

MANGALA SUTTA: ITS INFLUENCE OVER THE WAY OF LIFE OF SHAN PEOPLE AND THEIR POETIC LITERATURE IN SHAN STATE, UNION OF MYANMAR



Nang Num Htwe

ABSTRACT

This research aims to make the understanding of the *Mangala Sutta* and the Poetic Literature of Shan people in Shan State, Union of Myanmar. It is to explore the background and meaning of the *Mangala Sutta*, Shan Poetic Literature or *Lik Loung* or Shan Manuscript and the influence of *Mangala Sutta* on the daily life of Shan people in Shan State. The article also shown an understanding of the *Mangala Sutta* which is a part of *Paritta* chanting and also deals with Shan Manuscript tradition. It shows the role of traditional poetic writing, *lik loung*, in the practices and teachings of Theravada Buddhism among the Shan people and analyses how the *lik loung* draws on and enfolds other literature from the *Theravāda* tradition and the religious context in which such texts are read to an audience. It is concerned with some of the traditional ceremonies commonly celebrated by Shan people in Shan State and discloses some of the historical background and the expected benefit of Buddhist ceremonies according to the beliefs of Shan people.

Keywords: Mangala Sutta, Theravāda, Paritta, Shan people, Shan Poetic Literature or *Lik Loung* or Shan Manuscript

INTRODUCTION

Mangala Sutta is one of the most popular *Suttas* from the *Pāli* Buddhist Scriptures. ‘*Mangala*’ means ‘*Blessing*’ and ‘*Sutta*’ means ‘*Discourse*’. The *Mangala Sutta* provides lessons of direct practical application, capable of immediate and fruitful use by people in all walks of life, irrespective of differences of sex or status, race or religion. It is true for everyone and also a part of *Paritta* chanting. The doctrines from *Mangala sutta* and *Mangala sutta* chanting is widely practiced among the difference Buddhists communities in Myanmar.

Myanmar (also known as Burma) is an ethnically diverse nation with 135 distinct ethnic groups officially recognized by the Burmese government. It is likely that through the British, and on the basis of Burmese pronunciation, the Tai people in Myanmar became known to the world as ‘Shan people’.¹ Primarily Shan people are farmers and live in the river valleys and lowland pockets of the Shan plateau. There are 9 percent of Shan people from the total population of Myanmar and over ninety percent of Shan people are Buddhists.

Most of Shan people believe that chanting *Paritta* (protection) can prevent evil and bring good fortune. They believe in chanting *Paritta* (protection) in traditionally and call it “*Parait Loung*” that means “Great *Paritta*” which is including *Mangala Sutta*. Apart from *Mangala Sutta* chanting, Shan Buddhists use a form of poetic manuscript to convey the teachings of the Buddha. The poetic manuscripts are used for the teaching of even very advanced doctrine and practice capture distinctive, ways of transmitting *Dhamma* among the Shan people. They are written new manuscripts or copy from the existence old manuscripts by the request of the donors according to the occasions such as the ordination ceremony, the anniversary of a temple, honorary ceremonies, etc. and there are many doctrines from *Tipitaka* including the *Mangala Sutta* in Shan Manuscripts.

¹Jotika, Khur-Yearn. **The Poetic Dhamma of Zao Amat Long’s Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta and The Place of Traditional Literature in Shan Theravada Buddhism.** A Doctorial Thesis to the University of London, 2012.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is a documentary research. Data collection is based on primary sources in *Tipiṭaka*. The researcher tried to understand the background of the *Mangala Sutta* including its definition and gathering the data from the secondary sources written in Burmese, Shan and English. Furthermore, it is studied the life of Shan people in Shan State including poetic literature through the related Thesis, books, article, online sources analyzed and determine the influence of the *Mangala Sutta* over the way of life of Shan people and Shan manuscript.

