

## Article

# The Embodiment of Buddhist History: Interpretive Methods and Models of *Sāsana* Decline in Burmese Debates about Female Higher Ordination

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**Abstract:** The mid-twentieth century was celebrated in Theravāda civilizations as the halfway point in the five-thousand-year history of the Buddha's dispensation, the *sāsana*. Around this time in Burma, fierce debates arose concerning the re-establishment of the extinct order of Theravāda nuns. While women were understood as having a crucial role in supporting and maintaining the *sāsana*, without a sanctioned means of higher ordination, they were excluded from its centre, that is, as active agents in *sāsana* history. In this paper, I explore what was at stake in these debates by examining the arguments of two monks who publicly called for the reintroduction of the order of nuns, the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (1868–1955) and Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa (1881–1950). I will show that both used the enigmatic *Milindapañha* (*Questions of Milinda*) to present their arguments, but more than this, by drawing from their writings and biographies, it will be seen that their methods of interpreting the Pāli canon depended on their unique models of *sāsana* history, models which understood this halfway point as ushering in a new era of emancipatory promise. This promise was premised on the practice of *vipassanā* meditation by both lay men and especially women, the latter who, through their participation in the mass lay meditation movement, were making strong claims as dynamic players in the unfolding of *sāsana* history. The question of whether the order of nuns should be revived therefore hinged on the larger question of what was and was not possible in the current age of *sāsana* decline. Beyond this, what I aim to show is that mid-twentieth-century debates around female ordination concerned the very nature of the *sāsana* itself, as either a transcendent, timeless ideal, or as a bounded history embodied in the practice of both monks and nuns.



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## 1. Introduction

The framing question of this paper is what is and is not possible in the present age of the *sāsana*, conventionally held in Burma<sup>1</sup> to be a time of decay and decline in the Buddha's dispensation. The Pāli word *sāsana* (B. သာသနာ *sāsanā*)<sup>2</sup> “can refer to a body of ideas (and texts) which claim to convey the Buddha's teaching outside of any historical or material embodiment” (Schober and Collins 2018, p. 6). This definition we may call an “idealist” denotation of the term, yet the word *sāsana* also has a less abstract denotation as “a bounded entity” that “continues its existence in time”, both as an “ideology” but also in the form of relics, monasteries, stupas, and crucially for this paper, in monks and nuns (Schober and Collins 2018, p. 6). Hence, *sāsana* is both an ideal captured by the Buddha's “timeless” teachings, but also a type of tangible instantiation and institutionalization of these teachings in texts, monasteries, and the monastic community (P. *saṅgha*). While Juliane Schober and Steven Collins contrast *sāsana* with *vaṃsa*, the latter being closer to what we mean by the word “history”, in what follows, I use *sāsana* to signal the unfolding of the ideal of the Buddha's teachings in concrete, embodied form over historical time. My working construal of the term is an attempt to capture in this paper the ways discourses about

the *sāsana*'s past, present, and future motivated and were mobilized by different religious, social, and political actors in Burmese Buddhist debates about the higher ordination of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*) in the mid-twentieth century. My point is that the competing answers to the question about the possibilities of the current stage of *sāsana* decline given during the last century directly impinge on the spiritual capacity of women, and on whether the *sāsana* of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-sāsana*) should or should not be revived.

The point of this paper is not to evaluate the merits of the different arguments for or against re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, to prosecute my own interpretation of the relevant Pāli texts, nor to delve into the actual details of the debates themselves, but rather, to furnish these debates with further historical context, that is, to discuss the different conceptions of history at play during a formative period in the first half of the twentieth century when these debates were unfolding. To this end, I focus on the case of the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (မင်းကွန်း ဇေတဝန် ဆရာတော် Maṇḥ kvanḥ jetavan Cha rā tau, also known as Ūḥ Nārada, 1868–1955; hereafter, the Mingun Jetavana),<sup>3</sup> a Burmese scholar-monk and pioneer of what Ingrid Jordt calls the “mass lay meditation movement” (Jordt 2007). In 1949 he published his *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* (Commentary on the Questions of Milinda), and in this text, the Mingun Jetavana puts forward his call to reinstate higher ordination (P. *upasampadā* B. ရဟန်းခံ ရာ ဟန့် ကမ္မံ) for women, thereby promoting the revival of the Theravāda order of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*) in twentieth-century Burma. My focus is on how the Mingun Jetavana makes his case, that is, by reverse engineering his interpretation of the pronouncements of the Buddha on *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* with the concept of methods for future monks (P. *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayas*), a concept rooted in the higher forms of knowledge (P. *abhiññāsa* B. အဘိဉ္ဇာန် *abhiññāñ*), psychic and supernatural powers wrought through the practice of meditation.<sup>4</sup> By invoking the concept of methods for future monks and by arguing for the possibility of the *abhiññāsa* in this present period of *sāsana* history, I demonstrate that the Mingun Jetavana is trying to transcend what Bhikkhu Bodhi (2010) calls the conservative Theravāda “legalist” argument for why women can no longer become *bhikkhunīs* by deploying a reverse prolepsis where the Buddha has purposefully embedded future flexibility in the Vinayaṭṭhaka that attends specifically to the conditions of the present, a flexibility into which the Mingun Jetavana claims special access. In short, the Mingun Jetavana is arguing for a new model of *sāsana* history.

While Bodhi (2010) has previously written about the Mingun Jetavana's calls to re-establish the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, my contribution to understanding these debates in mid-twentieth-century Burma is to highlight the dynamic between methods of textual interpretation, models of *sāsana* history, and the ways the mass lay meditation movement had radically transformed the soteriological landscape for women. Simply put, the mass lay meditation movement, based in part on the *satipaṭṭhāna* (“foundations of mindfulness”) method of *vipassanā* (“insight”) meditation formulated by the Mingun Jetavana, had changed the role of women in terms of service to and practice of the *sāsana* by the mid-twentieth century, and for the Mingun Jetavana, the intentions of the Buddha in laying down the rules around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* in the Vinayaṭṭhaka needed to be reconsidered, or rather, recovered, in lieu of this transformation. To perform this radical act of recovering the Buddha's intention for the present, the Mingun Jetavana invoked the concept of *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayas*, interpretative methods “hidden” in the canonical text upon which he was commenting, the *Milindapañhā*. My own argument is that these “methods for future monks” were “activated” in the *bhikkhunī* debate not just because of the current non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, but because of the belief by the Mingun Jetavana and others that by the mid-twentieth century, the *sāsana* had entered an era of liberation (B. ဝိမုတ္တိခေတ် *vimutti khet*) where practitioners of *vipassanā* meditation could once again attain to the highest stages of the Theravāda path (Stuart 2022, p. 115).

To support and further contextualize my interpretation, I compare the arguments of the Mingun Jetavana to those of Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa (အရှင် အာဒိစ္စဝံသ Arhaṇ Ādiccavaṃsa, 1881–1950; hereafter Ādiccavaṃsa), another Burmese scholar-monk calling for the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the first half of the twentieth century. Hiroko

Kawanami introduced the arguments of Ādiccavaṃsa in a ground-breaking 2007 article, but by putting these two figures in conversation, and by exploring elements of Ādiccavaṃsa's biography, I submit that this monk was also motivated by a new scheme of *sāsana* decline when interpreting the Buddha's proclamations on *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*, likewise using the *Milindapañha* to suggest his own radical historical model in line with the idea of the *vimutti khet*. Putting together the writing of these two monks alongside their biographies is generative in not only providing further historical context to their arguments, but also in highlighting the "complicated interlinking between vernacular biography and vernacular history" where the actions and achievements of the singular subject are "not readily confined in time and place" (Houtman 1997, p. 312). In other words, these biographies shed light on the models of *sāsana* history used and embodied by the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, models not always made explicit in their written works but which motivated their larger projects and visions for the future of Buddhism. Hence, this paper will demonstrate that calls for the reintroduction of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in mid-twentieth-century Burma cannot be separated from emerging beliefs in the vitality of the Buddha's *sāsana*, which for the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, had been rejuvenated through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation by lay women and men alike.

To set out the context in which the Mingun Jetavana was writing, I will begin this paper by presenting the conservative argument against reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, briefly discussing in Section 1 the liminal status of non-ordained, female ascetics in twentieth-century Burma and how the rise of the mass lay meditation movement has transformed the soteriological potential for both women and men. Yet, despite this new horizon for female practitioners, there is still resistance to reallowing their *upasampadā*, a position epitomized by elite scholastic monks who believe that it is a de facto impossibility given the absence of an officially sanctioned Theravāda *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* today and the requirement that women be ordained by both female and male monastics. While conservative Theravāda legalists put forward their objections to reallowing *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* as the most literal reading of the pronouncements of the Buddha recorded in the Vinaya-piṭaka, the argument of the Mingun Jetavana in favor of female ordination is based on the same set of canonical texts. After introducing the Mingun Jetavana in Section 3 and outlining how the supernormal *abhiññās* motivate his interpretative methods in Section 4, we turn in the Section 5 to an overview of his argument. Covering eleven pages of his commentary on the *Milindapañha*, the Mingun Jetavana proposes that women can be ordained by monks alone until a quorum is reached and the universally accepted two-sided method involving both monks and nuns is possible. I point out in this fifth section that this argument rests on the Mingun Jetavana's distinction between two types of regulation laid down by the Buddha, root regulations (P. *mūla-paṇṇattis*) and supplementary regulations (P. *anupaṇṇattis*). My purpose in analyzing the Mingun Jetavana's proposal here is to demonstrate that for him, this distinction between different types of regulations only makes sense if one takes the Buddha to have known the future, our present, for according to the commentator, the supplementary regulation concerning the ordination of *bhikkhunis* by monks was meant to apply precisely in the current historical moment—in the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that could fulfil the requirements of a two-side ordination. Yet, what right does the Mingun Jetavana claim to discern the nature and function of this supplementary regulation? To answer this question, I turn to the Mingun Jetavana's first biography, written by his disciple and erstwhile personal attendant, U Tikkhācāra (Ūḥ Tikkhācāra; hereafter Tikkhācāra) in 1957, two years after the Mingun Jetavana's passing. According to this biography and the legacy it helped establish, the Mingun Jetavana was a *buddhamatañṇū*, "one who knows the intention of the Buddha". With this status, which I explain in Section 6, the Mingun Jetavana invokes the supreme commentarial conceit, understanding the Buddha as addressing him directly through the *Milindapañha* and outside millennia of accrued local tradition.

In an effort to widen the scope and import of my argument, I turn in the second half of this paper to the figure of Ādiccavaṃsa, introduced in Section 7. Like the Mingun Jetavana, Ādiccavaṃsa argued for the higher ordination of women in his 1935 book, *Bhikkhunī-*

*sāsanopadesa* (ဘိက္ခုနီသာသနောပဒေသ *Instruction on the Sāsana of Nuns*) (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935). While the details of their arguments are roughly the same and likely developed in unison, I explore in Section 8 how Ādiccavaṃsa does not rely on his own special access into the rationale of the Buddha, but rather, insists upon the consistency of the Buddha's enactment and revocation of regulations while also putting forth a creative reading of the timeline of *sāsana* longevity. As we see in Section 9, perhaps more controversial than his call to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was Ādiccavaṃsa's belief that the Buddha's teaching could last longer than the 5000-year limit sanctioned by the Pāli commentaries and still espoused by the Burmese monastic hierarchy. Even though Ādiccavaṃsa is not explicitly associated with the mass lay meditation movement, for him, the longevity of the *sāsana* is not predetermined but contingent on the commitment to meditation by both male and female practitioners, alluding to the concept of the *vimutti khet*, or age of *vipassanā* liberation. This view is not expressed explicitly in his *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, but in his *Cha rā tau arhañ ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* (ဆရာတော် အရှင်အာဒိစ္စဝံသ အတ္ထုပ္ပတ္တိ *The Biography of the Sayadaw Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa*), written 15 years after Ādiccavaṃsa's passing at a time when *vipassanā* meditation was politically ascendent and culturally dominant. By using his biography to highlight the model of *sāsana* history motivating Ādiccavaṃsa's argument, my contention in this ninth section is that Ādiccavaṃsa's impetus to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* represented his recognition that women too were capable of reaching the ultimate stage of enlightenment in this age of *vipassanā* liberation. My reason for bringing Ādiccavaṃsa into this paper is thus to highlight in Section 10 that this same model of *sāsana* history motivated the argument of the Mingun Jetavana, a pioneer in the very movement that was transforming the role of women in the *sāsana*. What is critical to realize is that both authors rely on the *Milindapañha* and its relatively recent canonical status to make their case, for the dilemmatic question arises in this text about the ability of a lay person to survive if they reach the highest stage of Theravāda practice, that of *arahantship*, without renouncing the householder life as a monk or nun. This dilemma is an especially acute problem for women who do not have recourse to higher ordination. I therefore argue that both the Mingun Jetavana's and Ādiccavaṃsa's attempt to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* should be seen as a direct response to the *Milindapañha*'s dilemmatic question and part of a broader project, that of legitimizing the soteriological landscape reopened by the mass lay meditation movement in the age of *vipassanā* liberation. In this sense, the history of the *sāsana* becomes embodied in the figure of the nun herself.

## 2. Conservative Argument Against

In contemporary Burma there are several layers of distinction used to demarcate the proximity of one person or group to the centre of the *sāsana*. In the broadest division, only fully ordained male monastics (P. *bhikkhu*, B. ဘုန်းကြီး *bhunḥ kriḥ*) are considered "inside the *sāsana*" (B. သာသနာဝင် *sāsanā vañ*) (Houtman 1990a, p. 120), literally, in the "lineage of the *sāsana*", since their role is to protect, promulgate, and realize these teachings through scriptural learning, the pursuit of moral perfection, and the practice of meditation. Since the Theravāda community of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*) is said to have died out in what is now Burma sometime in the twelfth century (Falk and Kawanami 2017, p. 40),<sup>5</sup> women are without a current pathway to higher ordination (P. *upasampadā*, B. ရဟန်းခံ *ra hanḥ kham*), at least according to conservative elements in present-day Theravāda, who do not recognize the validity of other lineages of nuns in Mahāyāna or other Buddhist contexts. According to this conservative reading, women are thus "axiomatically excluded" from being insiders of the *sāsana* (Jordt 2005, p. 44). If we take "*vañ*" in the term "*sāsanā vañ*" as "history" (P. *vaṃsa*), we may reframe this situation to say that women are therefore outside the historical unfolding of the Buddha's *sāsana* in time and space, at least according to the monastic hierarchy of monks in Burma. There are, however, semi-lay female renunciants, or *thilashin* in Burmese (B. သီလရှင် *sīla rhañ*), women who occupy an elevated position compared to ordinary laypeople as "those carrying out duties for the *sāsana*" (B. သာသနာဝန်ထမ်း *sāsanā vañ thamḥ*) (Houtman 1990a, p. 121). Legally recognized by the Burmese govern-



ment as a rights-bearing religious vocation, these *thilashin* inhabit a liminal status somewhere in between renouncing the householder life and the domestic sphere, taking eight or 10 precepts of the higher moral order, shaving their heads, donning robes, and pursuing a “noble celibacy” while also handling money and preparing food for themselves or their male monastic patrons (Jordt 2005, pp. 44–45). In a conservative reading, the closest to the *sāsana*’s centre a woman can aspire is to take up the life of a *thilashin* while sponsoring the novitiate ceremony of her son, thereby becoming both a supporter and an “inheritor of Buddhism” (B. သာသနာမွေ *sāsana mve*) (Houtman 1990a, p. 121). This orthodox interpretation does not prevent women in Burma from striving to develop the *thilashin* vocation into a parallel institution of “the *sangha* with the hopes of reproducing in shadow form the function of the earlier *bhikkhunī* order” (Jordt 2005, p. 44). Yet, given their disproportional access to the merit economy of Burma and conventionally thought to be lacking the karmic charisma (B. ဘုန်း: *bhunh*), or “innate spiritual superiority acquired through accumulated merit” (Harriden 2012, p. 7), the best Burmese women have been able to create through the institution of the *thilashin* is a simulacrum of the extinct *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and the extant order of monks (P. *bhikkhu-saṅgha*), at least in the eyes of the monastic establishment in Burma.

