When he was fifteen years old, he became a novice in the village monastery. After he was ordained at Bagwe Gyaung Haung Monastery, he started his formal monastic education at Kosaung-taik Monastery in Myingyan, a well-known monastery school. He was extremely bright and passed the state ecclesiastical exams in successive years, and was second nationally when he passed the final qualification exam to become a Dhammacariya (teacher of the dhamma). He was awarded a distinction and received the official degree of *Sāsanadaza Siripawara Dhammacariya* from the government. He continued his studies in Mandalay at

Kyanthagyi Nyaung-gan-taik Paríyattí Monastery and then in Yangon at Chauk-tat-gyi taik Monastery. He also passed the Sakyadhiha Dhammacariya exam in Mandalay which is renowned for its difficult questions, and received the honorary suffix of Biwuntha (Abhivamsa), or “higher lineage,” which affiliated him with the small and exclusive club of select scholar-monks. He was not only a bright student, but also a gifted teacher. After completing his studies, he started to teach and became a lecturer in Nyaung Oo district, Kangyigon Sathindaik Monastery. He then went back briefly to Minjyan Kosaung-daik, the monastery where he initially studied and taught as the principal lecturer. In 1969, he was invited to Insein Ywama village in Yangon to become the head teacher of a large monastery school where he remains today. He rose to the height of his teaching profession in 1983 and became professor of Abhidhamma studies at Paríyattí Sāsana University in Yangon, and later became vice chancellor. He also had state appointments as a judge in the Sangha Court of Insein district and served as one of the forty-seven members of the state executive committee of Sangha Maha Nayaka during 1990–95.⁸ He has written more than thirty books and textbooks that are used in the national Buddhist curriculum for Myanmar monks and nuns.

But what established his reputation as a remarkable teacher was the method he developed to teach Buddhist philosophy from important volumes in the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* such as *Mātikā*,⁹ *Dhātukathā*,¹⁰ *Yamaka*,¹¹ and *Patthāna*.¹² He reworked the old syllabus and created a much more effective method to understand the principles and difficult concepts by using simple tables and charts.¹³ It is said that his learning method has revolutionized the study of the *Abhidhamma* and made it much easier for monastic students to understand the principles of intricate concepts when preparing for exams. Since the early 1970s when he started teaching full-time, almost two thousand students under his tutelage have passed the state exams, some of them with distinction.¹⁴ Amongst them, Ashin Thilatkana became the youngest Tipitakadhara, which is awarded to a monk who has learned and memorized the entire *Tipitaka* canon. This achievement of his disciple once again enhanced his reputation as a great teacher.

U Tiloka’s cv is full of academic achievements, publications, and distinguished disciples associated with him. Nevertheless, what appeals to the public derives from his special personal qualities, which are seen to be antithetical to what is expected of a highly accomplished scholar. Many of the devotees’ narratives centered around his kind and benign behavior, and pointed to his unusual lack of *maná* (Pāli: *mana*) (pride or sense of self-importance), lack of *lāmbá* (Pāli: *lobha*) (selfish desires), and absence of *dàwthá* (Pāli: *dosa*) (anger or aversion). People described him as kind, accessible, and impartial. Other comments included that he was respectful to everyone, never showed any anger, and treated his students with affection, as if he were their parent. He is also known to engage in volunteer work; for example, he gives private tuition to nuns and visits ethnic minority areas to teach disadvantaged children. His humility became widely known when it was authenticated by an account told by the chief monk meditation instructor, U Thawmana, at Mahasi Meditation Center in Yangon. U Thawmana said he was

flabbergasted when U Tiloka first visited the center to practice meditation. The highly accomplished monk asked to be treated in the same way as any ordinary monk and said that he had left his academic credentials and monastic position behind in order to concentrate on the practice. This story was interpreted as a sign of his exceptional moral quality. All these traits were viewed as most unlikely for a distinguished scholar and enhanced his spiritual worth even further in the eyes of the Myanmar public.

In person, he is mild mannered and soft-spoken. He smiles easily and has a warm and affectionate air. Accounts concerning his compassionate nature and his lack of selfish desires continue to be generated. For example, detailed information concerning the attentiveness with which he gave massages to his father was circulated as if everyone had seen him caring for his father. The care he takes in looking after his monk and nun disciples is narrated by many and he is constantly described as someone who is full of loving kindness (*myittlhā*; Pāli: *mettā*). Nowadays, he has reverted to traditional ascetic practices, and meditates for long hours, occasionally going to the graveyard to contemplate on rotting corpses. This is a meditation method practiced by “hardcore” monks to face the reality of the coming death and gain a deeper understanding of the nature of life. He has also become vegetarian, eats only once a day, mixing up all the food in his bowl and apparently not showing any attachment to the tastes of food. People report how he often rests in a sitting position or sleeps outdoors, which is as if he is subscribing to the prescriptive ascetic model in the forest tradition.¹⁵ However, unlike a typical *arahant*, he does not limit his physical movements or contact with his many lay followers. Despite claims that he is entirely detached, he travels around the country in the image of a wandering ascetic and conducts rituals to bless laborers and engineers working in the most hazardous conditions in remote corners of the country building bridges and tunnels. He is respected because he is able to descend from the high pedestal of academic and monastic heights, and is not afraid to break down barriers and social distinctions. He is loved because he shows that he cares and communicates with people on equal terms. All these qualities are seen and spoken of as extraordinary and many see him as reaching *arahant* status.