MANGALA SUTTA

The *Mangala Sutta* means the Discourse of Blessings. This discourse can be found in *Khuddaka Nikāya* in two places: in the *Khuddakapāṭha*², and in the *Sutta Nipāta*³. The teachings in this *Sutta* can easily be understood, appreciated and followed by everyone regardless of their religion. The teachings in the *Mangala Sutta* are timeless and universal. The views expressed by the Buddha in the *Mangala Sutta* are a masterpiece of practical wisdom. The principle of the whole teaching of the Buddha is self-reliance. The main point has mentioned in the *Mangala Sutta* is which the blessings come from own efforts and those efforts have many dimensions: educational, social, economics, psychological and spiritual.

38 BLESSINGS

According to the introduction stanza of the *Mangala Sutta*, which was added to the original text after the Buddha, there are 38 blessings. They are (1) not to associate with the fool, (2) to associate with the wise, (3) to honour those worthy to honour, (4) to reside in a suitable place, (5) to have done preparation (meritorious actions, good deeds) in the past, (6) to set oneself in the right course, (7) to have a good education, (8) to have knowledge of arts, science and vocations and be proficient at work, (9) to follow a code of discipline, (10) to practice pleasant speech, (11) to support father and mother, (12) to cherish wife and children, (13) to be engaged in unconflicting (peaceful occupation), (14) to be charitable, (15) to be

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³Sn 2.4

righteous in conduct, (16) to help one's relatives and friends, (17) to do social services, (18) to loathe evil, (19) abstain from evil, (20) to refrain from intoxicants, (21) to be mindful in the *Dhammas*, (22) to have reverence, (23) to be humble, (24) to be content, (25) to be grateful, (26) to listen to the *Dhamma* on due occasions, (27) to be patient, (28) to listen to advice, (29) to associate with monks, (30) to have *Dhamma* discussions on due occasions, (31) to practice self-restraint, (32) to live according to the Noble Eight-Fold Path, (33) to understand the Four Noble Truths, (34) to attain the realization of *Nibbāna*, (35) the mind unshaken by the whims of fortune, (36) to be free from sorrow, (37) to be free from defilements, (38) to have lasting peace and security.

SHAN POETIC LITERATURE OR *LIK LOUNG* OR SHAN MANUSCRIPTS

Shan Buddhists use a form of poetic literature to convey Buddhist teachings in an interesting, or special way. These poetic texts are read in the context of religious or social activity on variety of occasions. The texts are called *lik loung* in Shan Language means 'great writing/text'. *Lik loung* is also known as '*lik langka long*', 'the text of great poetry', on account of its illustriousness and complexity. The term '*langka*' for Shan poetic works is probably derived from the Sanskrit or *Pāli* word '*alankara*', literally meaning 'decoration' or 'ornamentation'. The composer or reciter of poetic texts is usually called *zare*, which literally means 'clerk,' but refers to a poet or poetry reader in this context.

The type of *lik loung* poetic literature used in Shan ritual performance covers a variety of subjects, from the secular to the religion, histories, folk tales, and manuals for particular events such as the ceremony of ordination, the anniversary of a temple, honorary ceremonies, etc. There is a great variety of Shan *lik loung* literature. This richness and variety can also be seen through examining such as a book Lung Khun Maha's *Puen Khu Maw Tai Hok Zao*, the most important history of Shan literature and means, 'History of the six Tai/ Shan intellectuals'.⁴

⁴Khun Maha. **Puen Khu Maw Tai Kao Zao**. Myanmar, 1986.

TRADITION OF SHAN MANUSCRIPT

There are debates among scholars about the date of the earliest Shan literature, including *lik loung* poetic works. In the book *Puen khu maw lik Tai hok zao* written by the writer named *Lung Khun Maha* which was published in 1970, based his research in part on interviews with local people. In addition, he gathered from manuscripts information such as the bibliographical details of authors, which commonly appear in the introductions to or sometimes in the conclusion of Shan manuscripts. Through this work he provided a clearer picture of the dates and lineages of some key poetic authors, taking us back nearly five centuries.⁵

