



# The Evolution of *Theravada* Buddhism in Myanmar: Origins and Growth

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## ABSTRACT

This paper serves as an overview of the historical and contemporary Buddhist practises in Myanmar. This paper tries to demonstrate how the Buddha's teachings had a significant impact on the creation of morality and giftedness as well as the growth of human civilization and the ability to be freed from suffering. Religion in the nation has a significant impact on moral development, the emergence of morally upright and intellectually gifted individuals and the development of mature thought. The mythology, histories, records from other countries, and archaeological surveys on artefacts and excavations will all be used to learn more about the arrival of an expansion of Buddhism in Myanmar. Finally, this paper explores how Buddhism has evolved over time and how it is doing in contemporary Myanmar.

*Keywords: Theravada Buddhism, Myanmar, Religion, History, Mythology*

## 1. Introduction

The conditions of Buddhism from its first arrival to the present day and its evolution will be discussed in the paper about Buddhism in Myanmar. First, the key pieces of evidence that the Myanmar people consider to support the arrival of Buddhism will be listed. The stories, historical accounts, and supporting inscriptions pointing to the presence of Buddhism in ancient Myanmar will then be briefly discussed.

### *What is Buddhism?*

For the two main streams of Buddhism that are still practised today *Theravada* and *Mahayana* the Buddha teaches the Dhamma. The earliest branch of Buddhism that is still practised today is *Theravada*. "The Teaching of the Elders" is what the name "*Theravada*" signifies. The Canon, the earliest extant collection of the Buddha's teachings, serves as the scriptural model for *Theravada* Buddhism. For many years, *Theravada* has been the main religion in Sri Lanka and continental South East Asia (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos). *Mahayana* is divided into two categories: *Maha* (Great) and *Yana* (Vehicle). *Mahayana*, a branch of Buddhism that is popular in North Asia, encompassing China, Mongolia, Tibet, Korea, and Japan, hence meaning "the Great Vehicle."

### *Buddhism's Introduction to Myanmar:*

The inhabitants of Myanmar practised animism and nature worship in their early history, as is to be anticipated in any nation. Ancestral worship and Hindu Brahman beliefs and rituals were incorporated into the national religion as indigenous and immigrants from other countries mixed together in Myanmar. Even in modern times, remnants of these pre-Buddhist ideas can be seen in people's everyday behaviour. Legends, histories, foreign records, archaeological surveys on relics, and excavations will all be used to study the introduction and growth of Buddhism in Myanmar.

### *Buddhism First Arrived in Rakhine:*

For the spread of Buddhism in Myanmar, an inscription found in Nagajunikonda is intriguing. The chronicle was written during King Madhariputa's 14<sup>th</sup> year in power as the ruler of Tambapanna during the Ikshvaku dynasty (3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.). Some nations are referred to in the *Milindapanha*, while others are referenced in the Ceylonese chronicles. In Rakhine, little stone stupas with the "*Yedhamma Gatha*" engraved on them have been found. One can estimate that it was created somewhere in the fifth century A.D. Numerous old votive tablets had been discovered during excavations of pagodas and little bronze Cetiya. There are numerous other sources there, including pagodas, pictures, stone votive tablets, terracotta tablets, and *Pali* and Sanskrit inscriptions.

### ***The arrival of Buddhism in Thare Kettara:***

Following the arrival of Buddhism in The Ketra Hmawza, close to Pyay, numerous stone and bronze statues and monuments were discovered. The Buddhist religion is represented with terracotta tablets, both with and without inscriptions, and shrines. The sculpture seen in little brick monuments and artefacts discovered during excavations at the bases of the Bebe, Lemyetnha, and Yahandagu was determined to date from after the 7th or 8th century A.D. Theravadins were said to frequent these temples. *Theravada* religion can also be traced back to pieces of Pali stone inscriptions discovered in the Bawbawgyi Stupa's base and on its railings. Because of how much the Pyu alphabet and numbers resemble those of the Gupta Period Brahmi script, which was used in India until roughly the fifth century A.D. The papers reveal that Buddhism was a well-liked and thriving religion in the capital city of the former kingdom of Thare Kettara during the decades from the sixth century A.D. to at least the tenth century A.D.