THE PREACHER: SITAGU SAYADAW

U Nyanissara, commonly known as Sitagu Sayadaw, is perhaps one of the most popular monk preachers in Myanmar today who fits comfortably within the general typology of charisma as we normally know it. He was born in 1937 in Thegon Township, Pegu Division, in Lower Myanmar and became a novice when he was fifteen years old. After becoming ordained in his native town, he started his monastic education and passed the primary, middle, and higher levels of state Pathamapyan exams between 1956 and 1958. It is said that he already had a vision from a young age to go abroad to disseminate the *Sāsana*. He obtained an MA degree in Buddhist doctrine at Khinmagan Pali University in Mandalay, and a diploma in English at the Sangha University in Yangon. It seems that he did not

pursue his scholastic interests within the narrow confines of monastic learning, and whilst most monks, once completing their education, go back to their native villages to settle and start a monastery school, he set his sights on establishing a monastic foundation to play a key role in missionizing. In 1965, he founded BBM College in Lay Myethna town in the delta region of Lower Myanmar and worked as the headmaster and chief administrator until 1968. He then moved to the area of Sagaing Hill in Upper Myanmar, an area that is a well-established educational center for monks and nuns, and set up his own monastery. He became the disciple of the late monk Anesakhan Sayadaw U Pandita (1899–1977), who was widely known for his preaching skills, and learned from him the decorative style of Buddhist homiletics that later established him as an accomplished preacher. He also continued to study English as he knew that linguistic ability would help him to reach the outside world and allow him to establish foreign links. In 1979, Sitagu Kyaung Monastery was donated to him by his increasing number of devotees and this gave him his monastic base.

His fame and influence derived from a combination of linguistic and oratorical skills, charismatic leadership, and a socially-engaged (this-worldly) vision that subsequently materialized in many of his projects. His sermons were well sought after; devotees from far and wide came to listen, and he was invited by sponsors to remote corners of the country. In the early 1980s, he started to go abroad, firstly to countries in Asia and then to the USA through invitation by the Myanmar communities in the diaspora to deliver sermons and conduct ceremonies. He also published books and pamphlets, and many of them were translated into English. By the end of the 1980s, he was exerting considerable influence amongst his lay following and with the donation of funds collected by his sermon trips, he started to engage in several social projects. His first project in the early 1980s was to install a water pump by the Irrawaddy River for monastic residents of Sagaing Hill, an area known for its arid climate, by pumping up, filtering, and distributing the much-needed water for the local community. The project took four years and cost 30,000 US dollars (8,000,000 Myanmar kyat) to complete, but as a result, water pipes have been laid down to provide water to over 800 monasteries and nunneries, and more than 10,000 residents have benefited from it. This was followed by another project in Sagaing, the construction of a private Sangha hospital, Sitagu Aryudhana hospital, equipped with one hundred beds, which was primarily meant to provide service for monks and nuns, but now benefits everyone in the community. The project took four years and cost 350,000 US dollars (35,000,000 Myanmar kyat) to complete, but the hospital eventually opened in March 1990.¹⁶ His vision for community development and interest in international missionizing were brought together in his third project, a Buddhist University, Sitagu Buddhist Academy, that was completed in 1998.

In 1993, the SLORC government granted him the official title of Mahā Dhammakathika Bahujanahitadhara for his excellence in expounding the dhamma, and in 1995 he was also awarded the title of Agga Mahā Saddhamma Jotikadhaja for his contribution to the *Sāsana*. In 2003, he received a further Honorary



FIGURE 2. Photo of Konlon Sayadaw taken three months before his death in January 2003. He is believed to be the last *arahant* in contemporary Myanmar. (Photo taken by Gabriele Küstermann)

Doctorate in Literature.¹⁷ However, his projects and activities have also made him increasingly identified with worldly aspirations rather than with the other-worldly, which has led to some criticism. Nevertheless, he is sought after as an effective leader who is audacious enough to engage in community projects that have brought about many changes and developments.

THE MEDITATOR (KONLON SAYADAW)

Saintly monks who are rumored to have achieved the enlightened state of an *arahant* have been the focal point of worship in Myanmar. One such monk, Konlon Sayadaw U Tezaniya (1907–2004), came from an ethnic minority group called Danu, a sub-group of the Shan. He was born in 1907 as the youngest son of seven children, and became a novice when he was thirteen years old. In 1926, he was ordained at Pyani Monastery, Htethon village, in Pindaya district in Shan State. It is said that he studied at several monasteries, but it is not recorded whether he sat for any state ecclesiastical exams. He returned to the village monastery after the abbot who ordained him passed away, and he is known to have dabbled in alchemy, herbal medicine, painting, construction work, and architecture. He later shifted his focus and started to practice full-time, and following that stressed the primacy of meditation over any other means of attaining enlightenment. It is also said that he made a vow early on not to harm any life and became a committed vegetarian for life.

In the tradition of *arahants* in Myanmar, there are many miracle stories and unusual incidents surrounding Konlon Sayadaw, which were narrated, written down, and circulated by his followers; subsequently, these have enhanced his

mythical status. It is noteworthy that miracle stories surrounding this monk have increased over the years, and despite them being parochial and locally based, these stories have continued to appeal to devotees from urban centers and other parts of the country. For example, one story that is circulated is that during his early years he had visited Shwedagon Pagoda on several of his visitations. He said he was most surprised to see it as exactly as he had seen in his dreams when he visited the pagoda on his trip to attend the sixth Buddhist Council (1956) in Yangon. As he started to devote more time for practice, he handed over his monastery to disciples and left for the deep forest to meditate for an extended period of time. It is said that a territorial spirit of Galontaung Hill invited him to the area where his present monastery, Galontaung Kyaung, is located. This is told in the context of a story that narrates how he communicated freely with local spirits and supernatural beings. He meditated in caves deep in the jungle where wild animals were known to have roamed, and although he kept away from human habitation, surviving on fruits and nuts, people soon came to know about his ascetic existence. Again there are miracle stories regarding this period; some talked about seeing a halo coming out of his cave or the presence of a rainbow over where he meditated. There are stories about his lack of fear and how wild animals became tame in his presence as he communicated with them. Some said that local spirits always protected him so that he could not be harmed. On one occasion, bandits came to his cave in search of valuables but could not find anything to take. Out of anger, they tied him up and left him to die. He sat there chanting, and whilst sending out loving kindness to spirits in the surrounding environment, the rope that tied him miraculously fell to the ground and released him. When he burnt the rope, it is said that the house of the bandits caught fire and they lost everything that they had plundered.