COMMISSIONING OF SHAN MANUSCRIPT

The commissioning of Shan *lik loung* texts and manuscripts grew out of a traditional Shan emphasis on Buddhist merit-making. Nowadays, Shan manuscripts can also be found in the special collections of research libraries around the world, such as those in the German holdings catalogued by Terwiel and Khamdaengyodtai.⁶ In Bangkok, there is a special collection of Shan manuscripts in the collection of the Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation's Library, still waiting for cataloguing. In terms of holdings in the UK, an unpublished catalogue of the Cambridge University Library's holdings was compiled by Sao *Saimong Mangrai*, a Shan scholar who worked on the Scott Collections at Cambridge in the early 1980s, and both the Oxford and Cambridge holdings are to be catalogued by a UK-based research project funded by the Dhammakaya Foundation, one of the biggest sponsors of Buddhist studies in the world today.

THE RITUAL OF LISTENING TO POETIC TEXTS OR SHAN MANUSCRIPT

The ritual of listening to poetic texts is performed at several places for several occasions. The audiences for the ritual of listening to poetic texts at the temple are usually the temple sleepers, who stay overnight in the temple and practice the ritual of temple sleeping.

⁵Khun Maha. **Puen Khu Maw Tai Hok Zao**. Myanmar, 1970.

⁶Terwiel and Khamdaengyodtai. **A Catalogue of Lik Loung in Germany**. 2003.

Moreover, the ritual of listening to poetic texts also continues to take place at people's homes on particular occasions, such as funerals, memorial services, the inauguration of a new house, or household blessing for good health and prosperity. Although there are specific occasions when listening to the reading of such texts is expected, a special ceremony of listening to poetic texts can also be held at any time of the year.

RECITING AND READING SHAN MANUSCRIPT FOR THE FUNERAL CEREMONY

A common way in which the Shan promote the tradition of manuscript or *lik loung* literature is the ritual of memorial service for dead person. They are not copied for the funeral itself, where an existing copy of a different text may be recited, but commissioned even at a later date. The traditional memorial service in which a ceremony of reading and listening to these new texts usually takes place in the last fifteen days of the annual monastic rains retreat. Although it is extinct in some other areas where Shan populations are mixed with other cultures or have more contact with modernity. The *lik loung* text *Sutta Nibbāna* has had a great influence on Shan tradition of donating a text for the dead. It is in particular an outcome of this practice that copies of *lik loung* manuscripts are found everywhere in Shan communities, even though they are also copied for other occasions and reasons.

PRESERVATION OF SHAN MANUSCRIPT

Copies of Shan *lik loung* manuscripts are traditionally kept in three places: in the temple, in private houses and in the personal collection of the *zare*. Rather, this collection was formed relatively recently (from 1970s onwards) by efforts to save Shan manuscript in other temples and houses in the region from neglect or mistreatment. As for collections of manuscripts at private houses, the tradition is that sometimes after manuscripts were donated to the temple, with the permission of the head monk, the donors would be allowed to take the texts back and keep them at their own house, usually on Buddha alters or in cabinets under or near the Buddha alters. It is worth noting that *zare* may also keep duplicate copies of popular texts available for new donors/sponsors, who wish to have a text for certain occasion, with a few blank pages at the front, so that they can add details of the donor/sponsor when one requests that text.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SHAN MANUSCRIPT

The rules, which guide composers of *lik loung*, are quite strict. One of the most complex aspects of *lik loung* composition is the rhyming system. Specialist training is necessary for the performer to apply the rules and system of poetic language specific to this genre of literature. The metrical forms of Shan poetry are bewildering in their variety. There are verses in short lines, and very long lines, in couplets and quatrains, regular and irregular. It is not necessary for the rhymes can also be found in different paragraphs crossing over verses or units of meaning.