The standard rationale for designating an individual or group as “inside” or “outside” the *sāsana* has come under considerable strain over the last century, as what Gustaaf Houtman calls “performative criteria” have arisen redefining how people manifest and realize their relationship to Buddhism in Burma (Houtman 1990a, p. 123). In the realm of textual learning (P. *pariyatti*), Rachele Saruya (2022), building on the work of Chie Ikeya (2011), Erik Braun (2013) and Alicia Turner (2014), has shown how women in Burma, by leveraging anxieties around colonial rule, missionary education, and the rise of print technology, collectively created a “demand” for lessons on the Abhidhammapiṭaka, thereby providing lay women access to a subject previously reserved for elite scholar-monks and shifting trends in knowledge production in the process. In terms of the practice of the Buddha’s teachings (P. *paṭipatti*), the rise of insight, or *vipassanā* meditation in the first half of the twentieth century and its extraordinary spread among the lay population meant that, in the words of Jordt, “people from all walks of life [could] engage en masse in the penultimate training leading to the stage of enlightenment” (Jordt 2005, pp. 43–44). Due to the advent of the “mass lay meditation movement”, combined with an increased access to formerly elite learning opportunities, the role of lay people in the protection, perpetuation, and realization of the Buddha’s *sāsana* underwent profound transformation in the twentieth century. This transformation was especially pronounced for women, who make up a preponderance of those undertaking *vipassanā* practice. It was in this context that some Burmese women began to agitate for a renewed responsibility within the *sāsana* itself, joining efforts in Sri Lanka and India to re-establish the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* by importing *vinaya* lineages from East Asia. One such woman was the scholar-nun Saccavādī, known in Burmese as Ma Thissawaddy (Kawanami 2007, p. 232). Her landmark and contentious case from the early 2000s came to be known as the “Bhikkhunī Bhāvābhāva Vinicchaya” (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 206), or the “Judgement on the Existence or Non-Existence of Nuns”.<sup>6</sup>

This transformed soteriological landscape, however, has not appeared to influence the arguments put forth by conservative, Theravāda legalists against reinstating the higher ordination for women. Writing in 2015 about efforts to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the twenty-first century, Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa, the rector of the International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University and a high-ranking member of the country’s ecclesiastical hierarchy, represents the contemporary legalist position of senior monks in Burma, stating that

[i]n the idea of some people, there was another way to revive [the] *Bhikkhunī-sāsana*. A *bhikkhunī*-aspirant went to the side of Chinese *Mahāyāna Bhikkhunī* to get *bhikkhunī* ordination as the first step; they obtained [the] second ordination from the *Theravāda* monks as the second step. So, this form of “hybrid” dual ordination of *Mahāyāna bhikkhunī* and *Theravāda bhikkhus* started in India

and the number of bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka is more than hundreds now. (Nandamālābhivamsa 2015, p. 29)

What Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa is describing is the method followed by Saccavādī, whose preceptors were Sri Lankan *bhikkhunis* ordained by Taiwanese nuns in Bodhgaya, India, in 1998 (Ashiwa 2015, p. 19).<sup>7</sup> Yet, for Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa and the monastic hierarchy he represents, the “bhikkhunis ordained by this ‘hybrid’ [...] *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* method are not real Theravada bhikkhunī in the viewpoint of *Theravāda*” (Nandamālābhivamsa 2015, p. 29). As Burmese monastic-scholar Janaka Ashin explains, the argument here is that the Dharmaguptaka *vinaya* lineage maintained by these Taiwanese or Korean preceptors and passed on to their Sri Lankan initiates was “in some way contaminated because of the Mahāyāna beliefs of those who follow them” (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 206). For Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa and others, the problem is that *bhikkhunis* in China, Taiwan, and Korea “follow a different code of rules, adopt different procedures for establishing the boundary, *śīmā*, within which ordination is to be carried out, and do not employ Pāli for conducting legal acts” (Anālayo 2017, p. 10). This argument belies the strict neoconservative self-image carefully crafted by elite monks in Burma (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 208), a self-image which Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa demonstrates when he stresses that

Myanmar Sayadaws (senior monks) who follow strictly the treatises of *Pāli* (original text), *aṭṭhakathā* (commentaries) and *ṭīkā* (sub-commentaries) do not accept this new *Bhikkhunī-sāsana* because bhikkhunī ordination is not possible anymore. The impossibility for new bhikkhunī ordination is due to the disappearance and non-existence of the *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. If there is a *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, then there is a possibility for bhikkhunī ordination. According to the Vinaya rules, a candidate should obtain ordination from *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha* for the first time and then ordination from *Bhikkhu-saṅgha* for the second time. That means, the candidate should obtain the ordination from both *saṅghas*. As there is no more *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha* anymore, bhikkhunī ordination is impossible. (Nandamālābhivamsa 2015, pp. 28–29)

While offering his sympathy for the plight of female renunciants in Burma, Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa is essentially externalizing the decision, reducing it to a matter of immutable scriptural fact and historical reality. His claim that the “impossibility for new bhikkhunī ordination is due to the disappearance and non-existence of the *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*” essentially invalidates the existence of *bhikkhunis* in other Buddhist countries, meaning he denies the validity of those who tried to “transplant” or “repurpose” the lineages of other Vinayapiṭakas into the Theravāda context. By thus denying the validity of these “Chinese Mahāyāna lineages”, Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa reveals his own neo-conservative, literalist interpretation of Theravāda Buddhism and the Pāli canon on which it relies. My aim here is not to pass judgement on this position or assess its relative merits or accuracy,<sup>8</sup> yet by extending our historical scope to the first half of the twentieth century, we will see that the existence or non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is not so much a matter of scriptural record, but like so many other issues of *vinaya* orthodoxy, contingent on modes of scriptural interpretation influenced by the accretion of local tradition and hermeneutical convention. American-born monk Bodhi emphasizes this point, writing that “Theravāda jurisprudence often merges stipulations on legal issues that stem from the canonical Vinaya texts, the *aṭṭhakathās* (commentaries), and the *ṭīkā*s (subcommentaries) with interpretations of these stipulations that have gained currency through centuries of tradition” (Bodhi 2010, p. 116). In other words, the possibility of reinstating the higher ordination for women in the Theravāda context depends on regimes of interpretation and exegetical mores, themselves determined by the conventions of a given, local tradition.

The contingency of these regimes of interpretation is exemplified by the fact that the Mingun Jetavana interpreted the same Vinayapiṭaka and its commentaries in a fashion diametrically opposed to the position of conservative Theravāda legalists, using his own

interpretative methods based on the concept of the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayas* (“methods for future monks”) to argue that the Buddha actually intended his words to be used to re-establish the *bhikkhūnī-saṅgha* far into his future—our present. In what follows, I first examine the person of the Mingun Jetavana and his commentary, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, laying out his argument for the revival of the *bhikkhūnī-saṅgha* in the twentieth century, which relies on the Buddha’s knowledge of the future and the Mingun Jetavana’s ability to recognize and decipher the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayas* embedded in the *Milindapañhā*.

### 3. Mingun Jetavana

Widely considered an *arahant* (B. ရဟန္တာ *rahanta*) of the twentieth century—one who has reached the highest stage on the Theravāda path to nirvana—the Mingun Jetavana is an enigmatic figure in the history of twentieth-century Burmese Buddhism. As a pioneer of one of the major lineages of Burmese *vipassanā*, which Kate Crosby describes as a “modernised reform method of meditation” (Crosby 2013, p. 12), he was responsible in part for liberalizing contemplative practices traditionally seen as the vocation of virtuoso male monastics, making them accessible in the local vernacular for un-ordained women and men. At the same time, he based his “reform method” in Pāli canonical texts like the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (*The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*), reflecting a “preoccupation with origins” which effectively functioned to “obscure previous [vernacular] literature” on meditation (Skilton et al. 2019, p. 4).<sup>9</sup> Aside from the Mingun Jetavana’s technique, which came to be known as the “*satipaṭṭhāna* method” in his lifetime (Caṃ rhanḥ 1954, p. 14), perhaps his greatest legacy was the establishment of the first-known meditation centre in Burma in 1911 (Houtman 1990b, p. 2), a place to which “all the people wishing to attain [nirvana] would be warmly welcome[d] [...] to practice *vipassanā*” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 47). Indeed, the concept of the meditation centre was arguably the key institutional driver of the mass lay meditation movement in twentieth-century Burma,<sup>10</sup> since it allowed for monastics and lay people to practice together in the same space according to roughly the same technique.<sup>11</sup>

The Mingun Jetavana was not just known as a pioneer of *vipassanā* meditation but as an accomplished Pāli scholar who has been referred to by Htay Hlaing, a biographer of Burmese monks writing in the early 1960s, as an “unknown *tipiṭakadhara*” (B. လူမသိသော တိပိဋကဓရ ဆရာတော်ပါပေ *lū ma si so ‘tipiṭakadhara’ cha rā tau pā pe*) (Theḥ lhuin [1961] 1993, p. 448), one who had memorised large parts of the Pāli canon and could recite them by heart. The Mingun Jetavana’s scholastic work on Pāli canonical and commentarial texts included many “judgment” texts (P. *vinicchaya*) on the Vinayapiṭaka, or code of monastic discipline, and he was known by Htay Hlaing’s informants as being very strict in *vinaya* matters, even when it came to the monks in his meditation centres (Theḥ lhuin [1961] 1993, p. 451). Indeed, according to his first biography from 1957, the Mingun Jetavana demanded that any monk who enters his regime of *vipassanā* practice must have memorized the monastic code (P. *pātimokkha* B. လွတ်မြောက်ခြင်း *lvat mrok khraiṇḥ*) for both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*, “understanding them comprehensively” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 110). This emphasis on memorizing and understanding the monastic code for nuns (P. *bhikkhūnī-pātimokkha*) by the Mingun Jetavana stands in contrast to the current state-sponsored examination syllabus for *thilashins* in Burma, who instead of studying the Vinayapiṭaka, are tested on the *Sukumāramaggadīpanī* (*Manual of the Path for the Delicate*) at the primary, or “root level” (B. မူလတန်း *mūla-tanḥ*),<sup>12</sup> and the *Dhammapada* (*Verses on the Dhamma*) at subsequent levels (Saruya 2020, pp. 158–59). As Saruya points out, the former text was originally written by the Ledi Sayadaw (လယ်တီ ဆရာတော် *Ley tī Cha rā tau*, also known as Ūḥ Ñāṇadhaja; 1846–1923) “as a *vinaya* for the youth” (Saruya 2020, p. 159), testifying to the ambiguous status given to *thilashins* by the monastic establishment and government of Burma.

Arguably the Mingun Jetavana’s most consequential contribution to Buddhist scholarship in Burma was the composition of two commentaries written in Pāli on texts added

to the canon in Burma in the last century and a half,<sup>13</sup> which he published as *aṭṭhakathās*, the most authoritative form of commentary in Theravāda literary history.<sup>14</sup> Assigning his two Pāli commentaries the name “*aṭṭhakathā*” was a rather audacious move given the textually conservative nature of Burmese Buddhism since at least the time of King Bodawpaya (ဘိုးတော်ဘုရားမင်း: Bhuiṇ tau bhu rāḥ mañḥ, r. 1782–1819) (Pranke 2008, p. 1). For it is claimed, at least by his followers, that the Mingun Jetavana’s commentaries were the first new *aṭṭhakathās* composed in at least five centuries, if not a millennium,<sup>15</sup> and I have found no evidence that any other author since that time has labelled their text using the prestigious title “*aṭṭhakathā*”.<sup>16</sup> While his first such commentary, the 1926 *Peṭakopadesa-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Disclosure of the Canon*), was relatively uncontroversial and mostly relegated to elite scholarly circles, his second, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Questions of [King] Milinda*) created an uproar among the monastic elite and forced the U Nu administration of the parliamentary period (1948–1962) to intervene and confiscate several hundred copies of the text (Bha ri Ukkatṭha 1949, p. 15) (Bollée 1968, p. 315). Started around 1938, finished in 1941 (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 84), but not published until 1949, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* is the first-known commentary of its type composed for the c. 3rd-century B.C.E. *Milindapañhā* (*Questions of [King] Milinda*),<sup>17</sup> which features a fictional and expansive dialogue between a Greek-Bactrian monarch and a South Asian monk. The controversy over the commentary, which is well documented in newspapers of the time and apparently even spurred the government to introduce legislation in response (Huxley 2001, p. 134), was over two contentious issues: calls by the Mingun Jetavana to reform the robe-giving ceremony (*P. kaṭhina-kamma*), a major component of monk-lay relations in Burma, and his promotion of the full ordination of women as nuns. What is unique about his attempt to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is that the Mingun Jetavana not only bases his argument in scriptural interpretation—the same set of texts offered by conservative monks like Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa above—but in the Buddha’s ability to see the future when formulating the different layers of rules around *bhikkhunīs* in the Vinayaṭṭakā. According to the Mingun Jetavana, the Buddha thus embedded in his texts or those that resulted vicariously from his enlightenment (such as the *Milindapañhā*, which is said to have come some five centuries after the Buddha’s passing) “methods handed down to future monks” (*P. anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayo dinno*), an important feature of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* also noted by Madhav Deshpande in the landmark introduction to his 1999 edition of the text (Deshpande 1999, p. 7).<sup>18</sup> The task of the commentator, then, is not just to explain the words and phrases of the root text, but to discover such hidden “interpretive methods” and reveal their relevance for the Buddha’s future, our present. To appreciate the nature of his argument, which is tantamount to claiming the ability to decipher the intention of the Buddha, it is necessary to first understand the role of the higher forms of knowledge in the Mingun Jetavana’s controversial commentary, known in Pāli as the *abhiññās*.

#### 4. Higher Forms of Commentary

After the prefatory and introductory sections of his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana titles the first chapter of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* the *Pubbayogakanda* (*Chapter on Previous Connections*), which consists of sixty-five pages in the transliterated edition by Deshpande (1999). The subject of this chapter is the past lives of the two protagonists, King Milinda and the monk Nāgasena, and how they come to debate in the royal city of Sāgala, identified with “modern day Siālkot in the Punjab” (Aston 2004, p. 98). In the root text there is a palpable phantasmagoric quality to this chapter, which features millions of monks flying to the Himalayas, Nāgasena’s teacher reading his pupil’s mind, and devas in heavenly realms being reborn in human form. These fantastical episodes pulsate throughout the root text and while they are often not the focus of contemporary scholarship on the *Milindapañhā*, which has been concerned more with the philosophical and philological aspects of the work, they are the primary subject of exegesis for the Mingun Jetavana, whose goal in the



first chapter is to explicate the role of these higher forms of knowledge underlying the narrative momentum in this chapter.

The *abhiññās*, often translated as “supernormal” or “psychic” powers, are forms of “intellectual, perceptual, and instrumental knowledge, an understanding and control over the ‘natural’ order of things, such that it allows the knower to change that order” (Gómez 2010, p. 542). This “understanding and control” over nature is achieved through one-pointed concentration (P. *samādhi*) leading to the states of total absorption (P. *jhānas*) which grant the practitioner powers and abilities beyond the normal human range, like those seen in the first chapter of the *Milindapañha*, where vast stretches of time and space are collapsed to make the narrative possible. Referring to his own age—the age of *sāsana* decline—the Mingun Jetavana outlines the higher forms of knowledge in the first page of his commentary on the *Pubbayogakanda*, emphasizing that those

who obtain the knowledge of the various supernormal powers are not many, [those] who obtain the knowledge of the divine ear are not many, [those] who obtain the knowledge of reading other’s minds [. . .], [those] who obtain the knowledge of past lives [. . .], [those] who obtain the knowledge of the divine eye [. . .], [those] who obtain the knowledge of the future [. . .], [those] who obtain the knowledge of karmic results are not many, they are only few, [as] person[s] endowed with the *magga* (path) and also endowed with the *phala* (fruit) are only few as well.<sup>19</sup>

All told there are seven *abhiññās* listed here.<sup>20</sup> For the majority of his exegesis on the first chapter of the *Milindapañha*, the Mingun Jetavana describes these higher forms of knowledge as found in the root text with extensive quotations from the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa, sometimes for several pages. The reason the Mingun Jetavana takes such pains to explicate these *abhiññās* early in his commentary is because they effectively constitute the epistemology of his exegetical technique. This function is especially true for the knowledge of the future (P. *anāgatamsa-ñāṇa*), which motivates and makes possible the Mingun Jetavana’s attempt at reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in twentieth-century Burma.

To appreciate how the exegetical epistemology of the higher forms of knowledge functions in this attempt, consider that in the introduction to his transliteration of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, Deshpande labels the Mingun Jetavana a “religious reformer” who “couched these reformist ideas”—like the reestablishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*—“as doctrines passed on [by the Buddha] to future monks (*anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ esa nayo dinno . . .*)” (Deshpande 1999, p. 7). According to this concept as formulated by the Mingun Jetavana, the *Milindapañha* contains quasi-esoteric lessons or hitherto-hidden methods of interpretation that were embedded for monks far into the future, when the conditions for such lessons and methods would be conducive for the full ripening of their relevance. The special capacity claimed by a commentator like the Mingun Jetavana is the ability to discover such interpretive methods “for future monks” (P. *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ*) in the root text, to recognize past utterances or proclamations scattered throughout the Pāli canon and elucidate how they bear on the present moment. This process of identifying latent methods imbedded by the Buddha for future generations is exactly what the Mingun Jetavana does when introducing the issue of higher ordination for *bhikkhunīs* in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*.

## 5. Mingun Jetavana’s Argument for Reviving the *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*

The point in the *Milindapañha* at which the Mingun Jetavana makes his intervention regarding the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is in a dilemmatic, two-pronged question (P. *ubhato-koṭṭika pañha*) in the *Meṇḍakapañhakaṇḍa* (*Chapter of Questions on the Ram*) concerning the longevity of the *sāsana*, a perennially debated question in the history of Theravāda Buddhism. In the *Milindapañha*, King Milinda asks Nāgasena about an apparent contradiction between two statements made by the Buddha concerning the duration of his teachings: in the *Cullavagga* of the Vinayapiṭaka, it is said that the *sāsana* will only last 500 years, which stands in contrast to a statement in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (*Discourse on the Great Complete Nirvana*)

recounting the Buddha's final months, where, "in response to the question put by Subhadda the recluse", the Buddha replies that "if in this system the [monks] live the perfect life, then the world will not be bereft of *arahants*" (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:186). The first statement, as Nāgasena explains, is in reference to the Buddha's decision to admit women into the *saṅgha* as *bhikkhunīs*, at which point he predicts that as a result of permitting female ordination, the *sāsana* will last half as long, from 1000 to 500 years.<sup>21</sup>

After explaining Nāgasena's resolution of this *prima facie* dilemma, which dismisses the apparent contradiction by clarifying that the first statement refers to the temporal range of the *sāsana*, while the second statement was made in the context of the "actual practice of the religious life" (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:186), the Mingun Jetavana pivots to invoke the epistemology of the *abhiññās*, asking "[b]ut in regard to this question [about the disappearance of the *sāsana*], this method is handed down to future monks. What is this method handed down to future monks?"<sup>22</sup> In answering his own question, the Mingun Jetavana sets up a juxtaposition with two statements by the Buddha found in the Vinayaṭīka concerning the ordination of women: the first is "I allow, o *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*;"<sup>23</sup> the second statement is "a female undergoing a probationary course (*sikkhamānā*) who has been trained in the six *dhammas* for two rains is to seek ordination from both orders."<sup>24</sup> The first statement refers to the ordination of 500 "Sākyan" women from the royal court of the Buddha's father, who were admitted into the *saṅgha* through a ceremony overseen only by monks after Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's maternal aunt and stepmother, accepted the eight "heavy rules" (P. *garudhammas*) of respect towards *bhikkhus*, thereby becoming the first *bhikkhunī*.<sup>25</sup> The second statement is the sixth *garudhamma* itself, which was a prerequisite for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's own ordination and which tradition has taken to apply to all subsequent *bhikkhunīs* as well. According to the sixth *garudhamma*, in order to enter into this probationary period, the female candidate must first be granted permission by the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.<sup>26</sup> While it is true that in the absence of such a *saṅgha*, a woman cannot even embark on this preliminary stage to becoming a *bhikkhunī*, it is further stipulated in the sixth *garudhamma* that a female probationer must seek ordination from both orders, meaning first the *bhikkhunī*- and then the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*. The inability to meet these two criteria, that of being admitted as probationers by the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and then receiving a two-sided ordination from both monks and nuns, is considered by conservative legalists as the major barrier to ordaining women as *bhikkhunīs* in the present age. However, for the Mingun Jetavana, the real problem is that monks alive today consider these two statements made by the Buddha as being in conflict. The apparent juxtaposition here is that either women are to be ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* alone, or by both the *bhikkhunī*- and the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, but that both scenarios cannot be valid at once.