What is especially unique about Konlon Sayadaw is that he is associated with unusual occurrences of nature and local ecology. For example, flowers on his premises are said to be always in full bloom even when they are out of season. The story of two unusually-shaped gourds and a mutant ear of corn may typify the association between his exceptional spiritual qualities, the fertility of the surrounding land, and the potency of the Buddha.¹⁸ The story goes that the monk had already known in his dream that three unusual Buddha images would arrive, so he waited for their arrival with three glass cases ready to enshrine them. He was more than pleased when a local farmer brought him the first mutant gourd in the shape of the Buddha; it was named Lavamuni Gourd Buddha. The second gourd was harvested, which was in the shape of a *nagá* (cobra) raising its head to protect the Buddha. The third arrived when another local farmer brought a strange ear of corn shaped with one tall peak in the middle of the cob resembling a pagoda, surrounded by eight small spires. All of them were interpreted as auspicious signs and evidence of the Buddha's mystical power manifesting itself in nature.

In addition to these stories of unusual natural occurrences, there were physical signs manifested on his body as evidence of the monk's spiritual qualities.¹⁹ For example, his right thumb is said to have displayed the image of Nagayon Hpaya in the shape of a *nagá* protecting the Buddha, and his left thumb showed the image

of Kyaiktio Hpaya, the sacred rock that hangs on a cliff top near Kyaito in Lower Myanmar. His right palm displayed the image of a legendary monk, Shin U Pagok (Pāli: Upagutta), and the other had an image of Shin U Thīwali (Pāli: Sīvali), both popular *arahants* who are revered as protector saints in Myanmar Buddhism. The soles of his feet are said to have emitted a sweet smell of nectar and the monk himself often invited visitors to come close so that they could smell it directly. On his right sole there was an image of a lotus bud and on the left sole there was a mark that resembled an open lotus flower. At the nape of his neck, some witnessed the mark of the same letter as that noted on the nape of King Kyansittha, which suggested that he was the king's reincarnation. All these special features were noted, admired, and then circulated through word of mouth, inviting more people to come and pay homage.

In his case, what seems to have appealed to the devotees is quite the reverse of the scholarly monk already mentioned. For example, Konlon Sayadaw came from a poor minority background and did not have any academic credentials, but despite his relative lack of monastic learning, people emphasized his deep insight and wisdom. He could communicate with animals and spirits, and gave sermons that could impress the most learned audience. Although he did not know English, it was often mentioned that he could understand and communicate with any foreign visitor. He also attracted important politicians and some of the educated middle class from Yangon.²⁰ Another account was given when he was invited to Singapore and gave a sermon on Buddhist discourse. His special quality was authenticated by the account of a very learned Singapore monk, Ashin Dhamma Rakkhita, who happened to be in the audience. It was noted that this monk, who had many doctorate degrees from foreign academic institutions, commented that he had never met anyone who could expound the essence of Vipassanā meditation as well as Konlon Sayadaw, and that gave him the public seal of approval. However, he appeared completely oblivious to the kind of influence he exerted on the audience, and left an impression of equanimity and gentle warmth. He passed away in January 2004. It is said that he left the world quietly without showing any pain or suffering; a true mark of an *arahant*.

THE MYANMAR NOTION OF POWER AND CHARISMA

In order to examine the concept of charisma and understand its implications of power within the context of Myanmar society, I explore several terms that pertain to notions of authority, power, and influence in the vernacular language. To start with, the notion of *ana* is most commonly heard to describe power and its ability to impose order by coercion or force, deriving its authority from political office and military strength. Perhaps this concept is the closest to the Western notion of political power that is inherently secular, although in this case it is not sanctioned by a democratic process or by the courts.

In contrast, the religious authority of Sangha is never described as *ana*, but referred to as *āwza*,²¹ and it derives its source of authority from the reverential and

moral influence monks are able to exert over the general public. Its institutional authority may be legitimized by the ruling political power, but its social influence is exercised through a network of influential abbots and monasteries, supported by their wide circles of lay devotees. But *àwza* does not derive its strength from an organizational foundation as we understand institutional authority. An interdependent relationship between monastic members and society precedes the concept of *àwza*, and refers to a kind of reverential authority that makes people spontaneously want to offer their services, but without any form of coercion. A father, a teacher, and a village headman are also regarded to have *àwza*, which is exerted over their family members, students, or villagers. In a society where there is little confidence in the political and legal apparatus, we can assume that the notion of *àwza* ultimately rests with the moral quality of an individual beheld in the eyes of the community. At times, a mother is considered to have *àwza*, especially in situations that concern domestic decision making. The concept has added another dimension of patronage whereby the authoritative position is sustained upon the care and attention given by the person with *àwza* towards those who come under his or her influence. In this respect, the main feature of such authority rests “chiefly and almost exclusively on consensus” (NASH 1965, 57), which is based on a specific relationship and ideals that are recognized and commonly shared in society.

Meanwhile, a culturally specific term that describes the notion of charisma may be found in the Burmese term *hpòn*. If someone has *àwza*, it is naturally assumed that the individual is equipped with *hpòn*. *Hpòn* is described as the efficacious quality of a person that does not have to be confined to the spiritual or religious context, but such a quality is often associated with Buddhist monks who are addressed as *hpòngyi*, the big *hpòn* or “big glory.”²² NASH has described this concept as such that “a man of *pon* need not try to dominate, for his power radiates, and people come to him to give allegiance and to offer up services and trust” (1965, 272). Meanwhile, SPIRO has translated this term as “spiritual charisma,” observing it as a uniquely male quality that provides males with a consensus for moral superiority (1977, 270–71).²³ My informants mentioned that *hpòn* was an emanating sort of influence one had, which affected others positively and benefited the person, so that he would never be short of money or influential friends, and whatever he wished for was always granted. Such a concept of power has to be understood as “relational” in a traditional society where people live dependent on one another in an intricate web of relationships that make them interact on almost every occasion. In other words, this kind of “power” is generated in interdependent situations, especially in a social context where state apparatus is neither effective nor endorsed by the majority. What makes a person stand out in such a society seems to be his intuitive understanding of surrounding contexts and human psychology. He must also be compassionate and understand how to mediate as well as circulate resources that benefit everyone.²⁴ A man with *hpòn* is a leader who takes risks, settles disputes, listens to junior members, directs and commands without coercion, and often has a far-reaching vision that allows him to coordinate people’s services and resources to make things actually happen. In most situations, however, conformity is the

rule and people more readily accept a position of dependence following a decision already made by consensus. A monk, nevertheless, is expected to show leadership due to his impartiality and pivotal position in society, which makes him qualified to exert his *hpòn* as he regularly interacts with his many devotees.