### ***Buddhism Arrives in Suvannabhumi:***

There was a flourishing *Theravada* Buddhist community at Suvannabhumi. Thera Sona and Thera Uttara travelled by water to Suvannabhumi, according to the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa*, which were written in the fourth and sixth centuries, respectively. Further inside India lies Suvannabhumi, a realm of gold similar to the Greek Chryse. The Lower Myanmar region, about 30 miles north of Thaton, is identified with this site by the Mon *Pali* inscriptions of Kalyanisima, Pegu (149 AD). Nearly 400 years prior, in that area, King Asoka of Bagan's Ayethema village restored the two significant events known as Kyaik Te and Kyaik Talan and left behind two lengthy inscriptions in the old Mon language. The Kelasa Mountain, which will be Thaton itself, is surrounded by pagodas that stretch for kilometres. Buddhism would have been brought to lower Myanmar during the reign of Asoka if Suvannabhumi's association with that region were to be acknowledged.

### ***The arrival of Buddhism in Bagan:***

The *Theravada* school of Buddhism was brought to Bagan by Buddha Sasana, who travelled there by land from the North. It contained elements of Hindu Brahmanism. In addition, Aries or woodland monks led sloppy lives and practised and spread a degraded brand of Buddhism. With the noble goal of creating a pure form of Buddhism, King Anawrahta was determined to purify the Buddhism that was already practised in Bagan. In 1057 AD, Anawrahta dispatched missionary monks from Thaton to his capital along with the Tipitaka Texts, the Buddha's holy relics, and other recommendations from Shin Arahan. The two major turning points in the religious and cultural history of Myanmar were the arrival of Shin Arahan in Bagan in 1053 and the introduction of the Tipitaka Texts and missionary monks in Bagan in 1057. Since then, Myanmar has been firmly established as a centre for Theravada Buddhism with reference to the Tipitaka Texts, or Buddhism in its purest form. Schools can confidently assert that Southeast Asia is home to all Theravada nations. Theravada Buddhism is being practised in its purest form in Myanmar. Inscriptions on plates made of gold, silver, or copper are discovered in Myanmar's earliest digs. These are the common inscriptions:

*"Ye dhamma hetuppabhava*

*tesam hetum tathagato aha*

*tesanca yo nirodho*

*evam vadi maha samano"*

### ***Studies of the Buddhist Scriptures:***

There are 551587 novices and Bhikkhus in Myanmar. Additionally, there are 55608 nuns. They have approximately 1238 monasteries. Additionally, Buddhism is taught in more than a thousand colleges (*Pariyatti*). The *Tipitakadhara* examination is the highest and most difficult in Myanmar. In Myanmar, there are a lot of Buddhist examinations. There are two main categories of Buddhist tests: official examinations and private examinations. The tests conducted by the government are:

1. Tipitaka,
2. Dhammacariya,
3. Pathamabyan,
4. Nikaya
5. Abhidhamma and Visuddhi.

These may also be referred to as "Traditional Buddhist Examinations," which were used in earlier times to win the kings' loyalty. In Buddhism, there are numerous private tests in addition to governmental ones. The well-known ones among them are summarised as follows:

1. Sakyasiha,
2. Cetiayangana,
3. Susamacara,

4. Samaneyaw

5. Suvannabhumi.

These are the tests that monks must pass. Additionally, laypeople are the target audience for *Abhidhamma* classes. The *Abhidhamma* dissemination organisation is in charge of these courses. And all around Myanmar, its numerous branches have opened. Regularly, once a year, the exams are held.

***Patipatti: Myanmar's meditation centres:***

One of the key functions of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar is the meditation centre. There are numerous different meditation centres in Myanmar. Among them, the well-known centres include the Mahasi Meditation Center, the Shwe Taung Kone Panditarama Meditation Center, the Naga Cave Kalaywa Taw Ya Meditation Center, the Moe Gote Meditation Center, the Janitarama Meditation Center, the Soon Loon Cave Meditation Center, the Hpar Aut Meditation Center, the Dhammaduta Sasana Meditation Center, the International Patipatti Center, the Dhammajoti Meditation Center (Founded by S.N. Goenka), Myae Zinn Meditation Centre, Saddhammaramsi Meditation Centre, Thae Inn Cave Meditation Centre, Taung Pulu Meditation Centre, Mula Saccadipaka Meditation Centre, Mingun Taw Ya Meditation Centre, Kathit Wine Meditation Centre, and Shwe Minwun Sasana Meditation Centre. There are numerous branches of some of these meditation institutions. People from Myanmar and many tourists frequently visit these institutions to practise meditation. As a result, these centres are crucial to the execution of Buddha Sasana.