The Mingun Jetavana's purpose in setting up this juxtaposition is to show that these two statements are in fact not in conflict, but rather, both point in their own way to the underlying intention of the Buddha, namely, that "with respect to the two utterances the meaning is shown in each case just that a woman should be ordained."<sup>27</sup> What the commentator is doing in this instance is actually setting up his own dilemmatic, two-pronged question, effectively emulating the logic of the *Milindapañha*. Taking on the role of King Milinda, the interrogator of the root text, the Mingun Jetavana writes the following:

[According to] one [view], the woman who is to be ordained is to be ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*. [According to] another [view], the woman to be ordained is to be ordained by both [the female and male] *saṅgha*[s]. Future *bhikkhus* holding such wrong views, having seized on a particular meaning for the sake of explaining their wrong views, [will say] according to their opinion, "O Friend, if it was said by the Tathāgata, 'I allow, o *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*,' with this utterance, the utterance [also spoken by the Tathāgata] 'A female undergoing a probationary course who has been trained in the six dham-

mas for two rains is to seek ordination from both orders' [should then be considered] wrong."<sup>28</sup>

In this quote, the Mingun Jetavana is describing future monks, future, that is, to the Buddha, meaning he is obliquely calling out his contemporaries. Their views are "wrong" (P. *micchā*) in so far as they are arguing for the exclusivity of one utterance by the Buddha in contrast to the other (e.g., *yam vacanam, tam micchā*). In the next part of this passage, the Mingun Jetavana writes that other future monks may say, in contrast to the first position, that

"if it was said by the Tathāgata 'a female undergoing a probationary course who has been trained in the six *dhammas* for two rains is to seek ordination from both orders,' indeed according to this [statement], [the Tathāgata's] utterance 'I allow, o *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*,' is likewise wrong."<sup>29</sup>

As the Mingun Jetavana has framed the issue of the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* above, there are essentially two positions held by future monks, both standing in opposition to each other:

Is it not then that a two-sided ordination has been prohibited [by the statement] that a woman should be ordained by the one[-sided] *bhikkhu-saṅgha*? [Likewise, is it not then] that a one[-sided] ordination by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* is prohibited for a woman [by the statement] that a woman should be ordained by the two-fold *saṅgha*? Therefore, one [statement] prohibits the other, [for] one [view of future monks] is that a woman should be ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, another [view of future monks] is that a woman should be ordained by the two-fold *saṅgha* [of both monks and nuns], this is as such a two-pronged question (*ubhato-kotika*).<sup>30</sup>

Hence, either ordination by one side of the *saṅgha* (i.e., *bhikkhus* ordaining *bhikkhunīs*) is permitted, negating other options, or dual ordination alone is permitted, carried out first by *bhikkhunīs* then sanctioned by *bhikkhus*, thereby invalidating the one-sided option. The one-sided method is that which was carried out for the 500 Sākyan women who followed Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and is one means proposed by those presently wishing to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* (see, e.g., [Anālayo 2017](#)). The second method,<sup>31</sup> where the ordination ceremony is essentially carried out twice, first by *bhikkhunīs*, then by *bhikkhus*, is the preferred means prescribed by Theravāda conservative legalists like Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa seen above. This preference for the two-sided method has itself become convention, for as Bodhi reminds us, "[f]rom the time the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* reached maturity until it demise, the dual-*saṅgha* ordination was regarded in Theravada countries as mandatory" ([Bodhi 2010](#), p. 106). Yet, the binary framing of the two positions is deliberately simplistic and diametrical on the part of the Mingun Jetavana, for in the spirit of the *Milindapañha*, the role of Nāgasena is to demonstrate that the two-pronged questions put forth by Milinda are in fact fallacious (S. *ābhāsa*) because the apparent "alternatives are not [really] opposed to each other" ([Solomon 1976](#), 1:508). Hence, the key to overcoming such a dilemma is to reveal that there is ultimately no conflict between the two statements, crucial in this case since both are spoken by the Buddha—held to be incapable of contradiction by all parties in this debate.

According to the Mingun Jetavana, the inability of monks to "answer and analyze this two-pronged question at present"<sup>32</sup> causes some of his co-religionists to argue for the exclusivity of these dueling positions, without realizing that both statements can be true under different circumstances. In clarifying these circumstances, the Mingun Jetavana writes that "in this matter we state: the Blessed one said, 'I allow, o *bhikkhus*, the *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*.' Additionally, that utterance of the Blessed One is a resolution (*pariccheda*) because of the non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*."<sup>33</sup> In other words, the reason why this regulation was initially laid down by the Buddha is because at that moment in the history of the *sāsana*, there was no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, an extenuating circumstance necessitating the single-sided ordination of the 500 Sākyan women by *bhikkhus* alone. Simply put, there was no other way to bring them into the history of the *sāsana* and fulfill the Buddha's (purportedly reluctant) wish. In contrast, for the Mingun Jetavana, the second

statement pertaining to the two-year training period of any prospective *bhikkhunī* is a regulation referring to “the practice of the female novice,”<sup>34</sup> the normal course of progress for a trainee under ideal conditions. Put another way, the first statement is about the evolution of the *sāsana* more broadly, while the second statement is about “a two-stage procedure for dual ordination” (Anālayo 2017, p. 18) (emphasis added).<sup>35</sup> Hence, just as Nāgasena’s resolution of the two statements about the longevity of the *sāsana* (concerning its 500-year span in contrast to the Buddha’s reply to Subhadda), the first statement allowing monks to ordain nuns is for the Mingun Jetavana temporal in nature, one contingent on historical circumstances, while the second statement about a candidate for ordination first seeking permission from the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* to enter the two-year training period refers to the actual practice and proceedings of the spiritual life, one that assumes all other attendant conditions have been met, such as the existence of a contemporaneous *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.<sup>36</sup> The Mingun Jetavana has thus mapped this same relationship between the two statements made by the Buddha about the longevity of the *sāsana* in the *Milindapañha* onto the contemporary issue of re-ordaining women as *bhikkhunīs*, such that in his analysis of the two-pronged question, “one [regulation] is far away from the other. One is not shared with the other. One is not mixed with the other.”<sup>37</sup> With the correct analysis, then, the Mingun Jetavana claims there is no contradiction at all.

The key to understanding the Mingun Jetavana’s strategy here is in recognizing that for him, these statements represent two distinct forms of regulation laid down by the Buddha. The regulation invoked by the Mingun Jetavana that comes first in the historical sequence of events is the sixth *garudhamma*, where a female novice must undertake a two-year probationary period first sanctioned by other *bhikkhunīs*. According to the Mingun Jetavana, this stipulation is known as a “root regulation” (P. *mūla-paññatti*) that was forward looking in nature. It is “forward looking” insofar as it was meant for the *bhikkhunīs-to-be*, because when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī accepted it along with the other seven *garudhammas*, the conditions could not possibly be met, as there was then no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that could sanction a candidate’s status as a probationer or ordain her after the two-year training period. Indeed, for the Mingun Jetavana, the “eight important rules for the *bhikkhunī* [Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī] were spoken [as a whole], made known to the not-yet-arisen *bhikkhunīs* with the status of a root regulation.”<sup>38</sup> As a result of this situation of historical absence, when it came time for the 500 Sākyan women to be ordained, the Buddha made what the Mingun Jetavana considers a “supplementary rule” (P. *anupaññatti*), one meant to apply in cases where the root regulations could not be honoured because of extenuating circumstances. In this case, the circumstance was the fact that there was at that time no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that the 500 Sākyan women could turn to, so in order to ensure their *upasampadā*, the Buddha “made known [a rule] with the status of a supplementary regulation, saying ‘I allow, o *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*.’”<sup>39</sup> According to this reading, the two rules do not negate each other but are complementary, one modifying the other under special circumstances.

Though it might seem a subtle distinction to us, for the Mingun Jetavana, recognizing these different types of regulation is crucial, as “this supplementary regulation did not achieve the state of being universal[ly applicable] (*sādhāraṇabhāvaṃ*) in regard to both sanction[s] and injunction[s] declared [by the Buddha] before and after [this secondary regulation was promulgated].”<sup>40</sup> What the Mingun Jetavana means here is that the ordination of *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus* did not become a root regulation that would have been in conflict with other root regulations, but was only valid under certain conditions, never having been outright revoked by the Buddha nor generally applied in all circumstances. In other words, this secondary regulation allowing monks to ordain nuns in no way conflicts with the other root regulations around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* but is designed for only certain circumstances, according to which its relevance is “actualized” and then only. As Bodhi also stresses this point,



[t]here is nothing in the text itself, or elsewhere in the Pāli Vinaya, that lays down a rule stating categorically that, should the bhikkhunī saṅgha become extinct, the bhikkhus are prohibited from falling back on the original allowance the Buddha gave them to ordain bhikkhunīs and confer upasampadā on their own to resuscitate the bhikkhunī saṅgha. (Bodhi 2010, p. 123)

Instead, it has become traditionally accepted in conservative Theravāda circles that this supplementary rule no longer applies, a localized and entrenched interpretation that the Mingun Jetavana is trying to dispute by his own unique reading of the Vinayaṭṭaka.<sup>41</sup> When responding to a contemporary peer questioning his position on the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the Mingun Jetavana reaffirms his view above, emphasising that the “supplementary rule laid down by the Buddha has been unbreakable for 5000 years of the Buddha’s dispensation” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 91). That is to say, given the contextual nature of the Vinayaṭṭaka, where the interpretation of “case law” has to attend to the actual causes and conditions for the Buddha’s proclamations, this secondary regulation is only applicable under the right circumstances, namely, in the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. In this sense, the “original allowance” that monks could ordain nuns “could be considered a legal precedent” (Bodhi 2010, p. 120), one which has never been overturned. The logic then is inescapable for the Mingun Jetavana: since the Buddha did not revoke this supplementary rule, and since we currently find ourselves in the repeat historical situation where there is no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the supplementary regulation is once again in effect, just as it was for the 500 Sākyan women. As such, the Mingun Jetavana boldly declares the validity of his own interpretation, embedding it in a stock phrase from the Pali canon that collapses the distinction between the time of the Buddha and the twentieth century: “Thus this is indeed permitted by the Blessed One, the one who knows, the one who sees, the Worthy One, by the completely and fully Awakened One, [that] a woman should at present be thus ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*.”<sup>42</sup>

## 6. *Buddhamataññū*: One Who Knows the Intention of the Buddha

By couching his own admittedly idiosyncratic interpretation in this stock phrase, which resembles countless other declarations of the Buddha’s knowledge found in the Pali canon,<sup>43</sup> the Mingun Jetavana is essentially claiming that this is the view the Buddha held all along, but which future monks—his contemporaries—were unable to appreciate. Yet, the Mingun Jetavana’s unique interpretation as a commentator is not just that the Buddha set up the dynamic between root and secondary regulations to instill an element of ad hoc flexibility in how the *vinaya* was to be executed, but that he foresaw the very historical moment in which we now find ourselves, namely, the non-existence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. My argument is that this resolution of the two apparently contradictory positions around the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is only possible because the Mingun Jetavana, with the higher forms of knowledge as his epistemological foundation, has collapsed the distinction between the age of the Buddha and his own time. He is able to do so because of the underlying concept of omniscience at play in the Vinayaṭṭaka, a set of texts which “express the Buddha’s omniscience by demonstrating the Buddha’s knowledge of time” (Heim 2018, p. 184). If we accept this play of omniscience, alluded to by the two participles “the One who sees, the One who knows” (P. *jānatā passatā*) in the stock phrase above, pronouncements in the Vinayaṭṭaka “must be judged not as literal, frozen truths, but as enactments in time” (Gold 2015, p. 118), enactments which unfold according to changing historical circumstances in the life course of the *sāsana*. In more practical terms, Ben Schonthal likens the Vinayaṭṭaka to a “living constitution” that has a certain amount of built-in plasticity to respond to the “changing needs of monks” (Schonthal 2018, p. 14). What is vital for our discussion here is that this plasticity in how and when the different regulations are applied is no accident, at least according to the commentarial tradition inherited by the Mingun Jetavana. While early layers of the Pāli canon were ambiguous about the omniscient status of the Buddha, by the commentarial period, we find “expressions like ‘*atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ sabbaṃ jānāti*’” used to refer to the Buddha, claiming that he is

one who “knows everything concerning the past, future and present” (Endo 2016, p. 57). The Mingun Jetavana patently agrees, reaffirming in the middle of his argument for the reintroduction of the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* that “all bodily[, vocal and mental] action of the Blessed One [i.e., the Buddha] was preceded by wisdom and accompanied by wisdom. In the past, perfect knowledge was unobstructed. In the future it will be unobstructed. In the present it is unobstructed.”<sup>44</sup> In this statement we see that for the Mingun Jetavana, the Buddha’s wisdom is manifest not just in the past—in the Vinayapiṭaka as an historical set of rules—but in the Buddha’s future, which has become our present. Such is the critical role that knowledge of the future plays in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, not because the Mingun Jetavana possesses this higher form of knowledge himself but because he is commenting on the words of the Buddha, for whom the obstructions of past, present, and future did and *do* not exist.

Working with the Buddha’s omniscience in the background, the Mingun Jetavana is able to admit that the statement, “I allow, o *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*”, is “an utterance of the Blessed One spoken in the past, a determination because of the non-existence regarding the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* [at that moment,]” while at the same time claiming it is

also [a statement] for the future, which is a resolution because of the non-existence of the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha*. It is also a resolution [by the Buddha relevant] to the present because of the non-existence of the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* [in our own time]; having seen with unobstructed perfect knowledge and omniscient wisdom, [the ordination of *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus*] is to be allowed.<sup>45</sup>

The supplementary rule in question, according to the Mingun Jetavana, was therefore never abrogated or limited because it was meant precisely to apply to the current situation. Thus, for the Mingun Jetavana, the Buddha, using his knowledge of the future “saw” that “in the future too, the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* will be non-existent.”<sup>46</sup> His allowance that *bhikkhus* could ordain *bhikkhunīs* was not just an expediency applicable to the 500 Sākyan women, as claimed by conservative Theravāda legalists, but a latent means for someone like the Mingun Jetavana to reinstate the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* 2500 years after the Buddha’s passing. Hence, one “should not ignore”, in the warning of the Mingun Jetavana, “the sphere of authority of the wisdom of omniscience.”<sup>47</sup>

What is most remarkable and perhaps the most contentious about the epistemology of commentary on display here is that by invoking the concept of the methods handed down to future monks, the Mingun Jetavana understands the Buddha to be directly addressing him. For he asserts that in this matter, “the *saṅgha* must be informed by a monk who knows the intention of the Blessed One, who is experienced and competent.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, the Mingun Jetavana is ensconcing himself securely within “the sphere of authority of the Buddha’s wisdom of omniscience”. As a result, he boldly claims, at the end of his argument for the revival of the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha*, that “we will know the wish of the Blessed One. We will see the face of the Blessed one like (*saṅkāsa*) the full moon. With the desire to [re]create the *bhikkhuni-sāsana* foremost [in his mind], a monk should cultivate [the teaching] with virtue, in the celebrated place of the Blessed One.”<sup>49</sup> This affirmation is rather extraordinary within the context of the neoconservative Theravada orthodoxy of Burma, because the Mingun Jetavana is not just trying to interpret his text, but is putting words into the mouth *and* mind of the Buddha, trying to speak on behalf of the Buddha himself. Put another way, the Mingun Jetavana is making a demand on the intention of the Buddha as expressed in the Vinayapiṭaka, which has major ramifications in a tradition that sees itself as the curator of the Buddha’s original and unadulterated teachings. In fact, the Mingun Jetavana is referred to by his present-day disciples as the *buddhamataññū*, or “one who knows the intention of the Buddha”.<sup>50</sup> Such a pretension may have been even more controversial than the argument for the revival of the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha*, for as he says above, the Mingun Jetavana is effectively acting “in the celebrated place of the Blessed One (*P. bhagavato thomite ṭhāne*)”. As Bodhi explains, “[f]or monks to attempt to reconstitute a broken

bhikkhunī saṅgha, it is said, is to claim a privilege unique to a perfectly enlightened Buddha, and no one but the next Buddha can claim that" (Bodhi 2010, pp. 104–5). Yet, such a claim is exactly what is being made by the Mingun Jetavana in invoking the intention of the Buddha, representing the pinnacle and the boldest conceit of the commentarial vocation.