Another term that is used in combination with *hpòn* is *kan* (karma), and the two combined together give an even stronger justification for a person's charisma or position of reverential authority. A person with *hpòn-gan* is popular, wealthy, and successful, and is endowed with good fortune as a consequence of meritorious deeds accumulated in his or her past lives. It is said that past virtues justify one's present success, and even help the person to avert danger or deflect the malice of other human beings, adding another layer of symbolic weight to one's charismatic quality. *Hpòn-gan*, however, is not acquired; one either has it or not. Hence, the popularity of a monk with *hpòn-gan* is seen to be predetermined: he can attract support effortlessly and exert a centripetal grip on his followers without coming under the immediate influence of any benefactor.

Amongst the three monks I have listed here, U Nyanissara, the popular preacher, is perhaps a typical kind of charismatic monk who manifests universal features of authority and personal qualities implicated in the notion of *hpòn*. In other words, he is a modern prototype of a charismatic monk who has enhanced his spiritual worth by active social engagement and by bringing many of his projects to fruition. In one respect, his appeal may be akin to that of a popular politician who can reach a wide audience as a result of his far-sighted vision, communication skills, political acumen, and an understanding of social demands. Such a monk can assert his authority that is *àwza* without succumbing to the secular power of politicians that is *ana*, nor to the interests of any of his wealthy supporters offering *daná* (Pāli: *dāna*) (religious donations) and ultimately succeed in having his way due to his *hpòn-gan*. Nonetheless, social engagement for monastics can be a double-edged sword, since they are in competition with secular authorities who are trying to exert their own reign of influence and control in society. Many of his projects that have profited the local community may be ultimately seen as this-worldly, and thus self-interested, which could subsequently compromise his moral standing and other-worldly virtues.

BEYOND THE NOTION OF CHARISMA

In comparison to a charismatic monk in the general category, an *arahant* is understood to be disinterested and detached from any worldly concerns, and thus represents the highest level of moral perfection for a human being that is beyond any implication of power or its application. And yet many of the stories surrounding an *arahant* or narrated by earnest devotees focus on his miraculous powers and supra-human feats casting light on his extraordinary abilities. Myanmar people appear to have a strong fascination for such an extraordinary figure and are always in search of an all-encompassing power crystallized in the ideal of an *arahant*. Thus it is important to understand the social and religious environment in which such a monk

comes to be apprehended as an agent to his “superagency.”²⁵ It is believed that an *arahant* can connect to the very source of mystical potency channeled for the benefit of society, but this sort of vital energy can only be mediated by someone who can withstand the storm, “the dangerous forces of disorder and the raw energies of nature” (REYNOLDS 2005, 225).

I distinguish here the virtuous standing of an enlightened *arahant* from that of a *weikza* (Pāli: *vijja*), literally meaning “higher or esoteric knowledge.” *Weikza* is a vernacular term commonly used to refer to a type of male practitioner, both lay and monastic, whose practice is “dedicated to the attainment of magical powers and extraordinary long life” (PRANKE 1995, 343). Strictly speaking, an *arahant* who has eliminated all his desires cannot be equated with a *weikza*, whose powers are appropriated to realize his ultimate aspiration to meet Ariya Metteyya Buddha (the Future Buddha).²⁶ Their respective paths may converge at some stage in their trajectories, but they lead different paths that are either this-worldly oriented or other-worldly in aspiration for the ultimate enlightenment. However, there is a certain amount of confusion among the Myanmar public as to the notion of *yahànda* (a term for *arahant* in the vernacular) and *weikza*; sometimes they refer to *yahànda* as *weikza*, but it is never the other way round, indicating the acknowledgement of a latent spiritual hierarchy (see TOSA 2000, 143 and 154). Meanwhile, extraordinary skills such as levitation, bilocation, communicating with spirits, and so on can be manifested by both a *weikza* and *arahant*, but the latter is ultimately disinterested in whatever suprahuman skills he possesses and their powerful consequences. The sort of supranormal abilities or skills alluded to here are collectively referred to as *zan* (Pāli: *jhāna*) in colloquial Myanmar rather than *eikdhi* (Pāli: *iddhi*) in the doctrinal tradition. However, they both point to the special mental state achieved in meditation and the resultant mastery of supranormal powers by the practitioner.²⁷ Furthermore, it is generally understood that *zan* or *eikdhi* is generated as a side effect; this is the means rather than an end, which TAMBIAH has referred to as the “by-products of their mastery” (1984, 45).

Another concept, *dat*, translated as “chemistry” or “electricity,” is also used to describe the special skill and power of a *weikza* or *bòdaw* (a practitioner who is known to possess such power). It is said that he finds the source of his *dat* in the cosmic universe as he appropriates the dynamics of four elements: earth, fire, water, and air, and, like an alchemist, he can manipulate them at will to benefit his own religious schemes. A master of such skill can foresee and predict danger or even avert it, for example by quenching heat with water or moving in the right direction at the right time to effect a positive change in the flow of “electrical” current in the immediate environment.

One of the most important notions that signifies spiritual power in the popular Buddhist discourse is *dagò*, which has to be brought into the discussion to understand the overriding spiritual potency of an *arahant*.²⁸ In contrast to the particular mastery of suprahuman skills described as *zan*, *dagò* alludes to a kind of miraculous potency embodied in the spiritual field that is at times channeled by an *arahant* who is beyond the confinement of any notion of individualized power.²⁹

The notion is activated by invoking the Three Jewels: the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, since *dagò* is believed to originate from the same source of miraculous power that gives them authority. The virtuous and moral state of an *arahant* associates him directly with the powerful essence as there are parallels with such spiritual power and “the staged progression taught by the Buddha that leads to mindfulness and enlightenment” (REYNOLDS 2005, 216). It is believed that in popular Myanmar Buddhism an *arahant* can invoke the regenerative powers inherent in nature and affect the cycle of reproduction and fertility. He can also bring karmic retribution upon wrongdoers whilst giving protection to the moral abiders. In a sense, an *arahant* is perceived to be part of the cosmic totality in which he plays the role of an “ordinator” as well as that of a life-giver and moral judicator. In a wider context, the concept of *dagò* is sustained in the relationship people have with their immediate natural environment, and the realization that their spiritual susceptibility makes us pay more attention to the symbolic weight they attribute to unusual occurrences and incomprehensible events in their daily lives.