***Myanmar Dhamma Schools:***

As it is fundamental to Buddhism, the Dhamma School's courses are founded on this idea. Young people are given Buddhist scriptural studies at a centre called Dhamma School. They are a form of private school taught by monks, nuns, and laypeople who are knowledgeable and experienced in the *Pariyatti* sector, and they are opened specifically in monasteries every Sunday. Dhamma School was established in Myanmar on March 14, 2012. More than 30000 teachers have graduated from the 552 teacher training programmes. In between 3000 and 5000 Dhamma Schools, they are instructing Buddhist courses. Books for teachers are also available, as are the required texts for students. They adhere to the student-centered methodology. It is a foundation designed to help young people develop smart perspectives and become adults.

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**Cultures of Buddhism**

Buddhism is often used to describe Myanmar's culture. Numerous seasonal religious festivals are observed for each month. Buddhism is a common theme among them. Thedingyut, Waso, the Bodhi tree watering, and the Kathina festival are a few well-known celebrations. There are other religious ceremonies besides these festivals. The Novitiation, Ordination, and Anekaja rites are well-known. Additionally, each month there are other Buddhist-related significant days in Myanmar. The fact that most cultures in Myanmar are based on Buddhist culture is evident from these festivals and customs. Additionally, the Dhamma-talk ritual is typically celebrated by the people of Myanmar. Therefore, the custom of Dhamma-talk can be observed every Sabbath day, every special religious day, and every other day in a Dhamma hall, at an intersection, or on open ground. Since the Bagan Period, Buddhism has flourished in Myanmar, and Buddhist literature has been prolific (the first dynasty of Myanmar). Religious publications are widely available today, including magazines, booklets, cartoons, etc.

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**Conclusion:**

Pagodas and other religious structures can be found throughout the remote and vast region of Myanmar. Pagodas are religious structures built to honour historical religious occasions. They are also significant historical sites and centres of Theravada Buddhist activity in the nation. Numerous pagodas and structures may be seen in Bago, Thaton, Mrauk U, Pyay, Mandalay, Sagaing, and other historical locations around the nation, bearing testament to the magnitude of Theravada Buddhism's spread and its heyday. The fifth International Theravada Buddhist Council took place in Mandalay in 1871, while the sixth International Theravada Buddhist Council took place in Yangon in 1954. As a result, Myanmar has received blessings from both gatherings. The moral and spiritual strength of Buddhism has helped Myanmar people endure the ups and downs of history. Another significant event in the development of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar and the spread of the faith around the world is the inauguration of the international Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon. Myanmar could thus be considered to be at the pinnacle of Vinaya among Theravada nations. Furthermore, the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* contains the most profound and nuanced teachings of the Buddha that are beyond the comprehension of the average person. However, Myanmar monks were able to teach and learn *Abhidhamma* in simple methods. Myanmar could be the pioneer in studying and imparting *Abhidhamma* as a result. As we saw above, Myanmar monks and knowledgeable laypeople pay close attention not just in the *Pariyatti* field but also in the *Patipatti* field. Since Theravada Buddhism and the Pali Canon were crucial to the development of Myanmar culture, which includes the Myanmar alphabet, prose, poetry, novels, customs, vocabularies, and stone inscriptions describing charitable acts, Myanmar and Buddhism cannot be considered in isolation. It is reasonable to think that material progress should match spiritual advancement in order to create a balanced and peaceful community in this quickly changing world. In this sense, Theravada Buddhism contributes more to the moral advancement and spiritual development of mankind. Because of the ongoing support of succeeding monarchs, administrations, and people, Myanmar is proud to declare that it is renowned for the blooming of both *Pariyatti Sasana* and *Patipatti Sasana* in Buddhism to the present day.

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