Ultimately, then, the Mingun Jetavana's argument for the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* amounts to a sort of "reverse prolepsis" made possible by the epistemology of the *abhiññās* not just as powers that collapse time, but as the substratum over which the history of the *sāsana* unfolds. By including knowledge of the future in his list of the higher forms of knowledge, the Mingun Jetavana is setting up what Jonardon Ganeri refers to as the "proleptic" function of commentary, where "an agent might be engaged in an activity of self-consciously addressing a future audience whose socio-political and intellectual context is unknown" (Ganeri 2011, p. 68). Opportunities for proleptic interpretations by commentators are abundant "when the intellectual 'context' is a Sanskrit [or Pāli] knowledge system, an entity conceived of by its participants as possessing enormous longevity" (Ganeri 2011, p. 68). In trying to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the Mingun Jetavana is leveraging the proleptic potential of the Pāli literary world, except in this case, he is applying prolepsis in reverse, since the agent is the historical Buddha, and the Mingun Jetavana has to work backwards from the present to know this agent's intention. Crucially for this commentator, because of the different model of history presented by the *abhiññās*, the enlightened agent in question actually does know the "socio-political and intellectual content" of the future, at least within the hermeneutical circle, thereby animating the concept of methods handed down for future monks underlying the whole *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*. Such a future, however, is not limited to the disappearance of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, but also includes the rise of the mass lay meditation movement in which the Mingun Jetavana was so central. For the Mingun Jetavana, this is a crucial fact, because the rise of *vipassanā* meditation for lay people has utterly transformed the soteriological landscape for women in twentieth-century Burma. To appreciate the full framework within which the Mingun Jetavana makes his argument, then, we must attend to the soteriological ramifications of this movement, for what is at stake is not just the ordination of women, as pressing as that is, but the vitality of the *sāsana* itself. This concern, I argue, is also what we see in the advocacy of Ādiccavaṃsa, a junior contemporary of the Mingun Jetavana who argued for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in part based on his own readings of the *Milindapañhā*. To therefore widen the scope of this argument and contextualize my discussion on discourses about *sāsana* decline in twentieth-century Burma, I will leave the Mingun Jetavana for the moment and attend to the controversial vision of *sāsana* history offered by Ādiccavaṃsa, before tying this vision back into the broader project of *vipassanā* meditation advanced by the Mingun Jetavana.

## 7. Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa

A gifted scholar and progressive thinker, Ādiccavaṃsa had diverse interests not limited to Buddhism. Going against the monastic consensus at the time about the centrality of Pāli and Burmese in religious education, Ādiccavaṃsa was an Anglophone who spent over ten years in England starting in the late 1920s (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 108). In addition to English, he "pursued further studies in [. . .] Hind[i], Sanskrit, Urdu, Bengali, and Japanese script in India, Sri Lanka and England. He had [a] desire to write Buddhist literatures into these languages" (Tejinda 2017, p. 42). According to Janaka Ashin, "Ādiccavaṃsa twice refused to accept the coveted *Aggamahāpandita* title [as a foremost Pāli scholar in Burma] because he did not want to be complicit with the colonial authorities" and even went so far as to declare that "he was not sure that Buddhism was the highest truth, and that if he found a higher truth he would accept it in preference to Buddhism" (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 109; see also Kawanami 2007, p. 231).<sup>51</sup> As these statements indicate, Ādiccavaṃsa was not against reforming the neoconservative Theravāda Buddhism in his native Burma, becoming "an advocate for vegetarianism for both monks and the laity (Janaka Ashin 2016,

p. 112). He also “allow[ed] laypersons to wear shoes in his monastery in Yangon” (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 133), demonstrating his relatively liberal attitude to Buddhism.

This liberal attitude was also evident in Ādiccavaṃsa’s approach to reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. In 1935, he published a monograph in Burmese of over 297 pages titled the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*. As the title indicates, Ādiccavaṃsa advocates for reinstating full ordination for women in Burma, deploying some of the same arguments that the Mingun Jetavana would use in his *Milindapañha-aṭṭhakathā* that the latter started three or four years after the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* was published. Although in his 2017 thesis Ashin Tejinda suggests that the Mingun Jetavana followed the lead of Ādiccavaṃsa, the timeline and provenance of these arguments are not so clear, and it is probably more accurate to see such ideas as generally percolating amongst subsections of the monastic and lay community before their proclamations in print. For instance, in his *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, Ādiccavaṃsa references the Mingun Jetavana when giving his initial rebuttal to opponents of his ideas, citing the latter as an authority in the Pāli canon and implying that the Mingun Jetavana either shared or was sympathetic to his views around re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 22).

A second link between these two is the fact that the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* was first written at the behest of the Mingun Jetavana’s prominent lay student and the meditation teacher, U Myat Kyaw (ဦး မြတ်ကျော် ။ Mrat kyau also known as မင်းကွန်းဓမ္မကထိက ဦး ပဏ္ဍိဓမ္မ Maṇḥ kvaṇḥ dhammakathika ။ Paṇḍiḍhamma, 1884–1947; hereafter Myat Kyaw (Prumḥ khyau 2009, pp. 332, 334)). Maung Maung refers to Myat Kyaw, who was previously a *bhikkhu*, as “[o]ne of the most influential and dedicated founders of meditation centres intended specifically to take in lay aspirants for the serious pursuit of the Buddha’s *dhamma*” (Maung Maung 1980, p. 113), claiming that in “the early 1930s, his was the most widely known and accepted of the meditation centres exclusively organized and run for the lay public” (Maung Maung 1980, p. 114).<sup>52</sup> In the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, Ādiccavaṃsa explains that his monograph partly arose from a casual conversation between Myat Kyaw, Ādiccavaṃsa, and others<sup>53</sup> on the possibility of re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, and without explicit permission, Myat Kyaw reported on the conversation and had it published in a newspaper under a pseudonym (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 5–6). The resulting controversy in the public sphere compelled Ādiccavaṃsa to write on this subject, especially after Myat Kyaw beseeched him to intervene in the ensuing debate (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 7–9). The *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti*, the 1965 biography of Ādiccavaṃsa, adds that Myat Kyaw “made copies of the finished manuscript with a typewriter and sent them to the leading scholarly monks (*piṭaka sayadaṃs*) throughout the Myanmar nation to receive [their] opinions”<sup>54</sup> (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 16). Given the intimacy between the Mingun Jetavana and Myat Kyaw, and between Myat Kyaw and Ādiccavaṃsa, it is likely that the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa were aware of each other’s ideas around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and may have even developed their arguments in collaboration. What makes them both unique, however, is their willingness to attach their names to such views and assert their arguments in print and for posterity.

As a result of publishing his *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, Ādiccavaṃsa was roundly criticized by other monastics and lay people in Burmese newspapers in 1934 and 1935, with an action taken against him called a *pakāsanīya-kamma*, what Thānissaro Bhikkhu translates as an “information-transaction” where the lay community is informed that the charged individual is a “changed man whose actions no longer reflected the will of the [monastic] Community” (Thānissaro 2013, II:1289). At its core, the *pakāsanīya-kamma* is “a public accusation of wrongdoing” (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, p. 220), meant to advance an open and civil censure of an individual monastic without actually taking formal action against the individual within the confines of the monastic code.<sup>55</sup> While Ādiccavaṃsa was not forced to disrobe (as he did not commit an identifiable *pārājika* offence), Kawanami describes the monastic hierarchy as “subjecting [him] to a prolonged period of isolation” because of his publication, during which he “was excluded from all *Saṅgha* activities” (Kawanami 2007, p. 232). The *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* points out that one of the lay people leading the charge



against Ādiccavaṃsa in the proceedings was U Saw (ဦး စော ၏ co, 1900–1948), the would-be prime minister of Burma from 1940–1942 and the person executed for the assassination of General Aung San in 1947 (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 22), indicating that the whole affair was highly politicized and of national import. After the public condemnation of Ādiccavaṃsa in the *pakāsanīya-kamma*, he composed a second book detailing the events, *Bhikkhunī areh puṃ kyam* (ဘိက္ခုနီအရေးပုံကျမ်း: *Story of the Bhikkhunī Affair*). In this text, which is 434 pages long, Ādiccavaṃsa lists the arguments for and against his earlier monograph, cites the main people involved in his *pakāsanīya* censure, and further explains his reasons for wading into the controversy.<sup>56</sup> While the *Bhikkhunī areh puṃ kyam* is an important text in need of further study, I will limit my discussion here to the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, comparing Ādiccavaṃsa's argument for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* with that of the Mingun Jetavana.

## 8. Argument of the *Bhikkhunī-Sāsanopadesa*

The first question that arises is what was so controversial in the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* that made public figures like U Saw bring a *pakāsanīya-kamma* against its author? The obvious answer is that Ādiccavaṃsa was arguing against received orthodoxy in reinstating the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, and like the Mingun Jetavana, using the Pāli canon to do so. In fact, Ādiccavaṃsa's argument is strikingly similar to that of the latter, as both advocated for the single-ordination method where *bhikkhus* ordain *bhikkhunīs*. According to Ādiccavaṃsa, the situation is quite simple, for the “*Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* can be revived as long as [the] *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* wh[ich] can give ordination in accordance with the first rule exists” (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, p. 47).<sup>57</sup> The reason for this allowance is because, like the Mingun Jetavana, Ādiccavaṃsa takes the Buddha's declaration that *bhikkhunīs* can be ordained by *bhikkhus* as being still valid (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 72–73). Part of Ādiccavaṃsa's argument rests on the fact that when the Buddha meant for one set of rules to override earlier pronouncements, he explicitly abolished the initial rule. For example:

With regard to the *Bhikkhu* ordination, the Buddha originally prescribed “*Bhikkhus*, I allow giving of higher ordination by taking three refuges”. Later the Buddha said, “From this day on, *Bhikkhus*, I abolish ordination by taking the three refuges that I had prescribed *Bhikkhus*, I allow ordination by *Ñatticatutthakammavācā* (*kammavācā* of four *ñatti*)”. Just as the Buddha officially abolished *Bhikkhu* ordination by taking the three refuges, here also [in the case of the one-sided ordination of *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus*], he should have officially withdrawn the first rule if he had a desire to abolish it. This case is very significant. He did not withdraw the first rule. Therefore, it is still valid.<sup>58</sup> (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, pp. 44–45)

What we see in this excerpt from the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* is Ādiccavaṃsa making his own claim on the intention of the Buddha without recourse to the Buddha's knowledge of the future or other *abhiññās*. Instead, he is arguing for the consistency of the Buddha in laying down the rules for ordination as found in the Vinayapīṭaka, using an analogous case to imply that we should not treat the ordination of women as some separate category distinct in kind from the ordination of men. In this instance, Ādiccavaṃsa is being a literalist in his hermeneutics in upholding the integrity of the Pāli canon, contending that the absence of a clear abrogation of the regulation that *bhikkhus* can ordain *bhikkhunīs* is a positive sign that the Buddha never meant for this rule to lapse, even with the introduction of the sixth *garudhamma* stipulating that women should be ordained by *bhikkhunīs* first. The implication here is that if the Buddha wanted to abolish the method of singled-sided *upasampadā* for women, he would have explicitly done so.

Yet, while the Mingun Jetavana makes a subtle distinction between this sixth *garudhamma*, which he sees as a root regulation, and the declaration by the Buddha that *bhikkhunīs* can be ordained by *bhikkhus*, which he takes as a supplementary regulation meant to apply in the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, Ādiccavaṃsa again deploys a more literal reading of the *garudhammas* as a whole, focusing on their Pāli designation as *ovāda*. He points out that

the Pāli word *ovāda*, which means “admonishing; instruction; counsel” (Cone, s.v. *ovāda*), implies that these conditions are not binding but “a kind of a provisional code that was drawn up before any problem had actually come about” (Kawanami 2007, p. 236). To this end, Ādiccavaṃsa bluntly states that the “Eight *Garudhammas* are not rules. In *Aṭṭhakatha*, they have been used as a metaphor like rules. Indeed, they are an agreement of women to become *Bhikkhuni*. If the *Garudhammas* are accepted as an agreement, it was intended to be used only for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to become a *Bhikkhuni*”<sup>59</sup> (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, p. 48). As this above quote indicates, Ādiccavaṃsa also takes the *garudhammas* to be problematic and is interpreting them figuratively, as “metaphors” meant to guide the practice of *bhikkhunīs*, but which are not binding. Since they are not binding, he believes the inability to follow their letter should not disbar a woman from receiving the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*.<sup>60</sup>

The reason why Ādiccavaṃsa must mitigate the authority of the *garudhammas* to advance his argument is because according to the sixth *garudhamma*, female candidates must be ordained by both sides of the *saṅgha*. In this process, the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* performs the ceremony first after the candidate has been “questioned about various obstructions to ordination, among them issues relating to a women’s sexual identity” (Bodhi 2010, p. 122). Only after the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* has ordained the candidate, the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* then performs essentially the same procedure, without carrying out this potentially sensitive line of questioning. Yet, despite the temporal precedence afforded the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in this procedure, the entire process must still be sanctioned by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, meaning that “[i]n this arrangement, it is still the *bhikkhu saṅgha* that functions as the ultimate authority determining the validity of the ordination” (Bodhi 2010, p. 122). Simply put, it is the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* that oversees the ordination of women in the end, even in the presence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. Ādiccavaṃsa argues the same point, writing that

[a]ccording to the Pāli word, “*ekato upasampann[ā]ya*” [(by being ordained by one side)] *Bhikkhunī ordination* has not yet completed and it is just for the sake of clearance in the presence of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*. The interrogation in the presence of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* was permitted merely to relieve the shyness and fear of female candidates. Hence, permission only for interrogation is obvious. Consequently, it should not be in vain to benefits of all women folks and Buddha *Sāsana* due to the lack of the *Bhikkhunīs* who have duty merely for an interrogation.<sup>61</sup> (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, p. 46)

In this line of thought, Ādiccavaṃsa is interpreting the sixth *garudhamma*’s requirement of a two-sided ordination as more a guideline or best-case scenario, meant to spare potentially reluctant female candidates the embarrassment of revealing personal details to *bhikkhus*. Again, he is claiming that this regulation should not be seen as binding or used as an obstacle to block the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* but was rather a means to remove any impediments which might “interrupt the carrying out of ordination” for women (Anālayo 2017, p. 20). Indeed, as Bodhi makes clear from his own reading of the “variant cases section attached to the [relevant] *bhikkhunī*” monastic rules (*pācittiya*s 63 and 64), “the Vinaya did not regard as invalid an *upasampadā* ordination that failed to fully conform to the procedures laid down in the eight *garudhamma*” (Bodhi 2010, p. 128), adding further evidence to Ādiccavaṃsa’s figurative reading of the *garudhammas* as helpful but not compulsory instructions.

It is not surprising, then, that when responding to the efforts to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* by Saccavādī in Sri Lanka, the state monastic hierarchy (the State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka နိုင်ငံတော်သံဃာမဟာနာယကအဖွဲ့ *Nuīn nām tau saṅghā. mahānāyaka aphvai.*) of Burma composed a judgement that, according to Kawanami, “focuses on the nature of the *garudhamma* rules” (Kawanami 2007, p. 234). This judgement, titled *Bhikkhunī vinicchaya cā tamḥ* (ဘိက္ခုနီဝိနိစ္ဆယစာတမ်း: *Record of the Bhikkhunī Decision*; hereafter the *Bhikkhunī-vinicchaya*),<sup>62</sup> in essence builds its case on the sixth *garudhamma* rule necessitating that a female candidate for *upasampadā* receive her ordination from a dual *saṅgha*. While Ādiccavaṃsa takes this rule (and the other seven *garudhamma*) to be unnecessary, and while the Mingun Jetavana

understands the *garudhammas* as root regulations that can be modified or amended in conjunction with supplementary regulations, the “Burmese *Saṅgha* holds that th[e sixth *garudhamma*] is a major ruling, which is binding, and therefore the ‘dual’ ordination stipulated in it has to be adhered to at all costs” (Kawanami 2007, p. 235). Although the *Bhikkhunī-vinicchaya* was written in 2004, almost seventy years after the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* of Ādiccavaṃsa, it represents the orthodox perspective of the state-sanctioned monastic establishment in Burma, one that was likely inherited from the monastic hierarchy in the first half of the twentieth century. By undermining the status of the *garudhammas*, Ādiccavaṃsa therefore was not just (seen to be) reinterpreting the Pāli canon but undermining the official interpretation of the Burmese monastic community, or rather, the right of the *saṅgha* hierarchy to make such final pronouncements over what does and does not count as orthodox opinion. Hence, while the arguments for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* are what ostensibly “attracted the attention of the general public, [...] they were alerted to the fact that seemingly [Ādiccavaṃsa] was trying to challenge the authority of the *Saṅgha*” (Kawanami 2007, p. 231). To do so, or at least to be perceived as doing so, is much more provocative than advocating for the reinstatement of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, for it potentially subverts the monastic hierarchy’s monopoly on interpreting the Pāli canon and their view of *sāsana* history as a whole.