An expression of awe towards something extraordinary and mysterious is commonly attributed to *hpaya dagò*, “the miraculous power of the Buddha.” Many of the sacred sites, where countless pilgrims pay visits, are referred to as *dagò-gyi thi neyà*, “spiritually potent” or “powerful” places. *Hpaya dagò*, however, seems to imply a mysterious cosmic force that is beyond even the powers of the historical Buddha, which governs the foundation and essence of natural occurrences and manifestations in the phenomenal world. Sacred sites in Myanmar are commonly associated with *hpaya dagò*, and pagodas and Buddha images are subsequently built on such places to mark their latent extraordinariness. There are examples such as Peik Chin Myaung near Pyin U Lwin (formerly Maymyo), where a large volume of calcium-rich water gushes out of a large cave in the middle of nowhere, forming an unusual and beautiful landscape of travertine pools.³⁰ It has become a major pilgrimage site in recent years; a well-lit footpath guides one through a narrow and winding pathway through caves that are adorned with numerous Buddha images and statues all the way. When it was first discovered in 1990, pilgrims had to crawl on all fours on the slippery lime floor and wade through the gushing water in total darkness in their earnest attempts to get closer to its powerful spiritual presence. This place is alluded to as very “powerful” because it exemplifies the mystical workings of the Buddha whose spiritual potency is said to exude through the unusual natural features. The famous golden rock, Kyaiktiyo, is another sacred site where a huge piece of rock covered in gold leaves sits precariously balanced on the edge of a cliff top. The rock, now one of the most important sites that Myanmar Buddhists visit once in their lifetime, is said to have attracted pilgrims even before any relics were enshrined on it to authenticate its veneration (see FIGURE 3).

Many of these sacred sites manifest strange natural formations, spectacular landscapes, or unusual natural occurrences, which are described as *thu-zein-thi* (strange, out of the ordinary), and thus “awe-inspiring” and spiritually potent. People marveled and worshipped at these sites even before the advent of Buddhism, inspired by their indigenous beliefs in both mystical and dangerous forces of nature. Signs



FIGURE 3. Kyaukse (the Golden Rock) is a major pilgrimage site for Myanmar Buddhists, and is one of the most sacred sites in Myanmar. (Photo taken by Hiroko Kawanami)

of such powers were occasionally revealed to a special human being, as we have seen in the case of Konlon Sayadaw, who received unusually-shaped agricultural products that people saw as a sign of Buddha's powers, whose arrival he had pre-ordained. As he connected with the miraculous potency and regenerative powers of ecology, devotees believed that the harvest was assured and flowers were always in full bloom in his presence. Thus the power of an *arahant* has to be understood as overwhelmingly encompassing in the totality of people's devotion and cosmological world view, reflecting their deep aspiration for something transcendental in relation to the phenomenal world.

SAINTLY MONKS IN MYANMAR

During my first visit to Myanmar in the mid-1980s, I visited several monks who were rumored to be *arahants*: the second Taung-hpila Sayadaw, Parikamma Sayadaw, Konlon Sayadaw, and Thamanya Sayadaw. When I met them, they were already elderly and lived mostly in the margins of the country, often on their own, sometimes living in caves or in simple wooden huts, far away from material comforts and habitation. Whenever I came across such a monk, the same question always sprang to my mind: how on earth did they manage to survive in such a remote place away from everything? In return, I was told that such a monk, due to his *dagò*, never suffered any inconvenience and did not experience any shortage of food. To my amazement, devotees and visitors continued to arrive from somewhere, prostrating themselves to the monk, bringing him food and necessities, and taking up whatever task had to be done in the monastery. The monk usually remained silent or uttered a few words at the most, but people would nod and whisper that he was indeed an *arahant*. Although such a monk was known to have acquired supranormal abilities, these skills were never flaunted, and even without showing any of the acquired arts, his extraordinariness was said to simply radiate. What seemed important to many of the devotees who went to meet him was that he could see what they wanted and responded to their prayers in ways that satisfied them. Although the monk normally said little, he had a spokesperson by his side, a lay devotee or sometimes an assistant, who spoke enthusiastically about his special spiritual qualities, contributing to the spread of miracle stories surrounding him. Followers also contributed to the *arahant* myth by interpreting any related events they witnessed into something extraordinary, adding another mysterious episode to his unusual life.

One such monk, the legendary first Taung-hpila Sayadaw, lived in the arid backwater of the Minwun Hill range on the other side of Sagaing Hill. He was known to have cut off his own leg when his monastery was broken into and scared off the bandits by his extraordinary courage. I met the second Taung-hpila Sayadaw; local visitors were divided as to whether to acknowledge him as an *arahant* or just a *weikza*. He would give out a spoonful of ash to every person who visited him that devotees believed would grant them longevity. Another monk, Parikamma Sayadaw, was commonly known as the "bean-eating monk"

who impressed his followers by surviving on a grain-free diet in a culture where it is regarded as almost inconceivable to survive without rice, their staple food. He was known for his practice of intensive meditation and rigorous austerity in the wilderness, and despite his attempt to stay away from society, he attracted considerable attention as an *arahant*. Konlon Sayadaw, already mentioned, gave away small pieces of his used robe to those who begged for them, which visitors believed would grant them protection from accidents and misfortune. In the early days before he was surrounded by assistants and security guards, some of the most ardent devotees waited eagerly to eat the leftovers of the monk's food so that they could consume something of his power and benefit from it. Followers also took away whatever object he had touched, saying that it offered protective powers against curses of witches, and believed that physical ailments could also be cured.