There are different types of poetry that can be used for writing *lik loung*, with names such as⁷: *kwam pout* [‘short rhymed poetry’], *saung kio* [‘two strands’], *sam kio* [‘three strands’], *ngu luean* [‘snake-crawling’] and *khet kyauk* [‘frog-jumping’]. Tones are used as the keys for the making of Shan poetry. There are five standard tones in Shan language – 1) rising tone, 2) low level tone, 3) mid level tone, 4) high level tone, and 5) falling tone. Of these, only the first tone, the second tone, the third tone and the fourth tone are used for the poetry. The fifth tone is never used for the rhyme of *lik loung* poetry, possibly because of its short and fast sound while the long and slow sound is needed for *lik loung* poetry.⁸

THE SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF SHAN MANUSCRIPT

The majority of Shan *lik loung* poetic literature contains non-canonical texts, i.e. texts not included in the ‘*Pāli*’ as established at the 5th and 6th Burmese Buddhist councils. While the majority of *lik loung* literature is non-canonical, works that are based on *Pāli* canonical works and commentaries including those on meditation. The types of popular folk literature transmitted through *lik loung* include *Bodhisatta* and *Jātaka* stories. *Watthu* or *wutthu* texts are stories based on Buddhist canonical literature, such as stories from the *Jātaka* and *Dhammapada*.

Some *lik loung* texts are regarded as sacred or especially powerful. One example is the text *Cintamani*. For the performance of a text, a special enclosure is often made for the reader.

⁷Tern Moeng. *Shan-English Dictionary*. 1995.

⁸Nandiya. *Khulai Taem/Lu Langka Loung Tai*: ‘The art of writing and reading Shan lanka Loung’.

MANGALA SUTTA IN SHAN MANUSCRIPT

There are several manuscripts written the *Mangala Sutta* in Shan Poetic style. But some Shan manuscripts of *Mangala Sutta* are known the composers exactly and some are written by anonymous. The famous manuscripts are *Mangala Suit Loung* (Great Mangala Sutta) written by *Zao Dhammadinna* (1541-1640), *Mangala Suit Loung* written by *Zao Vorakhae* (1889-1942) and *Mangala Sipsong* (12 Mangala) written by *Zao Kham Pang* (1885-1954), *Mangalasara Dipanī* written by *Nyanadhammaratkita Zare Sae*. There are also several manuscripts which are written by anonymous and only known the written date. They are *Mangala Sut* (written in AD 1857), *Anicca Saphava Lae Mangala Sut* (written in AD 1901), *Mangala Ganti* (written in AD 1929), *Mangala Sut* (written in AD 1931) and *Suatmoan Pin Tai Mangala Sut* (written in AD 1933).

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MANGALA SUTTA ON DAILY LIFE OF SHAN PEOPLE IN SHAN STATE

The life of Shan people in Shan State reveals the importance of Buddhism. Shan people preserved *Theravāda* Buddhism for over two thousand years. As most of Shan men studied from monasteries, the doctrines from the *Mangala Sutta* reflected to their life. Some doctrines from the *Mangala Sutta* which we can see clearly in Shan communities are supporting mother and father, cherishing wife and children, engaging in unconflicting (peaceful occupation), helping one's relatives, loathe evil, refraining from intoxicants, conducting social services and accompany with monks. They also practice according to almost the whole doctrines from the *Mangala Sutta* which are taught by religious teachers especially monks.

Shan Buddhist monks play a significant role in preserving religious festivals and people believe in *kamma* (action) and rebirth. They trust that today action will produce future results, so they perform different ways of making merit.

BELIEF OF SHAN PEOPLE

Shan people belief in *Kamma* and its result that is taught in Buddhism such as "Doing good will experience life's bounty; Doing evil will suffer misfortune or Doing good begets good and Doing evil begets evil". Shan people are afraid of the bad results of bad action since they hold the belief that the fruit of unwholesome action will visit them as the Buddha stated that man's merits and sins one owns and these will follow the doer like one's shadow.

Shan people are concerned about unrighteous business because they are afraid of the result of their actions. The Blessed One advises householders concerning making a living that in acquiring wealth, one must resort to right kinds of trades, neither by exploitation nor by unjust means in any occupation for living. Although they are Buddhists, Shan people also practice animism and worship spirits (*phee*) to protect them from natural disasters, illness and other evils and dangers. The villagers pay respect and make offerings to them occasionally.