## 9. Beyond the 5000-Year Limit of the *Sāsana*

The purpose in taking this detour into the arguments of Ādiccavaṃsa is to demonstrate that the controversy around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* must thus be understood as one aspect of the centuries-old debate in Burma around the longevity of the *sāsana*. This connection is clear given the canonical account of the Buddha’s early reluctance to admit women into the monastic community, where it is said he feared doing so would shorten the timespan of his teachings by one half. The *garudhammas*, also at the centre of debates around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, were instituted, according to the commentarial explanation, to prevent just such a decline after allowing women to ordain as *bhikkhunīs*. Hence, when stating its opinion against reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the *Bhikkhunī-vinicchaya* of the State *Saṅgha* Mahā Nāyaka quotes the preeminent Burmese scholar monk, the Mingun Sayadaw (မင်းကွန်းဆရာတော် Maṇḥ kvaṇḥ Cha rā tau, also known as, Ūḥ Vicittasārabhivāṃsa; 1911–1993), not to be confused with the Mingun Jetavana, who signals the highest of stakes in this debate: “In the world, [the] danger [to] the Buddha *Sāsana* actually appears because some monks are trying to revive [the] *Bhikkhunī sāsana*”<sup>63</sup> (Bhv trans. Tejinda 2017, p. 81). At issue, then, is nothing less than the survival of the *sāsana* itself. It is no surprise, then, that almost the final third of Ādiccavaṃsa’s *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, from pages 219 to the conclusion on 297, is devoted to discussing the various timelines for the disappearance of the *sāsana*. These timelines include what is found in the Pāli canon, the Pāli commentaries, the views of Burmese monks like the Ledi Sayadaw, the position of Ādiccavaṃsa’s contemporaries, and the views of Ādiccavaṃsa himself. The position of Ādiccavaṃsa on the timeline of the *sāsana*, it appears, was considered unorthodox and catalyzed in part the initial hostility to the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*. When discussing the newspaper headlines of those protesting Ādiccavaṃsa’s publication, the author of the 1965 *Ādiccavaṃsa atthupatti* states that alongside the effort to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, Ādiccavaṃsa’s contention that “‘the life of the Buddha’s *sāsana* also is more than 500 [years, that] it may be longer because one wants for it to be longer than 6000 [years]’ has surely been disturbing to dogmatic people who have already formed the opinion that says, ‘the *bhikkhunī-sāsana* is not able to exist at all. The age of the *sāsana* is also [5000] years only’” (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, pp. 16–17). The 5000-year timeline of the Buddha’s *sāsana* is not found fully formed in canonical texts but “appear[s] for the first time in the commentarial literature of the Pāli tradition” (Endo 2013, p. 136). Despite the many discrepancies in the accounts of this process of degeneration among the various commentaries (Endo 2013, p. 135), the 5000-year duration of the *sāsana* is taken as the orthodox model in Burma, with any aberrations meeting with strict monastic sanction or even harsh state repression.<sup>64</sup>

Ādiccavaṃsa partly develops his position on the longevity of the *sāsana* based on the *Milindapañha*, the same text that the Mingun Jetavana comments on and uses to propound his own theory for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*,<sup>65</sup> demonstrating yet another link between these two. Coming in between the Pāli canonical texts and the commentaries, Toshiichi Endo clarifies that the *Milindapañha* “shows a new classification of the disappearance of the True Dhamma, a step further than its canonical interpretation, and this classification can be regarded as a link connecting the Canon to the commentaries” (Endo 2013, p. 127). Indeed, the *Milindapañha* is considered paracanonical in all Theravāda countries except Burma, where it was officially endorsed as part of the Pāli canon (as the last book in the *Khuddakanikāya*) during the 1871 Fifth Council, which took place in Burma under King Mindon (မင်းတုန်းမင်း: Mañḥ tunḥ mañḥ, r. 1853–1878), the penultimate monarch of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885). The canonical status of the *Milindapañha* is thus important for Ādiccavaṃsa’s textual argument because it affords the statements found in the *Milindapañha* precedence over the commentarial accounts of the longevity of the *sāsana* used to support the conventional view. To make his case that the *sāsana* will last more than 5000 years, Ādiccavaṃsa examines the same two-pronged, dilemmatic question that the Mingun Jetavana uses to introduce his arguments for re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, namely, the apparent contradiction between the Buddha’s prediction that the *sāsana* will last only 500 years on account of admitting women into the *saṅgha* and the prediction to Subhadda the recluse that “if in this system the monks live the perfect life, then the world will not be bereft of *arahants*” (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:186).

In terms of the first statement, Ādiccavaṃsa deploys a creative reading of the root text, taking the numbers referenced by the Buddha as more figurative than literal. In the *Cullavagga* of the Vinaya-piṭaka (Vin II 256; see also A IV 278), the Buddha says that without the ordination of women, the *sāsana* would have lasted for 1000 years (P. *sahassaṃ*), but due to the admission of Mahāpajāpati Gotamī and the subsequent Sākyan women into the *saṅgha*, the *sāsana* would now last only 500 years. In Ādiccavaṃsa’s interpretation of this passage, “because [the word] ‘*sahassa*’ is an indefinite number—the meaning says [something like] ‘many thousands’ [of years]” (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 256). If we take the Pāli word for “1000” to be an indefinite number, as Ādiccavaṃsa suggests, it follows

then [that] in this *Bhikkhunī-khandhaka* [(Chapter on *Bhikkhunīs*) in the Vinaya-piṭaka], the Buddha saying “*sahassaṃ*” is merely [tantamount to] ‘one thousand,’ it did not imply the [real] quantity. Actually, it is like weighing the pros and cons and [to teach otherwise] is like preaching [based on] an assumption (*parikappa*). The [correct] meaning is if in the event that the *sāsana* will have one thousand [of some ratio], by allowing women to be *bhikkhunīs*, the *sāsana* now will have 500 [according to the same ratio] only. It means that [the given duration] has decreased in half.<sup>66</sup> (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 255–56)

In what we may call a latitudinal interpretation of the root text, Ādiccavaṃsa is claiming that the Buddha was not saying the *sāsana* will only last 500 years compared to 1000 if women had never been ordained, but rather, that it will merely decrease in half, with “1000” a sort of synecdoche for a long period of time, similar to how “10,000” is used as a rounded shorthand for an extremely large quantity in classical South and East Asian texts. Instead of lamenting the fact that women have decreased the life of the *sāsana*, Ādiccavaṃsa’s point is that the Buddha was “weighing the pros and cons” of his decision, such that while the life of the *sāsana* will be decreased by half, it was still worthwhile to admit women because hypothetically, twice as many people will reach nirvana. To Ādiccavaṃsa, this interpretation of the “indefinite” number given in the Pāli canon affords him the freedom to not only increase the lifespan of the *sāsana* beyond 1000 years, but to even transgress the commentarial limit of 5000 years. To claim otherwise and insist on these actual quantities is, in his opinion, to base one’s understanding on an assumption (P. *parikappa*), an assumption that has become crystallized and reified as unimpeachable tradition. It is this very tradition of interpretation that Ādiccavaṃsa is questioning here.



Yet, it is perhaps his reading of the second statement, the Buddha's prediction to Subhadda, that is most critical for Ādiccavaṃsa's argument. According to him, "the word that was preached to Subhad[da] with the saying: 'If these monks completely act according to the intention to live well, the world does not cease to have *arahants*' is the phrase that shows the power of practice"<sup>67</sup> (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 231). Ādiccavaṃsa goes on to explain that according to the interpretation given in the *Milindapañha*, "if there is practice, [the *sāsana*] continues to exist. The fact that the *saṅgha* is keeping [the precepts] and as long as [this practice] does not disappear, it is likely that the noble *sāsana* will continue to exist and be prominent"<sup>68</sup> (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 232). When glossing what he means by practice, Ādiccavaṃsa follows the *Milindapañha* and gives the Pāli word *paṭipatti*, which refers both to the moral life (P. *brahmacariyā*) and training in meditation. Elsewhere in this same passage, Ādiccavaṃsa uses the Burmese word *kyān. vat* (B. ကျင့်ဝတ်), which means "code of conduct; rules of conduct; moral code" (MAA, s.v. *kyān. vat*). The idea of moral practice is the obvious referent here, but by examining the account given in the *Ādiccavaṃsa atthupatti* of Ādiccavaṃsa's argument, we see an orientation towards taking *paṭipatti* as rather more concerned with the practice of meditation. In discussing the Buddha's prediction, Ādiccavaṃsa's biographer writes that

In like manner, after coming to know with all certainly the age of the *sāsana*, that by continuously and correctly keeping all [the Buddha's] teachings of the good *dhamma* (*saddhamma*), we realize again that the *arahant* is incapable of ceasing to exist. Therefore, in this age, there are many people who carry out *paṭipatti* practice to attain nirvana, and [many] are doing so successfully.<sup>69</sup> (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 27)

As reported by the biographer, the force of Ādiccavaṃsa's argument about the longevity of the *sāsana* is not just that the *sāsana* will last longer than 5000 years, but that *arahants*—beings who have reached nirvana according to Theravāda soteriology—still exist today. This interpretation runs counter to the commentarial timeline of *sāsana* decay, which sees the stages of the path culminating in nirvana as increasingly harder if not impossible to obtain as history progresses. Indeed, it is implied in the commentary on the *Ānguttaranikāya*, the *Manorathapūraṇī*, that the ability to reach nirvana will disappear after the first two thousand years after the Buddha's passing (Endo 2013, p. 129). Writing in the middle of the third millennium after the Buddha, Ādiccavaṃsa is flouting the commentarial account of the disappearance of the *sāsana*, suggesting, at least according to his biography, that "if one really acts with [proper] intention and strives in the *paṭipatti* practice of the *vipassanā* [meditation] stages in conformity with the Buddha's teaching, one is able to become not only a stream-entrant (B. သောတာပန် *sotāpan*), a once-returner (B. သာသနာဝါန် *sakadāgām*), or a non-returner (B. အနာဂါမိ *anāgām*), but an *arahant* (B. ရဟန္တာ *rahanta*) in the present" (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 28). We must be cognizant of the fact that Ādiccavaṃsa's biography is coming fifteen years after its subject's passing, and thirty years after the publication of his controversial book, at a time when *vipassanā* has a great deal of political and cultural capital. It is possible that the author of the biography is reading his interpretation back into the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, but given Ādiccavaṃsa's connection with the famous meditation teacher, Myat Kyaw, and his reference to the Mingun Jetavana in support of his arguments, it is not unlikely that Ādiccavaṃsa was influenced by the rise of the mass lay meditation movement when writing his tract to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.<sup>70</sup> In this way, his *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* not only advocates for reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* but for reimagining the whole life course of the *sāsana* according to the "power of practice".

## 10. Opening the Path

After this discussion on Ādiccavaṃsa's *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* and his controversial view of the longevity of the *sāsana*, we are now in a position to return to the animating question of this paper, namely, what is and is not possible in the current *sāsana* age? More to the point of our discussion, the question now becomes, how does a shift in what is possible

motivate the arguments for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*? To understand the connection between the vitality or decline of the *sāsana* and female ordination, we must return to the Mingun Jetavana and the *Milindapañha*. According to the Mingun Jetavana's disciples and those in his lineage, the rise of the lay-centred, mass-meditation movement dramatically transformed the landscape of the Buddha's *sāsana* in twentieth-century Burma. In his biography, Tikkhācāra, explains how he views the role of his teacher in the history of Buddhism:

Now, it is exactly half of *sāsana*, as it is 2500 years after the Buddha's demise. It exactly coincides with the Venerable Mingun [Jetavana] Sayādawgyi's 45-year mission accomplished by rediscovering and revealing the path of mindfulness that has now shone in all directions. It is exactly during half of *sāsana*'s lifespan that [the Mingun Jetavana] rediscovered and revealed the Path [to Nirvana] to the people home and abroad. (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, pp. 129–30)

Note, first of all, the equivocation between the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana here, namely, that the Mingun Jetavana's teaching mission is said to have lasted 45 years, the same length of time ascribed to the Buddha's own period of teaching in the Pāli canon. In making a further parallel between the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana, Tikkhācāra cites a prediction (B. တေတေ၌ *ta bhoṇ*)<sup>71</sup> said to be about his teacher, then offers a poem based on this prediction:

Almost half of *sāsana*, a peerless monk—endowed with great accumulation of merit and with profound wisdom powerful like *the weapon of diamond*—will appear on earth in the same way as Venerable Moggaliputta [from the *Kathāvatthu*] and Venerable Nāgasena [from the *Milindapañha*].

He would set up the victory flag at the tip of the raft sailing it to [nirvana]. Anybody wishing to follow him should shine the light of mindfulness-based wisdom removing the darkness of delusion. Hypothetically, he may be on this planet just to represent the Buddha himself. (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 130) (emphasis in original)

At this point, it is important to note that this biography is not to be taken as an accurate portrayal of the life of the Mingun Jetavana, with its obviously mythic portrayal of its subject. Instead, I want to suggest something even more provocative, following Houtman: this biography is to be taken as an encapsulated history of the *sāsana* itself. Indeed, in the Burmese context, there is a certain “fuzziness” when it comes to demarcating the history of a single individual and the history of the *sāsana* in general (Houtman 1997, p. 312). This fuzziness means that the history of the *sāsana* often collapses into and is reflected by the life of an individual, which is precisely what is seen in this biography of the Mingun Jetavana from 1957. By thus deploying and reinterpreting predictions around the half-way point of the Buddha's *sāsana*, his biographer and community of monastic and lay meditators elevate the Mingun Jetavana to the position of Nāgasena, who was reborn in human form to solve the dilemmas of King Milinda and protect the *sāsana* for future generations. Yet, even more than this, the Mingun Jetavana's biography positions him as a stand-in for the Buddha, a crucial claim because in this position, part of the Mingun Jetavana's mission is not just to spread the practice of *vipassanā* meditation, but also to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*—just as the Buddha did when first ordaining Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. Hence, like Nāgasena in the *Milindapañha*, the Mingun Jetavana is a surrogate for the Buddha himself, with his actions having epic ramifications for the *sāsana* in the centuries and millennia to come.

Aside from the equivalency set up between the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana, what is also evident from the above biographical narratives-cum-history is that for praxis-based communities in mid-twentieth-century Burma, *vipassanā* had opened up a new era in the history of the *sāsana*, “revealing the Path to Nirvana” in the words of Tikkhācāra. This path is one in which people, both monastic and lay, could now attain stages of enlightenment previously thought to be out of reach this far removed from the enlightenment experience of the Buddha. The Mingun Jetavana mentions as much in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*

when he is arguing for the revival of the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha*, writing that “the true *dhamma* of spiritual attainments (*paṭivedha*) will last five thousand years,”<sup>72</sup> meaning that the higher stages of the path are still possible in his own time, not just the pursuit of learning (*P. pariyatti*) or the outward signs of the religion (*P. līṅga-dhamma*).<sup>73</sup> Ādiccavaṃsa clearly agrees, citing the Ledi Sayadaw’s observation that there are no canonical teachings that preclude the possibility of attaining the states of total absorption or the higher forms of knowledge at present (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 232). Another prominent group that upheld the twentieth-century rejuvenation of the *sāsana*’s vitality is the meditation community that developed around U Ba Khin (ဦးဃဇင် ၏ Ba khañ, 1899–1971) and which traces itself back to the Ledi Sayadaw. Daniel Stuart explains that U Ba Khin held the view that two and a half millennia after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, which was celebrated in Burma in 1954, “the clock of *vipassanā* ha[d] struck” (Stuart 2022, p. 116), meaning that the *sāsana* had entered an era of liberation (ဝိမုတ္တိခေတ် *vimutti khet*) where practitioners of *vipassanā* could once again attain to the highest stages of the Theravāda path (Stuart 2022, p. 115). According to U Ba Khin, “[t]he *Vimutti* Era is the first 500 years that come after [the first] 2500 years of the *sāsana*. The current time ([i.e., the mid-twentieth century]) is included in the *Vimutti* Era, and so people should practice meditation” (Stuart 2022, p. 115 fn. 205). By this reckoning, then, the era of liberation would last from approximately 1954 to 2454, a remarkable claim that contrasts sharply with the views of more conservative elements of Theravāda Buddhism who adhere to the timeline of decay outlined in the Pāli commentaries.<sup>74</sup> Yet, such optimistic viewpoints in the *vimutti khet* were becoming increasingly widespread throughout the course of the twentieth century, for in the words of Jordt, “there was social recognition of a corps of enlightened lay people whose status in penultimate terms marked them as a different class of beings altogether” (Jordt 2005, p. 49). Indeed, it was commonly accepted that there were millions of people in Burma who had, since the early 1950s, reached varying levels of enlightenment through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation (Jordt 2005, p. 48). The majority of these were lay people, and the majority of these lay people were women. In this way, “[t]he mass lay meditation movement has had the greatest significance for women because it has provided women with an alternative institution for practice, one that permits them access to the highest goals and achievements in the religion” (Jordt 2005, p. 50).