When asked about his special qualities, devotees almost uniformly referred to his *myitthà*, which was described as boundless compassion, a kind of deep empathy that emanated indiscriminately towards everyone who came into contact with him. Even wild animals, spirits, and supranatural beings were tamed by it. Despite the orthodox understanding of a detached and distant *arahant* who is about to eclipse into *parineikban*, people held *arahant* monks in tremendous affection. In fact, many of the qualities they were drawn to seemed to pertain to those of a compassionate *bodhisattva* rather than that of a distant *arahant*, and in this respect, perhaps the phenomenon has to be understood in its connection with the religious developments found in north Indian Sanskrit Buddhism as advocated by STRONG (1992).³¹ Many of these extraordinary monks I met showed almost childlike innocence in their simplicity and directness; they smiled easily, exuding warmth and benevolence. Although they did not offer more than a nod or a single tap on a visitor's head, people stayed for hours to meet their eyes and possibly a sign, and more kept coming to receive whatever they regarded as spiritual blessing.

Myanmar has undergone several of its unsettled phases recently—in 1988, 1990, 1997, 2003, and the unrest in September 2007. During these periods, the “overtones of millennial Buddhism” described by SPIRO (1970, 172), which might have represented the post-independence era of the 1950s and 1960s, were no longer felt as strongly. Most people I interviewed showed no interest in the coming of a future king, and many were dubious about the existence of *weikza* in his association with the Ariya Metteyya Buddha. Meanwhile, I witnessed a sharp rise in bogus monks claiming to be *weikza*; that is, people spoke of them as being “bogus” as their main aim was to extract money from worshippers. Whilst some of them continued to attract visitors who travelled long distances to ask for the winning lottery numbers, people were generally skeptical about their so-called supranormal powers, perhaps as the result of successive government crackdowns on monks engaged in unorthodox practices. Meanwhile, Thamanya Sayadaw and Konlon Sayadaw, both rumored to be *arahants*, saw their popularity skyrocket during the 1990s. Both of these monks had ethnic minority origins and lived in peripheral ethnic minority states away from the influence of political power. Neither of them were assertive of their prophetic role in any way, but nonetheless their charismatic

authority and guidance were sought by thousands of Myanmar people and even by those in power as well as in opposition. They became the focus of people's worship and devotion, especially during the period when social tensions were heightened, which was probably a direct response to the dissipating sense of concrete direction in society.

After an almost two decade interval, I visited one of them, Konlon Sayadaw, a few months before his death in early 2004. His humble monastery, which I first visited in 1986, had developed beyond recognition into a vast complex of buildings and pagodas. What used to take a few hours by horse trap following a dusty and narrow path from the nearest town of Pindaya in Shan state could now be easily reached within ten minutes. I even noticed a helicopter pad near the main entrance of his monastery used by senior army generals who visited regularly from the capital. Despite his ideals of non-attachment to material things, generous donations of land had expanded the premises, and his simple wooden house had been replaced by a huge concrete palace. We stayed in a luxurious apartment in his compound equipped with modern facilities to accommodate VIPs and foreign guests. The once quiet and solitary compound had become the residence of more than a hundred student monks studying in a monastery school. To my astonishment, the physical signs and extraordinary features that were witnessed on his body and interpreted as an outward manifestation of his spiritual height had dramatically increased, contributing to the ever-growing *arabant* myth. Miracle stories surrounding him had also multiplied, and various kinds of stigmata witnessed on almost every surface of his body were shown in photographs and sold as souvenirs. Looking bewildered and frail, the monk was surrounded by many caretakers who would keep the large number of devotees at bay by whisking him around in a wheelchair for his daily round.

MEANS OF CONTROL AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Frequent intervention by the state into Sangha affairs has been witnessed in modern Myanmar history in its attempts to impose direct control, especially on monks. In the early 1980s, a national monastic structure was implemented at three regional tiers so that the authorities could oversee and exercise greater control over monastic affairs. At its apex was Naingan-daw Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Ahpwe, a national committee of Sangha leaders comprising of forty-seven senior monks appointed by the state. Under the auspices of the Religious Ministry, this committee became the highest decision-making body for the monastic community. In the 1990s, more attention was directed at restoring historically important pagodas and religious buildings in order to promote the cultural and religious heritage of the country. In addition, the regime took on an active role to reward monastic members for their religious achievements by granting them honorary titles in state-sponsored ceremonies. Official criteria were set for worthy monastics who made contributions to *Sāsana-pyu* (dissemination of the *Sāsana*). Although the regime has attempted to revert to the traditional role as promoter of the *Sāsana*

and establish its political legitimacy in relation to it, we cannot say that it has been successful in persuading the Myanmar public to accept its moral stance to act as *dhammarāja*, the righteous ruler. As HOUTMAN has pointed out, the state has been concerned about popular monks and their “uncontrolled manifestation of charisma,” since that could “erode the regime’s control over the country” (1999, 121). So its main aim has been regarded as normalizing the powers of influential monastic figures and averting criticism from the international community. In order to absorb their influence and popularity, the government has adopted a hands-on policy to appease and control the Sangha, acknowledging their religious work with the overall intention to diffuse the potential tension that could destabilize the country.

The granting of honorary titles started in earnest under SLORC in May 1991, and a large number of monastics—both monks and nuns, as well as lay Buddhists—have been awarded titles, some posthumously, for their contribution to the *Sāsana*. There are four areas in which these honorary titles were granted to monastic members, highlighting important religious activities and their contribution to the *Sāsana*. These titles acknowledge “religious work” in a wide context, and in this scheme, ascetic monks normally left outside the orthodox scheme have been incorporated into the national fold and conferred honorary titles. Eminent monks, such as Ledi Sayadaw in the late nineteenth century, or Shwehintha Sayadaw in the more recent past, have been awarded honorary titles such as *Sāsana Mahā Rattaguru* or *Agga Mahā Pandita* in their connection with Buddhist kings and the royal family in a previous era; however, those titles were granted primarily to acknowledge their high scholarly learning. The most prestigious title awarded today to a monk is that of *Tipitakadhara*, granted to the most erudite scholar-monk in recognition of his extensive and complete knowledge of the *Tipitaka*.³² However, these academic titles carrying the true weight of scholarly distinction were granted to encourage monastic education rather than as a means of control.