COMMON CEREMONIES

Buddhist monks and laypeople in the community, consequently, depend on each other not only in religious activities but also in education and local administration. That is why both laypeople and Buddhist monks are interdependent and must have responsibility toward each other for the social development as described in *Sigālovada Sutta* and *Mangala Sutta*.⁹

NEW HOUSE WARMING AND PARITTA CHANTING CEREMONY

In new house warming ceremony, Shan Buddhist usually hold *Paritta* (verses of protection) chanting and listening to poetic texts for the inauguration of a new house, or household blessing for good health and prosperity. Without performing religious rites first, the new house is looked as if it is not yet completed. Before the celebration day, the house owner invites *Zare*, the poetic writer and reader, to their house to read the poetic manuscript. New house owners are very happy to have chance to make merit for their new house and are confident that they will have a happy life in their new house. In new house warming ceremony, the people prefer to listen *Paritta* chanting especially the *Mangala Sutta* (discourse on blessing), *Ratana Sutta* (jewel discourse), and *Karaniyametta Sutta* (discourse on loving-kindness). They hope that *Paritta* chanting can help them free from danger and disturbance that befalls on them.

⁹Narada Thera, **The Buddha and His Teaching**, Fourth Edition, (Buddhist Missionary Society, Malaysia, 1988).

MARRIAGE CEREMONY

Buddhist monks are also involved in wedding ceremony in Shan State. Shan people get advise for the wedding day from monks. Monks are also play an important roll for Shan wedding ceremony. Monks are usually invited to bless the bride and bridegroom on wedding day. It is the custom of Shan Buddhists in Shan State for they have faith in Buddhism and *Paritta* chanting especially the *Mangala Sutta*. Religious rite is, however, regarded as one of the parts of married ceremony to fulfill the couple happy lives.

BABY NAMING CEREMONY AT ONE-MONTH AGE

When a baby is born it receives a warm welcome in a Shan home. The Shan families believe that a baby brings more gladness into their family. The parents will hold the washing ceremony called “*Arb-loan*” in Shan language at one-month age. After washing ceremony, a feast is made for the naming of the baby. The elder of the guest pourer water over the baby and the midwife ties while cotton threads round the wrist of the baby. A small coin is pierced and strung on it, with the idea of having tied the prosperity and locked it. The name consists of two or three more syllables and is used for all legal or official purpose.

Having named, the grandmother shaves the first hair of the child, leaving a clump at the top of the head and saying that it protects the top of the head which is still thin. In shaving the first hair, it is customary for the parents to make on offering to the spirits. For instance, the child’s name may be changed or the parents may pretend that the child is last or stolen, if there is no body to torment, the spirits will certainly be deceived and leave the house.

FUNERAL CEREMONY

Funerary rites in Shan people may be held in the home or at the monastery. At death there may be an extended period of loud wailing, in part to announce to a village community that a death has occurred. They may include iron and copper banners (*tung lek tung tong*), a three tailed white flag (*tung sam hang*) which is representing the Triple Gems, a monk’s alms-bowl, a lighted candle of time on the top of a flower vase, food for the death person’s spirit to eat, water to drink and a kerosene lamp to light the way to the other world.

The white clothes are also placed along the sides of the death body and it is dressed in new clothes. Clothes of a person who died a natural death, other than from a contagious disease, may be worn by other, but in the case of a violent death, they are buried with the body

in the coffin. An unimportant man may be buried 24 hours after death, the funeral of a man of a significant position in the state often does not take place from many days in order to allow their relatives and other people to attend the ceremony.