This demographic trend was not lost on the Mingun Jetavana, especially because many of his foremost disciples were female. For instance, there is Daw Kusala who practiced under the Mingun Jetavana as a lay women from 1909, eventually becoming a *thilashin* (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 124). Somewhat remarkable for a *thilashin*, who tend to focus more on scriptural learning than meditation (Htay Htay Lwin. 2013. *Nuns in Myanmar Buddhism*, p. 64), Daw Kusala “established a meditation center where she had been teaching *vipassanā* meditation for almost 40 years. Even some monks practiced under her guidance. Thus she was a highly respected [meditation teacher]” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 124). Though not disciples of the Mingun Jetavana directly, Htay Htay Lwin also mentions several other prominent *thilashin vipassanā* teachers, such as Daw Kummāri from Ayemyo Nunnery, who wrote the *Nibbāna-pavesanī kyaṃḥi* (*Treatise on the Entry into Nirvana*) in 1927 on how to practice meditation (Htay Htay Lwin. 2013. *Nuns in Myanmar Buddhism*, p. 83).<sup>75</sup> With such honoured and presumably high-ranking female meditation teachers and practitioners, the possibility naturally arises that some of these women could achieve the ultimate fruit of Theravāda soteriology, that of becoming an *arahant*. As Jordt explains, with the rise of the *vipassanā* movement and the dawn of the *vimutti khet*, “enlightenment itself [was] no longer seen as the exclusive purview of the [male monastic] sangha” (Jordt 2005, p. 59). Herein lies the tension that people like the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, I argue, were trying to address in their push for the ordination of women as *bhikkhunis*: being a female, defined de facto as outside of the *sāsana*, does not fundamentally bar one from becoming an *arahant*, especially as *vipassanā* opened up a window of increased soteriological potentialities. Yet, as Jordt has aptly questioned, why are there then virtually no reports of female *arahants* in Burma, despite their obvious

proficiency as lay meditators, and despite the “rather strong tradition of women anāgāmi (third stage enlightened beings)” in the country (Jordt 2005, p. 58)?<sup>76</sup>

The answer might lie, not surprisingly at this point in our discussion, in another two-pronged question in the *Milindapañha*. There is a passage in which King Milinda puts to Nāgasena the following dilemma: “Venerable Nāgasena, your people say: ‘Whosoever has attained, as a layman, to Arahantship, one of the two conditions are possible to him, and no other—either that very day he enters the [monastic] Order, or he dies away, for beyond that day he cannot last’”<sup>77</sup> (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1894] 1963, II:96). This quote attributed to the canon, as the translator T.W. Rhys Davids signals in a footnote, is so far untraced in any extant material, meaning that it only survives in this text. Yet, given that the *Milindapañha* is included in the Pāli canon in Burma, the above dilemma cannot be so easily dismissed. As John Frank Brohm shows, it’s prescription even caused some tense moments in lay-meditation centres, as the following story from the 1950s illustrates: “Two young men were observed who had received their ordinations in great haste because they were adjudged to have achieved arahantship as laymen (adjudged, that is, by members of their meditational group). It was said that the layman who accomplishes such a rare and remarkable feat must enter the monkhood quickly ‘or die’” (Brohm 1957, p. 352). A similar anecdote from the translation of the *Selected Discourses of the Webu Sayadaw* concerns U Ba Khin, Chairmen of the Subcommittee for Paṭipatti at the Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Association (ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာနဂ္ဂဟအဖွဲ့. *Buddha sāsana nuggaha aphvāi*.) during the parliamentary period. In this role, U Ba Khin was receiving numerous reports from meditation centres throughout the country claiming “that there were a large number of Path and Fruition State winners ranging from teenage girls to elderly people”, which caused great concern amongst the “popular Pāli scholars” and government officials who formed the subcommittee (Bischoff 2003, p. 33). The inclusion of “teenage girls” in the lists of meditators reaching the highest stages of *vipassanā* practice must have been especially alarming to those on the subcommittee, since it upended both the lay-monastic and male-female divide in Burmese Buddhist soteriological hierarchies. We can only guess how many times similar events played out at places like the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha (“Meditation Centre of the Mahasi Order”) (B. မဟာစည် သာသနာ့ ရိပ်သာ *mahācaññ sāsana. rip sā*), where a lay person was deemed an *arahant* and forced to ordain as a monastic. Indeed, with almost a million people conventionally acknowledged to have achieved one of the stages of enlightenment since the founding of the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha, the numbers suggest that more than a few lay people have been recognized as *arahants* over the decades, a social fact regardless of whether such designations are valid or not. While this is a scenario that poses no existential problem for men, who have a pathway towards ordination and can choose to continue living as *arahants*, what about for women and the “teenage girls” mentioned above?

As the Panditarama Sayadaw (ပဏ္ဍိတာရာမ ဆရာတော် Paṇḍitārāma Cha rā tau, 1921–2016; hereafter the Pandita), a disciple of the Mahasi Sayadaw (မဟာစည် ဆရာတော် Mahācaññ Cha rā tau, also known as ဦး သောဘနံ Ṫh Sobhana, 1904–1982) and thus in the “teaching” lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, explains, “[h]aving eradicated craving, the arahat can continue to exist only if he is supported in the robes. Lay life requires motivations and actions that an arahat is no longer capable of experiencing in his psychophysical process. Accepting the food and resources of the laity make the extension of his life possible” (Jordt 2005, p. 59). Here, then, is a contemporary explanation of the passage found in the *Milindapañha*, one that Nāgasena himself does not offer but which accords to the *saṅgha*-centric paradigm of neoconservative Burmese Theravāda. A layman who reaches *arahantship* might not have the desire or “biological” drive to live but can enter into the merit economy as a monk and, out of compassion, become a rarefied field of merit for lay donors. In contrast, women, without the option of higher ordination (at least according to one view), cannot rely on such support from the laity and “thus have no [such] material institutions that could support them in this [enlightened] embodiment” (Jordt 2005, p. 59). In the absence of officially sanctioned higher ordination, “if a woman today attains arahatship”, according to the Pandita, “she will take her *parinibbāna* (full Nibbāna) within



seven days” (Jordt 2005, p. 59). In other words, because a woman cannot enter into the *sāsana* as a monastic and become a worthy field of merit, upon reaching the highest stage of the Theravāda path through *vipassanā* meditation, she must surely perish within seven days, just as Nāgasena demands (though for him, it would be within the same day). Such an explanation from a mainstream monastic scholar like the Pandita explains why there are no known accounts of female *arahants* in twentieth-century Burma: because if they did reach this stage, which is principally possible, they have prematurely perished before word spread of their achievement.

It is therefore not difficult to see the glaring asymmetry here: in principle, women have as much potential as men to achieve the highest stages of meditation practice but doing so would lead to their early demise. Thus, despite the sophisticated and detailed textual arguments put forth by the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, I submit that it is this asymmetry that ultimately catalyzed their advocacy. To support this conclusion, upon interviewing a high-ranking monastic figure in the lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, I was told that the primary reason he pushed for the ordination of women was because of the Mingun Jetavana’s compassion for his *thilashin* and lay women disciples, facing the prospect of perishing if they were to become *arahants* through *vipassanā* practice under his watch. Though this admission could not be found in print, such a rationale given by present-day members of his lineage demonstrates that the Mingun Jetavana’s actions are interpreted through the dilemmatic question about lay *arahants* in the *Milindapañha*, an *ubhato-koṭika pañha* that sits uncomfortably with the twentieth-century belief in the *vimutti khet*. Able to attest to their ability in meditation himself and promoting his *vipassanā* method as one that could lead to nirvana in the present age of *sāsana* vitality, the Mingun Jetavana thus saw it as his role as a teacher to clear a path for women who had perfected themselves through practice. To argue for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was simply consistent with his larger program, a logical conclusion following his formulation of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, his creation of the first set of meditation centers, and his teaching of lay women and *thilashins*. In a sense, then, the Mingun Jetavana merely unleashed the “power of practice” mentioned by Ādiccavaṃsa’s biography, a power which, when combined with the widespread belief in the *vimutti khet*, created a set of paradoxes in Burmese Buddhist culture that could not be addressed by textual arguments alone.

## 11. Conclusions

At issue in this paper was the relationship between exegetical methods of interpretation and models of *sāsana* history in mid-twentieth-century Burmese debates around female higher ordination. For ultraorthodox legalists in the monastic hierarchy of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism, the impossibility of re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is a simple matter of reading the Pāli canon as is. This view is premised on a carefully crafted neoconservative self-image, one in which a literalist interpretation of the Vinayaṭṭakā is the only valid reading, regardless of how the soteriological potential of women has changed over the course of the *sāsana*’s unfolding in the twentieth century. In the case of the Mingun Jetavana, a pioneer of the mass lay meditation movement, he uses the same set of texts to make the opposite argument, thereby demonstrating that the literalist reading of conservative legalists is in fact the product of a localized, tempered hermeneutical regime. While it was not my intention to adjudicate between these different views, the argument of the Mingun Jetavana also makes use of its own hermeneutical regime, but one that, through the concept of methods handed down for future monks, the Mingun Jetavana locates in the very mind of the Buddha. By invoking the epistemology of the *abhiññās* in his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana claims that when laying down the rules around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* in the Vinayaṭṭakā, the Buddha used his knowledge of the future to behold the full arc of *sāsana* history. For the Mingun Jetavana, this vista of omniscience prompted the Buddha to embed a degree of flexibility when it came to the interaction between supplementary and root regulations around the higher ordination of women. It is the special and provocative conceit of the Mingun Jetavana, known by his later disciples as a *buddhamataññū*, that he is

the one capable of performing a reverse prolepsis, working his way back from the present to intuit the intention of the Buddha through his commentary on the *Milindapañha*.

Ādiccavaṃsa too uses the *Milindapañha* to argue for re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. While Ādiccavaṃsa's argument is essentially the same as that of the Mingun Jetavana, we see by examining the former's biography that Ādiccavaṃsa was not only challenging the monastic hierarchy's stance on bringing back higher ordination for women, but their view of the history of the *sāsana* from which women were axiomatically excluded. In this way, Ādiccavaṃsa reframed the discussion from one of *sāsana* decline, to one of *sāsana* vitality, a vitality based on the power of *vipassanā* practice. By examining the broader motivations of Ādiccavaṃsa as found in his biography, we were able to recognize that the same reconceptualization of *sāsana* history was at play in the Mingun Jetavana's thinking. For the Mingun Jetavana and other praxis-based communities in the middle of the twentieth century, the dawn of the *vimutti khet* meant that it was possible to once more achieve the highest stages of the Theravāda path, an emancipatory promise open to women as much as men. The situation, however, clearly led to a paradox, a two-pronged question much like those found in the *Milindapañha*. On the one hand, lay women are patently capable of reaching the highest stage of the Theravāda path, especially in the dawn of the *vimutti khet*; on the other hand, without an officially sanctioned means to enter into the history of the *sāsana* through the process of *upasampadā*, a female practitioner faces the prospect of prescriptive death once having achieved the state of *arahantship*, at least according to the *Milindapañha* added to the Pāli canon in the nineteenth century. It is thus not surprising that both Ādiccavaṃsa and the Mingun Jetavana present their arguments for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* using the very same text, the *Milindapañha*, not only because of its newly minted canonical status, but because this text is the quintessential site for working out the paradoxes found in the utterances ascribed to the Buddha spread across the Pāli canon. In this case, Ādiccavaṃsa and the Mingun Jetavana deploy the *Milindapañha*'s analyses of apparently contradictory statements of the Buddha to mediate between accretions of textual interpretation and the fluid cultural landscape of Theravāda soteriology in the twentieth century.

In her own assessment of the Burmese debates about re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-sāsana* in the first half of the twentieth century, Kawanami suggests that “[m]any of the early initiatives to revive the *bhikkhunīs* have been instigated by educated monks and ambitious individuals who saw the need to introduce modern values of equality, justice and progress” into the *saṅgha* (Kawanami 2007, p. 242).<sup>78</sup> This crucial observation is especially apt for someone like Ādiccavaṃsa, who as we saw, was a liberal reformer in his approach to Buddhism. Yet, I have tried to show in this paper that there is another, equally important aspect to such efforts. The impetus for this paper was the question of what is and what is not possible in the present age of *sāsana* decline. For the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, this question directly impinges on the spiritual capacity of women. Indeed, the Mingun Jetavana was interested not only in re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, but in reprising the *bhikkhunī-sāsana* more broadly, a co-equal but alternative means of salvation for half of the population. In principle, there is no distinction between male and female in the history of the *sāsana*, but in cultural, social, and exegetical practice, the difference is paramount. Additionally, this difference between principal and practice is precisely the Mingun Jetavana's point, that an attention to the role of practice in the *sāsana*'s longevity makes the renewal of the co-equal and parallel *bhikkhunī-sāsana* an imperative. More than just an imperative, we might further argue that for the Mingun Jetavana, leveraging his concept of *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayas*, the changing soteriological landscape of the *vimutti khet* was itself foreseen by the Buddha. The goal of the Mingun Jetavana as he understood it was thus to bring the interpretation of the rules around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* in line with his own model of *sāsana* history, one that was becoming increasingly popular in Burmese society. In this way, we see the connection between competing models of *sāsana* history and different methods of interpretation in the debates about reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.

What side one comes down on may depend largely on how one understands and models the decline, or rather, the vitality of the *sāsana*.

By thus invoking the *abhiññās* in his argument and claiming that the Buddha knew the future which has become our present, the Mingun Jetavana raises and reveals the stakes of the debate around the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. For at issue is nothing less than the nature of the Vinayapiṭaka, or more accurately, the relationship between the Vinayapiṭaka and history. Schonthal points to the same stakes at play in efforts around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* over the last three decades in Sri Lanka: on the one hand, there is a conception of the Vinayapiṭaka as “a contemporary text used by Buddhist monks”, one where the intentions of the Buddha have, for practical reasons, been imperfectly “filtered through the corrupting frame of tradition (*sampradaya*)” (Schonthal 2018, p. 24); on the other hand, the Vinayapiṭaka represents “an ideal and timeless set of procedures and disciplinary norms existing before and outside of tradition” that operate beyond the vagaries of local hermeneutical regimes (Schonthal 2018, p. 24). It is to this second sense of the Vinayapiṭaka, as ideal and timeless, that the Mingun Jetavana is committed, while conservative legalists are more beholden to their localized hermeneutical regimes, despite their literalist interpretive methods. Ironically, it is his “timeless” approach to the Vinayapiṭaka that allows the Mingun Jetavana to apply and adapt this set of texts to the exigencies of his own historical moment. Yet, if we recall once again the blurred line between biography and history pointed out by Houtman and apparent in the biographical sources used in this paper, it becomes apparent that Burmese debates around the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* are so charged not just because of what they imply about the nature of the Vinayapiṭaka, nor because they involve what is and is not possible in the current age of the *sāsana*. Rather, these debates provoked such a fierce reaction from the monastic hierarchy because below the surface, they are about the ways the *sāsana* manifests in time, space, and society. In this sense, by upholding the transcendence of the Vinayapiṭaka, the Mingun Jetavana is simultaneously asserting that the *sāsana* is eminently immanent, embodied in the utterances of the Buddha, in the texts he left behind, but ultimately, in the current practice of both monks and nuns.

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## Abbreviations

A	<i>Aṅguttaranikāya</i>
Bhv	<i>Bhikkhunī vinicchaya cā tamh</i> (ဘိက္ခုနီဝိနိစ္ဆယစာတမ်း) [Record of the Bhikkhunī Decision]
Bio	<i>Buddhamataññu — aṭṭhakathā kyamh̐ pru kyeh̐ jūh̐ rhañ — mūla maiñh̐ kvañh̐ Jetavan cha rā tau bhu rāñ kriñh̐ *e theruppetti</i> (ဗုဒ္ဓမတညု—အဋ္ဌကထာကျမ်းပြု ကျေးဇူးရှင်—မူလမင်းကွန်း ဇေတဝန် ဆရာတော် ဘုရားကြီး၏ ထေရုပ္ပတ္တိ) [One Who Knows the Intention of the Buddha—Benefactor [Who] Composed Commentar[ies]—Biography of the Most Venerable Mūla Mingun Jetavan Sayādawgyi: A Pālī Commentator]
Bu	<i>Bhikkhunī Sāsanopadesa</i> (ဘိက္ခုနီ သာသနောပဒေသ) [Instruction on the Sāsana of Nuns]
Cone	<i>A Dictionary of Pāli</i>
D	<i>Dīghanikāya</i>
M	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
MAA	<i>Mran mā-aṅga lip abhidhān</i> (မြန်မာ-အင်္ဂလိပ် အဘိဓာန်) [Myanmar-English Dictionary]
Mil-a	<i>Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Mil-ṭ	<i>Milindapañhā-ṭikā</i>
Paṭṭh	<i>Paṭṭhāna</i>
Vin	<i>Vinayapiṭaka</i>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Also known as “Myanmar” since 1989, I shall employ the colonial-era term in this paper since most of the material to which I refer comes from the early to mid-twentieth century.
- <sup>2</sup> For foreign-language words and terms, “P” indicates that what follows is a Pāli word and “B” means the word given is Burmese, which is often a vernacularized version of the Pāli. Burmese script will be supplied for Burmese words, terms, and names followed by a transliteration according to the simplified system of Lammerts and Griffiths. An exception will be made for the names of Burmese authors who write in English and supply their own transcription of their names. Pāli words will be given according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration.
- <sup>3</sup> The Burmese word “sayadaw” is an honorific title literally meaning either “royal teacher” or “holy teacher”. Gustaaf Houtman suggests that this title was popularized during the time of King Mindon and eventually became the moniker for “monks who are either over 10 years in monkhood, or are in charge of their own monasteries, in which case, it can be interpreted to mean simply ‘abbot’” (Houtman 1990b, p. 278). As this title is very common, it will not be maintained in this paper after its first usage. In contrast, “Mingun” is a Burmese toponymical title which refers to the name of a place in Sagaing Township on the west bank of the Ayeyarwady River across from Mandalay. “Jetavana” is a Pāli toponym that describes “Jeta’s grove” where the Buddha was said to have resided for long periods of time during his lifetime, and is usually associated with more isolated, forest monasteries further from urban centres. In this case, “Jetavana” is one part of the name of the monastery in the town of Mingun over which the Mingun Jetavana presided, hence it is necessary to use these two titles in combination to signal the specific monk being referenced here, especially because there is another, more famous monk known simply as the “Mingun Sayadaw” who was junior to the Mingun Jetavana (see page 20 in this paper). The ordination name of the Mingun Jetavana, “Uḥ Nārada”, is also unsuitable for this paper, since it is much more common and does not signal the high status afforded this individual. As “Mingun Jetavana” is a title, it will be used together with its article, in the same way one would use “the” for “the Archbishop of Canterbury”. When there is an absence of the article “the”, this signals that the ordination name of the individual in question is being used, such as in the case of “Ādiccavamsa”.
- <sup>4</sup> The *abhiññās* are usually associated not with the practice of *vipassanā*, which underlies the mass lay meditation movement in twentieth-century Burma, but with the practice of calming (P. *samatha*) meditation. Despite the Mingun Jetavana’s method being known as “pure *vipassanā*” (P. *suddha-vipassanāyānika*) (Tin Than Myint 2008, p. 8), the Mingun Jetavana was meticulously focused on the *abhiññās* in the first chapter of his *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, and there are numerous anecdotes associating the *abhiññās* with if not the Mingun Jetavana personally, then with figures in his practice lineage, raising questions about the relationship between *vipassanā*, the states of total absorption (P. *jhānas*), and the *abhiññās* in early-twentieth-century discourses about meditation in Burma.
- <sup>5</sup> Htay Htay Lwin surveys in her dissertation epigraphic evidence from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries in Bagan that lists the names of several *bhikkhunīs* alongside prominent *bhikkhus* (Htay Htay Lwin. 2013. *Nuns in Myanmar Buddhism*, pp. 10–12). In the late thirteenth century, a series of (possible) Mongol invasions, “highly destructive Shan incursions”, unchecked growth in tax-free religious wealth, the end of the “Medieval Climate Anomaly”, and a shift in maritime trade networks began to unravel the political centralization of Bagan (Lieberman 2003, pp. 119–23). As a result, Buddhism entered what Htay Htay Lwin calls a “Dark Age”, during which time members of the *saṅgha* struggled to survive without centralized political support (Htay Htay Lwin. 2013. *Nuns in Myanmar Buddhism*, p. 14). Though not much is known about the presence or absence of *bhikkhunīs* during this period of fragmentation, the implication is that they disappeared from the territory now called “Burma” as a result of these



large-scale changes and political upheaval. Bhikkhu Anālayo, referring to similar political circumstances in South Asia, asserts that the *bhikkhuni-sāsana* disappeared after the eleventh century “when during a period of political turmoil the entire monastic community in Sri Lanka was decimated. To the best of our knowledge, at that time no bhikkhunīs were in existence elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia” (Anālayo 2017, p. 9). This statement, however, does not disaggregate the situation between the two regions, with the exact timing or circumstances of the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha*’s disappearance in Burma unknown at present. With the appearance of “*thilashin*” and similar titles in the historical record after the thirteenth century, it is possible there was not so much an “extinction” as a gradual transition from the state of *bhikkhuni* to a more ambiguous status as semi- or non-ordained female renunciants.