The honorary titles presently conferred are in the following areas: *Agga Mahā Gandavacaka Pandita* for recognized work in monastic education and teaching; *Agga Mahā Kanmahtana Sariya* for the practice of meditation; *Mahā Dhammakathika Bahujanahitadhara* for expounding the dhamma; and *Agga Mahā Saddhamma Jotikadhaja* for disseminating the *Sāsana*. As a prerequisite to nomination for any of these titles, candidates have to obtain qualifications by passing the state ecclesiastical exams and are not allowed to express anti-government sentiments. All three monks I have described in this article have been recognized by the state as worthy monks and granted honorary titles: Insein Sayadaw with *Agga Mahā Gandavacaka Pandita*, Konlon Sayadaw with *Agga Mahā Kanmahtana Sariya*, and Sitagu Sayadaw with both *Mahā Dhammakathika Bahujanahitadhara* and *Abhidjhaja Agga Mahā Saddhamma Jotika-dhaja*.³³

Nonetheless, the top-down infiltration of political influence and the official granting of honor and merit by the state does not necessarily convert to devotion and respect shown the monks by the lay people, especially if these monastic beneficiaries do not fulfill the general criteria for moral integrity. On the contrary,

maintaining close associations with the regime, and privileges given them, can undermine their holy image and ultimately diminish their moral reputation. Thus despite concerted efforts to capture their religious influence and innate potency, state interference has not in any way affected the social perception of charismatic monks.

CONCLUSION

We have seen how the awarding of prestigious degrees and honorary titles by the state has not only normalized some of their religious power, but also presented another dimension to the general perception of state-sanctioned monastic figures. Meanwhile, the state-administered system of monastic education and ecclesiastical exams have contributed to the competitive achievement-oriented environment, offering a direct channel for monastic members to uplift their social and religious standing. Although some have been critical of being evaluated by the state, viewing the procedure as interference that compromises their religious worth, few monks or nuns have rejected the possibility of becoming officially recognized as state-endorsed scholars. Meanwhile, lay devotees are on the constant lookout for a holier, more worthy, and more spiritually “potent” monastic on whom they can focus their entire attention. In this respect, the *arabant* ideal continues to capture people’s imagination and hopes, whereby the source of his appeal comes from their expectations for the extraordinary, the supramundane, and special moral qualities that are almost beyond human. So we have to recognize the general aspiration for a kind of charisma that is beyond the narrow confines of the concept, which is all the more encompassing as an aspiration that resonates with the primordial needs and religious imagination of the Myanmar people.³⁴ Such an extraordinary monk has to fulfill the role as a spiritual agent who can provide them with a sense of direction as well as a channel to connect with the very source of cosmic vitality and regeneration, through which not only the monk, but also his devotees, can become part of a wider cosmological scheme.

The 1990s witnessed major structural changes in Myanmar cities; the market economy of neighboring countries penetrated Myanmar’s closed doors, and various means of communication brought Western values, commercialism, and a more materialistic outlook to a traditional society.³⁵ At the same time, the unstable political environment and high inflation has deeply affected people’s lives and corroded their fundamental sense of security. Although the regime has publicly assumed its role as patron of the *Sāsana*, the wide network of monastic fraternity has become increasingly threatening to the government. We have seen how scholar-monks asserted their leadership during the democracy movement in 1988 and 1990, and more recently in 2007, by condoning the activities of young student monks taking to the streets. It is noteworthy that some of those arrested during these earlier times of unrest were not charismatic individuals or political agitators, but respected teachers of large private monastery schools who could command a large following through scholarly lineages and personal relationships. None of the monk leaders emanated the kind of coercive power that is described as *ana*, but they were often

scholars who exuded the quiet authority and reverence of *àwza*. In other words, they did not manifest “typical” charismatic features as we know them, but their authoritative position as *saya* (teacher) and the web of personal allegiance between teachers and disciples made them considerably powerful. Moreover, and unintentionally from their point of view, the extensive network of the monastic fraternity has come to represent an alternative power base and a potential challenge to the regime.

It was during this time that the presence of the two aforementioned *arahants*, both of whom had ethnic minority origins and resided in peripheral regions away from the political center, provided a major outlet to the disenchanting masses. Their devotees and followers attempted to build a peaceful utopia in an imperfect and unjust world, and focused much of their attention on realizing their ideal spiritual vision (see the article by TOSA in this issue). The *arahant* himself did not instigate or solicit his followers to engage in such an action, but became a vacuous medium through which people realized their vision for a harmonious society. Nonetheless, with the *arahant* ideal being ultimately world renouncing, its purpose was not to serve the secular interests of his followers or to become the focus for a “great revolutionary force” as assumed by Weber. In fact, it was his image of moral perfection that attracted them to him in the first place, but that was precisely a kind of ideal that could not, after all, be attained in this world. As with any cult of personality, after the passing away of these popular and other-worldly Buddhist saints who represented an era, the phenomena ended there, and the devotional energy of the people became once again defused and dissipated into the margins of the country.

NOTES

1. LINDHOLM (1993, 157) examined the concept of charisma in “premodern” contexts, in which he probably meant “non-Western contexts.” He paid special attention to the role of shamanic practitioners who had some kind of mysterious supernatural power that was asserted through ecstatic trance.

2. Secular models of authority and power have been introduced by European colonial rule, but they have been not been able to separate the Buddhist cosmological world view from the notions of power in Myanmar.

3. For discussions on concepts of power in Southeast Asia, see TAMBIAH (1976), PYE (1985), ANDERSON (1990), and KERSHAW (2001).

4. This term was suggested to me by Gustaaf Houtman at the international symposium “Buddhism, Power, and Political Order in South and Southeast Asia” (14–16 April 2004) at Harris-Manchester College, University of Oxford.

5. The state of an *arahant* biding his time can be discerned in the following verse in the *Theragāthā*:

It is not death, nor life I cherish;
 As the hireling his wage, so I bide my time.
 It is not death nor life I long for,
 Mindful and clearly comprehending,
 I bide my time.

(BHIKKHU, trans. 1991, 11)

6. For example, one of the popular criteria in assessing an *arahant* is that he has to smell like a fragrant flower or a ripe fruit.

7. Student numbers have more than halved since the monks' uprising in September 2007.

8. He was also appointed as the state Ovadacariya Sayadaw of Ethnic Minority Areas (Taungdan Sāsana-pyu Ovadacariya Sayadaw), amongst many other positions he held.