Before the funeral take place, the guests are feasted and relatives and friends offer gifts to the temples in the name of the dead person. This merit making is done by inviting Buddhist monk to come and receive alms-offerings at the house of the deceased or sponsor send alms basket to the monastery for the seventh days. It's done no matter whether the number of Buddhist monks and novices invited is odd or even. Shan people do not visit the graves of their dead, nor do they erect tombstones unless the dead man is of a considerable importance. The deaths are not forgotten, as feasts may be held in their honor on the anniversary of their death and bamboo poles are erected in their memory at religious festivals.¹⁰

THE INFLUENCE OF THE *MANGALA SUTTA* IN DAILY LIFE

Shan people belief that chanting the *Mangala Sutta* can bless self as well as other people. Most of Shan can chant *Mangala Sutta* in *Pāli* pronunciation but rare people think about its meaning. They are strongly belief that chanting *Mangala Sutta* every morning brings blessings to them. Some people set the goal to chant *Paritta* which is starting with *Mangala Sutta* for 5 days, 7 days, 9 days etc. to have lucky in their daily life. Most of the people only want to hear the word *Mangala* and no one like to hear *A-Mangala* (non-blessing).

Nowadays only the monastic education teach the *Mangala Sutta* to the young learners who are novice and temple boys. When a novice or a temple boy starting to stay at the monastery, he has to study the *Mangala Sutta* first and then following by 11 *Suttas* which are including in *Paritta* Chanting. Firstly the young learners will have to learn the *Mangala Sutta* in *Pāli* by heart. Later, the teacher will teach them the meaning of the *Mangala Sutta* in Shan language. But girls have no chance to learn at the monastery in the ancient time. Their mother taught them the daily activities according to the *Mangala Sutta*. Most of people do not recognize all the doctrines from the *Mangala Sutta*, but they practice many of the doctrines from that *Sutta* in their daily life even they do not notice that this is come from *Mangala Sutta*.

¹⁰ Ven. Sengindra Suvannasiri, **A Study of the Influence of Buddhism on the Life of Shan People in Eastern Shan State of Myanmar**, (A Master degree Thesis to Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2011).

The most commonly can be seen the doctrines from the Mangala Sutta among Shan communities are ‘*Mātāpitu upaṭṭānaṃ*’ and ‘*Puttadārassa saṅgaho*’ which mean ‘To support father and mother’ and ‘To cherish wife and children’. Mostly of Shan people have these two doctrines in their mind even someone do not know they come from the *Mangala Sutta*. The parents teach their children not to associate with the fool and to associate with the wise and they also practice according to those doctrines. So, the children have seen the practice of their parents and they also practice like their parents.

CONCLUSION

This article made an attempt to offer an overview about the influence of the *Mangala Sutta* on aspects of Shan cultures in Shan State. As the *Mangala Sutta* provides lessons of direct practical application, capable of immediate and fruitful use by people in all walks of life, irrespective of differences of sex or status, race or religion, it also studies the concept of the *Mangala Sutta* to understand more.

The *Mangala sutta* has exerted a great influence on every aspect of Shan people’s life. Shan people understand the *Dhamma* spiritually, culturally and morally as the *Mangala Sutta* chanting and listening to the poetic manuscript is the tradition of them. While many of manuscript texts are based on commentaries to the canon, some of the texts do not seem to be found in other Theravada Buddhist countries.

While it cannot know without further study how closely other manuscript relate to the canon and commentaries in this way, it is not unusual, particularly in cases where doctrine and soteriological practices are the focus of the text. In addition to composing in highly complex systems of poetry and offering explanations of their own, they transform the text through tales of exemplification directly relevant to the audience, making the text interesting with entertaining, even scatological and erotic comments (even if these are ultimately in the context of showing the dangers of erotic obsession), or animal stories.

The composer of manuscripts uses poetic language, often doubling up Burmese loan words with Shan synonyms to create a richer tone. The resulting texts are then of great length, so a further feature is the way in which the text is broken up to allow temple sleepers to take a break, and for the reader in public performances to change the tone to mark the stages of passage. They have a unique form of literature that reflects Shan history and is an integral part of Shan ritual and religious practice. It can be clearly seen that Shan people came into contact with Buddhism for very long time if we consider and analyze their traditions and culture.

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