6 After passing some of the most elite scriptural exams in Burma, Saccavādī travelled to Sri Lanka to obtain a master’s degree in Buddhist Studies, becoming “involved in the movement to reinstate the bhikkhunīs as it unfolded” in real time on the island (Kawanami 2007, p. 232). Eventually she received a dual ordination (P. *ubhato-saṅghe upasampadā*) from both sides of the sangha, with her upasampadā ceremony overseen by “12 monks from different countries led by [Talalle] Dhammāloka” from Sri Lanka and “12 bhikkhuni born in Sri Lanka led by Khemācārī” (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 206). In this way, Saccavādī attempted higher ordination through the two-side method, with both monks and nuns. When Saccavādī re-entered Burma, she was “summoned by the monastic authorities for questioning” in May 2005 and imprisoned for blasphemy under sections 295 and 295(a) of the criminal code, ostensibly for undressing before the state-backed monastic council after being made to change out of her brown bhikkhuni robes (Kawanami 2007, pp. 233–34). As the authorities interpreted the situation, Saccavādī was not a proper *bhikkhuni*, because even though she received higher ordination from Theravāda monks, the nuns who also acted as preceptors where not legitimate in the eyes of the Burmese monastic hierarchy, having received their ordination from a Mahāyāna lineage.

7 There was also an earlier ordination ceremony in Sarnath, India, in December of 1996, “when ten Sri Lankan women were ordained as bhikkhunīs by Sri Lankan monks from the Mahābodhi Society assisted by Korean monks and nuns” (Bodhi 2010, p. 99).

8 For this type of assessment, see Anālayo (2017), who argues that this view held by conservative legalists in Burma and elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia does not attend to the narrative logic of the Vinayaṭṭaka, and implies a degree of carelessness by the Buddha when laying down the different rules behind *bhikkhuni-upasampadā* (Anālayo 2017, p. 21). In this article, Anālayo assumes a “legal reading” himself (Anālayo 2017, p. 13), thereby arguing against the conservative view on the same terms as someone like Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa. This is not the approach I am taking in this article, which tries to understand the historiography of different interpretations of the Vinayaṭṭaka on this issue, without debating the admittedly important details of the Vinayaṭṭaka itself.

9 The “previous [vernacular] literature” that Crosby et al. have in mind concerns the forms of meditation they refer to collectively as *boran kammaṭṭhāna*, or “old-style meditation”, which is based on Abhidhamma theory but also has tantric-like characteristics borrowed from generative grammar, pre-modern obstetrics, and Ayurvedic notions of the body. Unlike *vipassanā*, where the goal is more to transform the mind or mental landscape of the practitioner, *borān kammaṭṭhāna* seeks to transform the whole body of the individual to resemble the enlightened body of the Buddha.

10 I am grateful to Ryosuke Kuramoto for pointing out the importance of the meditation centre in the revival of *vipassanā* meditation in Burma, personal communication, March 2020.

11 While there were likely sites used for various forms of practice inside monasteries or other places in the centuries before, the centre established by the Mingun Jetavana was unique as a non-monastic site dedicated to the intense practice of *vipassanā*, where lay women and men could assume the role of quasi-monastics alongside monks, supported by donations and without the supposedly burdensome responsibilities of domestic life to distract from their vocation.

12 Rachele Saruya explains that the *Sukumāramaggadīpanī* is a “short text of 86 pages and outlines basic rules and regulations” for non-ordained Buddhists in Pāli with glosses in Burmese, and includes recitations, devotional formulas, wish verses, and so on (Saruya 2020, p. 159).

13 The two texts on which the Mingun Jetavana commented, the *Peṭakopadesa* and the *Milindapañha*, were both added to the Pāli canon only in Burma, as the last two books of the *Khuddakanikāya*, from at least the Fifth Buddhist Council of King Mindon (မင်းတုန်းမင်း: Maṇḍi tunḥi maṇḥi r. 1853–1878) in 1871. They are not considered canonical in other Theravāda countries, a crucial point that will be readdressed later in this paper.

14 There is a hierarchy of commentarial forms, beginning with the *aṭṭhakathā* and followed by the subcommentaries (P. *ṭīkā*s) (von Hinüber 2000, p. 100), which are themselves commentaries on the *aṭṭhakathās* (or alternatively, commentaries on texts not originally deemed canonical, see K.R. Norman (1983, p. 194)). The *aṭṭhakathās* are traced by the Theravāda tradition to the time of the Buddha, but text-critical scholarship has shown that they are the product of several historical layers of editing, addition, and translation from Pāli into local vernacular languages. This process came to a head with the “school of Buddhaghosa”, as Cousins has phrased it (Cousins 2013, p. 390), a project in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E. by the Mahāvīhāra in the island of Lanka to render the available *aṭṭhakathā* material from Old Sinhalese in Pāli, which was also a process of editing, compilation, redaction, and textual criticism (see von Hinüber 2013). The *aṭṭhakathās* were so fundamental to the development of the Mahāvīhāra, which eventually became the Theravāda of today, that Endo suggests it might be better to refer to the Theravāda as “the Buddhism that Buddhaghosa upheld” (Endo 2013, p. 190).

- 15 The reason for this five-century margin is because the relative dating for the commentary on the *Apadāna*, the *Visuddhajanavilāsini*, ranges from 1000 to 1500 C.E. (von Hinüber 2000, p. 149). The *Visuddhajanavilāsini* is unknown to all previous commentators and is probably the last instance of an *aṭṭhakathā* commentary until the early twentieth century. Even more remarkably, Oskar von Hinüber (following Bechert 1958, p. 20) suggests that it could have been “composed in Southeast Asia” (von Hinüber 2000, p. 147).
- 16 Giving his commentaries the title of “*aṭṭhakathās*” is partly a matter of semantics but is not without significance. Indeed, when the Burmese monk Bhaddanta Kumārābhivamsa published a *de facto* *aṭṭhakathā* to the *Therī-apadāna* in 1992, a less provocative title of “*Therī-apadāna-dīpanī*” was chosen by the State Sangha Mahanāyaka Council, even though it is declared triumphantly in the introduction of this text that “with this work, the commentaries of all the fifteen texts of the Khuddaka-nikāya are now complete” (Obhāsabhivamsa 2009, p. xvi). Using “*dīpanī*” instead of “*aṭṭhakathā*” is to take much less of a presumptive position vis-à-vis the Pāli textual tradition. I must thank Chris Clark for bringing this text to my attention and sharing with me its introduction.
- 17 As Sodō Mori (1998) points out, there are at least three forms for the title of this text found in printed editions and manuscripts, with the most common in modern editions being the stem form in the masculine, the *Milindapañha*. Peter Skilling explains how the title *Milindapañhā*, with the long-ā, is most common in the Thai recensions, which could be either nominative, masculine plural or nominative, feminine singular (Skilling 2010, p. 5). Eng Jin Ooi confirms that for the Burmese manuscripts he has surveyed, the title with the long-ā is also found, “roughly” concluding, based on these and two Laotian manuscripts, that “the long ‘ā’ form is a common feature in the mainland of South-East Asia especially in the Tai speaking region” (Eng Jin Ooi 2021, p. 103). In this paper, I will follow the convention of modern printed editions and use “*Milindapañha*” in the masculine stem form when referring to the root text, but will follow the Mingun Jetavana’s lead and use the long-ā form “*Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*” when referring to his commentary. This strategy both respects the convention of philological study while also signalling that there is diversity in the textual recensions and commentarial constellation around the root text. For more on this issue of variations in the spelling of the root text, see Mori (1998, p. 291 fn. 1) and Eng Jin Ooi (2021, pp. 100–5).
- 18 In his introduction to the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, Deshpande translates *naya* as “doctrines” (Deshpande 1999, p. 7). While this rendering gets at part of the way the Mingun Jetavana is using this concept, *naya* is perhaps more accurately translated as “method”, or even, “methods of interpretation” (Cone, s.v. *naya*), which captures the fact that the Mingun Jetavana is using this concept to adjudicate between apparently contradictory statements made by the Buddha, as a hermeneutic tool to decide how best to proceed in the present based on the Buddha’s intention in the past. It is thus not so much a doctrine as an exegetical tool.
- 19 *iddhividhaññālābhi pi bahulo na hoti/dibbasotaññālābhi pi bahulo na hoti/cetopariyaññālābhi [...] pubbenivāsaññālābhi [...] dibbacakkhuññālābhi [...] anāgataṃsaññālābhi [...] yathākammūpagaññālābhi pi bahulo na hoti/appako va hoti/maggasamaṅgiko pi phalasamaṅgiko pi appako va hoti* (Mil-a 7,<sup>7–12</sup>). Note that all pages and line numbers to the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* refer not to the original 1949 edition in Burmese script, but to the 1999 transliterated edition by Deshpande.
- 20 This sevenfold enumeration overlaps with but expands on the six higher forms of knowledge (P. *chalābhiññās*) supplied in many authoritative Pāli and Sanskrit accounts of the *abhiññās*. For instance, the *locus classicus* of the *chalābhiññās* is found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (Discourse on the Fruits of the Homeless Life) of the *Dīghanikāya*, where the Buddha begins with the knowledge of the various superpowers (P. *iddhividha-ñāṇa*), then the sphere of the divine ear (P. *dibbasota-dhātu*), the knowledge of others’ minds (P. *cetopariya-ñāṇa*), the knowledge of recollecting previous lives (P. *pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa*), the knowledge of the falling away and coming into existence of beings (P. *sattānaṃ cutūpapāta-ñāṇa*), and the knowledge of the destruction of the cankers (P. *āsavaakkhaya-ñāṇa*). Patrick Pranke explains that these *chalābhiññās* can be understood as an “elaboration” of a scheme in the earliest strata of the Pāli canon, the three knowledges (P. *tevijja*), which consists of the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, and the *āsavaakkhaya-ñāṇa* (Pranke 2004, p. 8). The addition of the knowledge of the future, which is key to the Mingun Jetavana’s argument for the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, is perhaps inspired by a reading of the *Paṭṭhāna* (Conditional Relations), the final book of the Abhidhammapiṭaka, where the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* is given last in a list of the higher forms of knowledge enumerated according to the strong-dependence condition (P. *upanissāya-paccaya*) (see Paṭṭh II 165,<sup>33–166,<sup>5</sup></sup>).
- 21 It is worth noting, as Bhikkhunī Kusuma points out, that “[n]owhere except in the *Cullavagga* is there any indication that the decline of the Buddha’s teachings would occur as a result of the institution of the *bhikkhunī* order” (Kusuma 2000, p. 10), while even Buddhaghosa obliquely disagrees in his gloss on this passage, eventually extending the age of the *sāsana* to 5000 years. For his part, Anālayo claims that it is “probable” that this statement “originated as part of the narrative regarding the convocation of the first *saṅgīti*”, or mass recitation of the Pāli texts, which was convened because of the anxiety about the future viability of the *sāsana* (Anālayo 2017, p. 11). He goes on to suggest that over “the course of the transmission of the texts”, this negative sentiment in regard to the initial establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was “turned into statements made by the Buddha himself” (Anālayo 2017, p. 11).
- 22 *ayaṃ pana imasmiṃ ca pañhe anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ nayo dinno nāma hoti/ko esa anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ dinmanayo nāma* (Mil-a 195,<sup>7–8</sup>). All the translations from the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* are my own, but I must thank Christoph Emmrich and Bryan Levman for their tireless help in revising my translations. A translation of the section on reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* was also made by Bhikkhu Bodhi as an appendix to his 2010 article, pages 135–42, which I did not use for my initial translation, but found helpful in the places pointed out in these endnotes. I especially found his footnotes helpful in trying to understand some of the more obscure passages.
- 23 *anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetum* (Mil-a 195,<sup>8–9</sup>). The Mingun Jetavana takes this quote from Vin II 257,<sup>7–8</sup>.

- 24 *dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatoṣaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā* (Mil-a 195,<sup>9–11</sup>). The Mingun Jetavana takes this quote from Vin II 255,<sup>19–20</sup>.
- 25 For more on the *garudhammas*, see Ute Hüsken (2010).
- 26 Anālayo points out that after comparison with texts from other *vinaya* lineages, this particular *garudhamma* appears to have “gone through a change of wording”, especially because the “reference to both communities is not found in all versions”, with some extant sources mentioning only the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* (Anālayo 2017, p. 12). The historical layering of these rules is an important point, but not one considered by the Mingun Jetavana when making his argument.
- 27 *dvinnamī vacanānam attho ekenekena vacanena dīpito upasampādetabbamātugāmo yeva hoti* (Mil-a 195,<sup>18–19</sup>)
- 28 *eko upasampādetabbamātugāmo bhikkhusaṅghena upasampādetabbo/eko upasampādetabbamātugāmo ubhatoṣaṅgena upasampādetabbo ti micchāvādīnamī micchāvādādīpanattham tesam adhippāyam gahetvā anāgatabhikkhūnam matena yadi panāvuso tathāgatena bhaṇitamī anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhuniyo upasampādetum ti/ tena hi dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatoṣaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā ti yam vacanam/ tam micchā* (Mil-a 195,<sup>19–26</sup>). This translation was, admittedly, quite difficult, hence I adapted some of my translation according to Bhikkhu Bodhi’s work in this instance.
- 29 *yadi tathāgatena bhaṇitam/ tam dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatoṣaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā ti tenahi anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetum ti/ tam pi vacanamī micchā* (Mil-a 195,<sup>26–30</sup>).
- 30 *nanu upasampādetabbamātugāmam upasampāditena ekena bhikkhusaṅghena upasampādito ubhatoṣaṅgho paṭisedhito/ upasampādetabba mātugāmam upasampāditena ekena ubhatoṣaṅghena upasampādetabbamātugāmam upasampādito eko bhikkhusaṅgho paṭisedhito/ iti aññamaññam paṭisedho upasampādetabbamātugāmam upasampādito bhikkhusaṅgho eko/ upasampādetabbamātugāmam upasampādito ubhatoṣaṅgho eko ti evamayam ubhatokoṭiko paṇho* (Mil-a 195,<sup>30–196</sup>,<sup>1</sup>). For this passage too I found Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation very helpful.
- 31 This second method is called “ordination through eight proclamations (*aṭṭhavācīkūpasampadā*)” because the process involved an initial “motion and three proclamations” first by the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, followed by one motion and three proclamations by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, making for a total of eight “acts” in the entire process (Bodhi 2010, p. 104).
- 32 *ubhatokoṭikam paṇham etarahi vissajjetuñceva vibhajjetuñca asakkuneyyānam* (Mil-a 196,<sup>1–2</sup>).
- 33 *tattha vadāma/ anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetum ti etaṃ vacanam bhagavatā bhāsitam/ tañca pana bhagavato vacanam ayaṃ bhikkhunīsaṅghassa abhāvaparicchedo* (Mil-a 196,<sup>9–11</sup>).
- 34 *sikkhamānāya paṭipatti* (Mil-a 196,<sup>12</sup>).
- 35 Anālayo’s point here is that the sixth *garudhamma* is not actually “about dual ordination as such, but much rather about a two-stage procedure in conducting dual ordination (Anālayo 2017, p. 19). He therefore sees the addition of the stipulation that prospective candidates for *upasampadā* first seek permission from a *bhikkhunī* as “an amendment to the basic procedure described in *garudhamma* 6” (Anālayo 2017, p. 19).
- 36 As Anālayo explains, the idea of certain rules being contingent on conditions is not unprecedented for *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*. Another extenuating circumstance involves a situation where a female candidate cannot safely travel to seek ordination from the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, as stipulated in the sixth *garudhamma*; in such a case, she may send a messenger in her place (Anālayo 2017, p. 20).
- 37 *ārakā aññena añño/ añño aññena asādhāraṇo/ añño aññena asammisso* (Mil-a 196,<sup>19–20</sup>).
- 38 *aṭṭha garudhammā bhikkhuniyā anuppannāya bhikkhunīnam mūlapaññattibhāvena paññattā* (Mil-a 197,<sup>12–13</sup>).
- 39 *anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetum ti anupaññattibhāvo [ . . . ] paññatto* (Mil-a 197,<sup>22–24</sup>).
- 40 *esā pana anupaññatti pure ceva pacchā ca paññattena paṭikkhepenā pi anuññātenāpi sādharanabhāvaṃ na pāpuṇi* (Mil-a 197,<sup>24–26</sup>). Bhikkhu Bodhi offers the following translation for this crucial sentence: “But this secondary regulation did not reach a condition where it shared [validity] with any prior and subsequent prohibition and allowance that had been laid down” (Bodhi 2010, p. 138). He adds in a footnote to this somewhat cryptic passage that “[t]he purport seems to be that this authorization is valid only as long as the Buddha does not issue another decree that implicitly annuls its validity, such as that stipulating a dual-saṅgha ordination” (Bodhi 2010, pp. 138–39). Taking Bodhi’s instincts here further, my interpretation above, made with other biographical information about the Mingun Jetavana’s position, is that this supplementary rule, not having been explicitly annulled, is in effect as long as the Buddha’s *sāsana* remains, an interpretation dismissed or neglected by localized layers of legalistic interpretation.
- 41 Anālayo suggests that part of this entrenched interpretation stems from a reading of the *Dīpavaṃsa* in the episode where Mahinda brings Buddhism to the island of Lanka. When the ruler of the island at the time beseeched Mahinda “to grant ordination to the queen and her followers, Mahinda replied that it is not possible for a *bhikkhu* to do so” (Anālayo 2017, p. 22). According to Anālayo, Mahinda’s “statement was correct, since *bhikkhunīs* were in existence” back on the South Asian mainland, but it is mistake, claims Anālayo, to assert the relevance of this statement now, since there is currently no extant Theravāda lineage of *bhikkhunī*, at least not until the efforts that began in the 1990s (Anālayo 2017, p. 22).
- 42 *iti ayameva tena bhagavatā jānatā passatā arahatā sammāsambuddhena anujānito mātugāmo bhikkhusaṅghena etarahi evaṃ upasampādetabbo* (Mil-a 197,<sup>26–28</sup>).