9. *Mātikā* literally means “matrix” and provides a table of contents for the analysis of mind and matter. This book is in Dhammasangani in the *Abhidhamma*, translated by C. A. F. RHYS DAVIDS 1990.

10. For an English translation, see U NARADA 1962.

11. This volume, meaning “The Book of Pairs,” consists of ten chapters. It has not yet been translated into English.

12. *Pāṭhāna* is the longest volume in the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, translated as “The Book of Relations,” and describes the laws of conditionality and all knowledgeable experience. See U NARADA 1969 and 1981.

13. He has published many textbooks and commentaries on volumes in the *Abhidhamma* as well as on the ordination procedure for monks, the history of Buddha Sāsana, and Pāli grammar and literature.

14. During his tutelage between 1971 and 1991, the number of students who passed the state scriptural exams are as follows: 450 at introductory level, 396 at intermediary, 300 at advanced, and 62 for a Dhammacariya degree; amongst them there were 12 distinctions. Two monks passed the difficult Sakyadiha exam and one the ultimate Tipitaka exam.

15. Following the *Visuddhimagga*, ascetic monks in the forest tradition are known to have engaged in thirteen kinds of austerities known as *dhūtanga*. They have combined these with other practices such as vegetarianism, abstention from eating grains, *samatha* meditation (*samatha* literally means “concentration,” practiced to attain deep concentration of the mind by focusing on an object, a visual representation, or a concept), sleeping in a sitting position, as well as occasionally staying in a graveyard to focus the mind on rotting corpses.

16. The hospital, with inpatient and outpatient wards, is equipped with surgical and x-ray units, and has highly advanced technology to treat all kinds of eye diseases.

17. *The Wall Street Journal* of 19 August 2008 described him in an article titled “A New Breed of Monk Rises in Myanmar.” “A preacher like him is nothing new in Myanmar, but his ability to navigate a careful path between the pro-democracy movement and the military regime is probably what makes him a new breed.”

18. One of his devotees, U Wunna, was a Palaung gourd farmer who annually donated a large amount of gourds to the monastery. Although the gourd yield was usually good, in 1958, there was only one yield. The gourd was left to dry on the branch but he noticed that it took the shape of a human being. He showed it to a friend who thought it was auspicious and put it on the Buddhist altar. Another friend pointed out that it looked like the image of Buddha, and said if it represented the Buddha it should be shared with others. So U Wunna offered it to Konlon Sayadaw, a much revered monk in the area.

19. TAMBIAH (1976, 485) lists amulets, magical words, tattoos, diagrams, and other devices as embodiments of power, but he does not focus on the body of an *arahant* as an actual entity.

20. In 1998, a monastery school was started on his monastery compound to accommodate student monks from the Shan and Danu ethnic groups so that his religious legacy would be continued amongst the people of his ethnic group.

21. PYE does not distinguish distinct features of *ana* and *àwza* and refers only to the latter concept (1985, 103–104). In my view, he has confused the two.

22. SPIRO describes monks to be equipped with something special that “accounts for the monks’ prestige and position in Burmese society” (1970, 401).

23. SPIRO states, “By cultural prescription the exercise of authority (*āwza*) is a male prerogative, so any social status endowed with authority is, by cultural ascription, a male monopoly” (1997, 13). Spiro attributed a gender-specific value to the exercise of power, but most of my informants said a woman was not excluded from having such a quality. His essentialist viewpoint on “female inferiority” has not helped to further our understanding on gender relationships in Myanmar. NASH stated that he was not exactly clear as to the notion of a woman’s *hpòn* and he spells it as *pon* (1965, 52).

24. Such intuitive ability, in the case of shamans or mediums, may come from their direct connection with spirits and deities.

25. PATTANA KITIARSA defines superagency as “a culturally-defined abstraction with the supreme power and authority” (2005, 213).

26. In popular Myanmar Buddhism, there is a widespread belief in Ariya Metteyya (the Future Buddha) and that he will arrive five thousand years after the historical Buddha’s death to deliver Dispensation. Some ascetic practitioners are dedicated to prolonging their lives to meet his arrival. SPIRO notes a connection between *weikzahood* and the belief in the Future Buddha (1970, 168–69).

27. My informants referred to *eikdhi* (*iddhi*) when they were referring to the miraculous powers of Buddha in the context of his many life stories. But they generally distinguished the special powers of the Buddha and *weikza* in the popular Myanmar context. “In this usage, the term *zan* represents a conflation of the classical notion of mental absorption with the power it delivers” (PRANKE 1995, 345).

28. A person endowed with *dagò* does not necessarily have to be an *arahant* or monk, and at times, even a spirit medium is said to possess *dagò*. This point is raised by BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE in this issue; see footnote 20 in her article.

29. *Zan* or *eikdhi* can be regarded as manifestations of *dagò*, but my informants were keen to discuss them in different contexts or, perhaps unconsciously, to distinguish *dagò* from other notions of power.

30. The cave, which is 1,604 feet long, was discovered in the forest near Aneiksakan village near Pyin U Lwin.

31. There was no clear analogy detected amongst informants between these monks rumored to be *arahant* and the concept of bodhisattva.

32. In the last sixty years since the examination was started, twelve monks have achieved the prestigious title of Tipitakadhara, but only four survive today.

33. Insein Sayadaw did not receive this title until 1998 as he was imprisoned for his anti-government stance in 1990; he was also one of the forty-seven senior monks labeled as “puppets of the regime” by Western commentators. However, there are many dimensions to their religious work and activities that are not known to outside reporters.

34. Charismatic authority is known to be unstable and normally dies with the person. It is said that this is because a charismatic monk often fails to delegate his authority, which is non-transferable to start with, as such power derives from his personal abilities and qualities. His projects are administered by supporters of the monk and the operation normally relies on the goodwill of volunteers. But since the operation is not run on a solid and transparent foundation or by trained operators, his physical legacy goes into decline after his passing.

35. Mass media is yet to play a dominant role in Myanmar society, whereas in Thailand monks and nuns gain popularity through various channels of the media.

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