- See, e.g., D I 2,<sup>11</sup>; D II 213,<sup>11–12</sup>; M I 350,<sup>5</sup>; A I 67,<sup>34–68, 1</sup>; A II 196,<sup>11–12</sup>; Vin V 1,<sup>2–3</sup>, as a small sample of such statements, most of which seem to be found in the first four books of the Suttapiṭaka and the *Parivāra* of the Vinayapiṭaka. I must thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the ubiquity of this phrase in the Pāli canon and making important suggestions to improve my original translation.
- bhagavato sabbam kāyakammam nānapubbaṅgamam nānānuparivatti/ atīte amse apatīhatañāṇadassanam/ anāgate amse apatīhatañāṇadassanam/ paccuppanne amse apatīhatañāṇadassanam* (Mil-a 196,<sup>20–22</sup>). This is in fact a slightly condensed quotation from the *Nettipakaraṇa* (Nett 17,<sup>25–31</sup>), a text which Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli argues is not a commentary *per se*, but a sort of guide for would-be commentators (Nāṇamoli 1977, p. xlv), like the Mingun Jetavana.
- bhagavato vacanam atītaṃse pi bhikkhunīsaṅghe abhāvaparicchedam/ anāgataṃse pi bhikkhunīsaṅghassa abhāvaparicchedam/ paccuppannamse pi bhikkhunīsaṅghassa abhāvaparicchedam apatīhatañāṇadassanena sabbaññūñāṇena passitvā va anujānitabbam* (Mil-a 196,<sup>24–28</sup>).
- anāgate pi ti bhikkhunīsaṅgho abhāvo bhavissatī ti passatā* (Mil-a 197,<sup>20–21</sup>).
- sabbaññūñāṇassa āñācakkam na pahārayitabbam* (Mil-a 197,<sup>8</sup>).
- bhagavato adhippāyam jānantena byattena bhikkhunā paṭibaleṇa saṅgho nāpetabbo* (Mil-a 197,<sup>29–31</sup>).
- bhagavato manoratham jānissāma/bhagavato punñindusaṅkāsamukham passissāmā ti/ tam pi bhikkhunīsaṇaṃ kātukāmena pubbaṅgamaṇa bhikkhunā nāma bhagavato thomite thāne kusaleṇa bhavitabbam ti* (Mil-a 203,<sup>10–13</sup>).
- The term *buddhamataññū* also appears in the *Milinda-tikā* (Mil-t 15,<sup>13</sup>) when describing the qualities of Nāgasena.
- Hiroko Kawanami's translation of this passage, taken from page 26 of the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, runs "I have studied many other religious traditions and examined their religious teachings. So far I think Buddhism is the best and the most valid teaching of all. However, if I ever come across a better religion (than Buddhism) that conveys the ultimate truth, I am open minded enough to become a follower" (Kawanami 2007, p. 231). Eventually Ādiccavaṃsa did disrobe in 1941 and married a lay woman (Tejinda 2017, p. 96), though his reasons for disrobing are unclear to me at present.
- Myat Kyaw is also mentioned as a leading figure in spreading the Mingun Jetavana's method of meditation to Shan Buddhist communities in the 1930s, with 33 meditation centres in this lineage still active today (Khur-Yearn 2019, p. 333). In an endnote, Jotika Khur-Yearn attributes nine texts to Myat Kyaw, most of which are dedicated to the practice of *vipassanā* (Khur-Yearn 2019, p. 342).
- Those mentioned as taking part in this conversation include the Pinḥ kan Sayadaw, Ashin Nandamedhā (B. ပိန်းကန် ဆရာတော် အရှင်နန္ဒမေဓာ), the Bāḥ ka rā to ra Sayadaw, Ashin Jāniya (B. ဗားကရာတောရ ဆရာတော် အရှင်ဇာနိယ) and other unnamed monks (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 5).
- ရေးပြီးသော စာမူများကို [...] လက်နှိပ်စက်နှင့် မိတ္တူကူးပေး၍ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ အရပ်ရှိ ပိဋကအကျော် ဆရာတော်များထံသို့ ပို့ကာထင်မြင်ချက် ရယူခဲ့သည် (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 16).
- As Thānissaro Bhukkhu explains, the *pakāsaniyā kamma*, which is first attested to when the Buddha censures his cousin, Devadatta, for trying to aggressively take over the leadership of the *saṅgha*, "contains none of the other necessary explanations that would allow for the transaction to become a generalized pattern. In other words, there is no list of the qualities with which the object should be endowed, no description of how he should behave, and no allowance for revoking the transaction. Thus it seems to have been intended as a one-time event and cannot be included in a Community's repertoire of disciplinary measures" (Thānissaro 2013, II:1289).
- Ādiccavaṃsa's friend and one-time pupil, Shin Ukkatṭha (ရှင် ဥက္ကဋ္ဌ Rhañ ukkatṭha, 1897–1978), who would later be tried for his heterodox views on reincarnation, was also subjected to a *pakāsaniyā-kamma*, to which he too wrote a "robust response" called the *Tanpyan Pakāsaniyā* (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, p. 220). The reason why the *pakāsaniyā-kamma* was resorted to was because immediately after the military coup of 1962, the Ne Win regime was not interested in supporting the monastic court system set up by U Nu, meaning that without the means of state enforcement, the monastic hierarchy was forced to resort to this public censure (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, p. 220), which ultimately had no real teeth behind it other than ruining the reputation of the individual so charged in the eyes of the *saṅgha*-faithful.
- Ashin Tejinda does not translate the full text in his thesis, but offers selected paragraphs meant to highlight the main thrust of Ādiccavaṃsa's argument. According to Ashin Tejinda, this excerpt comes from page 77 in the original 1935 text.
- Page 72 in the *Bhikkhu-sāsanopadesa*.
- Ashin Tejinda paraphrases this excerpt from pages 82–84.
- In this, Ādiccavaṃsa is taking a different approach from some contemporary scholars, who argue that the *garudhammas* are later interpolations to the Vinayapiṭaka. Hüsken, for example, writes that "it is possible that the compilation of the *garudhammas* to hand constitutes a later insertion into the Vinaya, which is more recent than the rules corresponding to the *garudhammas* in the Pācittiya section of the Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga" (Hüsken 2000, p. 65). For evidence, she points to the "unsystematic order of the eight *garudhammas* in the *Cullavagga*; the difference in the sequence of *garudhammas* in the traditions of other Buddhist schools, as well as the parallels both literal and in content in the Pācittiya section of the Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga", all of which lead Hüsken to suggest that these *garudhammas* are the "produce of a process of development" (Hüsken 2000, p. 65). Despite his own text-



critical approach, Ādiccavaṃsa does not question the existence of the *garudhammas* in the earliest layers of Pāli texts, but instead challenges their elevation to the status of binding rules.

Here Ashin Tejinda indicates that he is taking this excerpt from pages 74–75 in the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*.

Ashin Saraṇa, who has translated part of this document in his New Pilgrim newsletter (161004), gives the full title of this text as “ယခုကာလဝယ် ထေရဝါဒဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာတော်၌ ဘိက္ခုနီ ရှိသင့်-မရှိသင့် ပြဆိုရာဖြစ်သော ဘိက္ခုနီဝိနိစ္ဆယစာတမ်း”, or “The Document on Resolution of Bhikkhunī(s) Which Explains Whether Bhikkhunī(s) Should Be or Should Not Be [Included] in the Buddha’s Dispensation of Theravāda in Present Era”. (Saraṇa n.d., p. 9). This first text, published in 2004, should be distinguished from a second text, the *Bhikkhunī-bhāvābhāva-vinicchaya* (*The Judgement on the Existence or Non-Existence of Nuns*), published in 2006 as a formal accounting of the case brought against Saccavādī in the Burmese monastic court system.

Ashin Tejinda takes this quote from page 42 of the *Bhikkhun-vinicchaya*.

In the second millennium, the schemes found in the Pāli commentaries were reinterpreted or challenged altogether in Burma, with certain groups, sometimes referred to derisively as the “*paramats*” (from the Pali word, “*paramattha*,” meaning “ultimate truth”) arguing for an advanced stage of *sāsana* decline, which caused them to deny not only the possibility of enlightenment, but the validity of higher ordination altogether (for more on the *paramats*, see Michael Mendelson (1975), who Jacques Leider (2004) argues confuses the *paramats* with similar anti-clerical sects like the Zawti). Because of these views, the *paramats* became synonymous with heretical ways of thinking, and such movements were alternatively repressed or championed by different Burmese kings.

It is important to note that Ādiccavaṃsa is still known today for having published a *Milinda-nissaya*, or interlinear Pali-Burmese bitext that is part translation, part exegesis, in 1916 around the age of 34 and with 14 years in the monkhood (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 61). This bitext is, as far as I can tell, the only *nissaya* proper still in circulation on the *Milindapañha* in Burma.

ထို့ကြောင့် ဤ ဘိက္ခုနီ ခန္ဓကဋ္ဌ ‘သဟဿ’-ဟူသည်မှာ ‘တထောင်’ ဟု ဘုရားရှင် အရေ အတွက်---မဆိုလို။ စင်စစ်ကား ပရိကပ္ပ ကြိဆ ဟောကြားခြင်း မျှဖြစ်သည်။ အဓိပ္ပါယ်ကား သူတော် တရားသည် တထောင်ရှည်မည် အရာ ဖြစ်အံ့ မာတုဂါမတို့ သာသနာတွင် ရဟန်း ပြုခြင်းကြောင့် ယခု ငါးရာ သာ ရှည်တော့မည်၊ ထက်ဝက် ဆုတ်ယုတ်ရာသည် ဟူလိုသတည်း။ (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 255–56).

“ဤရဟန်းတို့ကောင်းစွာ ကျင့်ကြံ နေထိုင် ကုန်မှု လောကသည် ရဟန္တာ မ သုဉ်း ဖြစ်ရာသည်” ဟု သုဘဒ်အား ဟောသော စကားမူကား အကျင့်၏ အစွမ်းကို ပြသော စကား ဖြစ်၏ (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 231).

အကျင့် လျှင် တည်နေကြောင်း ဖြစ်၏။ ကျင့်ဆောင် လိုက်နာရေး မပျောက်ကွယ် သမျှ သာသနာတော် တည်ထွန်း နေပေလိမ့်မည် (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 232).

ထိုသို့ သာသနာ့သက်တမ်းကို အမှန်အကန် သိလာရသည်နှင့်တစ်ဆက်တည်းမှာပင် သူတော်တရား “သဒ္ဓမ္မ” ကို မှန်ကန်စွာ ကျင့်ဆောင်နေသရွေ့ ရဟန္တာလည်း မဆိတ်သုဉ်းနိုင်ကြောင်းကိုပါ တစ်ပါတည်း သိလာကြရပြန်သည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် ယခုဘဝ၌ပင် မဂ်ဆိုက်၊ ဖိုလ်ဝင် နိဗ္ဗာန်ကိုမြင်အောင် ပဋိပတ်လုပ်ငန်း လုပ်ဆောင်သူများလည်း ယခုအခါ အားရစရာ မြောက်မြောက်မြားမြား ပေါ်ထွက်လာပေသည် (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 27).

Having said that, Ādiccavaṃsa’s friend and one-time president of the editing committee for the Sixth Council (1954–1956), Shin Ukkatṭha, was not as optimistic. According to Jordt, Shin Ukkatṭha “did not accept the so-called *paṭipatti sāsana* and therefore did not accept the possibility of achieving *nibbāna* in this life” (Jordt 2007, p. 52).

*Ta bhois* (B. တဘောင်) are defined as “random utterances (of children, actors or madmen) interpreted as prophecies” (MAA, s.v. *ta bhoi*).

*pañcavassasahassān paṭivedhasaddhammo ṭhassati* (Mil-a 195, 2–3).

According to the stages as given in the *Manorathapūraṇī*, which represents the “most detailed” and “perhaps the latest innovations” of the commentarial scheme of *sāsana* decline, the first aspect of the Buddha’s teachings to disappear is attainment (P. *adhigama*), such as the ability to reach *arahantship* and the other three lower fruits, followed by the disappearance of practice (P. *paṭipatti*), then scriptural learning (P. *pariyatti*), the disappearance of outward signs (P. *līṅga*) of the religion, and culminating with the disappearance of the Buddha’s relics (P. *dhātu*) (Endo 2013, p. 129). The author(s) of the *Manorathapūraṇī* explain that by “*adhigama*” they mean the disappearance of “the four *magga*-s, four *phala*-s, four *paṭisambhidā*-s, three *vijjā*-s, and six *abhiññā*-s; when dwindling away, they begin with *paṭisambhidā*-s” (Endo 2013, p. 129). Hence the *sāsana* scheme described by both the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa go against what is proscribed in the *Manorathapūraṇī*, or at least represent a creative rereading.

While U Ba Khin’s meditation lineage is relatively minor in Burma (but perhaps the world’s largest via S.N. Goenka in India), as the first Accountant General of Burma under the U Nu administration, his views could not be so easily dismissed. In fact, Pranke informs us that this idea of a *vimutti khet* “was taken up for consideration by the Sixth Buddhist Synod (1954–1956) which rejected it as contradictory and as lacking textual support” (Pranke 2010, p. 466). He adds that “[s]ubsequent publications by the Ministry of Religious Affairs that discuss the *sāsana*’s lifespan omit reference to th[is] theory”, and as a result, the idea has not been “universally accepted” (Pranke 2010, p. 466). This concept was thus widespread enough to warrant such a public and high-profile dismissal.

According to Saruya, this Ayemyo Nunnery was established by “a nun from Mawlamyine [...] in 1908”, and while it has become a “leading educational center” helping *thilashins* pass the Pāli exams, the original purpose was for it to act as a training center for meditation (Saruya 2020, p. 165).

- <sup>76</sup> In contrast, Martin Seeger explains that there are several cases of *maechi*, the Thai equivalent to *thilashins*, being recognized as *arahants* in modern Thai history, some of whom have become the object of devotion for large swaths of the population (see e.g., Seeger 2018, pp. 128–30). This contrast raises the question of what is it about the Thai case that makes such female *arahants* a possibility, even if unlikely, but which then precludes a similar phenomenon in neighboring Burma? One possible answer might be found in the neoconservative nature of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism when compared to a more modernized, reform-minded Thai Theravāda Buddhism, but another possibility is perhaps suggested by the subtitle of Seeger's (2018) monograph, *Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism*. It is possible that the presence of female *arahants* in Burma is "hidden" insofar as it is not well known enough to be in wide circulation, showing the need for further research on this topic.
- <sup>77</sup> *bhante nāgasena, tumhe bhaṇatha: yo gihī arahattam patto dve v' assa gatiyo bhavanti, anaññā: tasmim yeva divase pabbajati vā parinibbāyati vā, na so divaso sakkā atikkametum ti* (Mil 264,<sup>29–31</sup>–265,<sup>1</sup>).
- <sup>78</sup> Nirmala Salgado (2013) is another scholar who sees the modern attempt at *bhikkhunī* revival in Theravāda Buddhism as owing much to the creation of a western liberal subject, at least in terms of how scholars have dealt with the subject. Indeed, her intervention is important in trying to "decolonize" the discourse around *bhikkhunī* ordination, and her fieldwork is based extensively on interviews with Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs*.

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