

# An Analytical Trend in the Development of Buddhism in Mon Region of Myanmar in the next decade



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## ABSTRACT

This article is to study the historical background of Buddhism in Mon Kingdom and to explore the development of Buddhism in Mon region and to analyze the trend in the development of Buddhism in Mon region in the next decade. Furthermore, it is also supposed to examine the history of Mon people. Buddhism in Mon could have been a major prelude to a history of Buddhism in Myanmar in modern time. The results of the study indicate that nowadays, even the Mon people lost their own country; they observe the Buddha teachings deeply in their heart until the end of the Buddha Sasana. People have often asked what has been the trend in development of Buddhism on the people of Mon region of Myanmar. To really evaluate the effect of Buddhism on the people of Mon, one would have to turn back to its historical emerge of Buddhism in Mon or in Rāmaññadesa. It also would be useful to analyze the historical background of Buddhism in Mon region of Myanmar in the next decade.

**Keywords:** Mon, Buddhism, Rāmaññadesa, Kingdom, Suwannabhumī.

## Introduction

Buddhism has a long history in the Mon tradition and Buddhism and Mon people or the people of Rāmaññadesa are relying on each other in harmony such as water and lotus in the lake. Further, the Mon people are the first people to seek refuge in the Buddha and in the Dhamma prior to various kinds of races in the world. Historically, Buddhism in Mon or in Rāmaññadesa is not only play a key role in Mon but also play a key role in Myanmar and in South East Asia. Nowadays many researchers ignore the history and development of Buddhism in Rāmaññadesa the country of Mon how the scholars of Mon people made an attempted to introduce and maintain its systematics to be taken into consideration of the new scholars of today.

## Pre-Buddhist Religion in the Mon Kingdom

Religion is very important to the Mon people. A majority is these ethnic groups are religious, practicing a mixture of spirit worship and Buddhism. The others are who only follow Theravada Buddhism. It is believed that before Buddhism arrived in the Mon Kingdom, there are three kinds of traditional beliefs followed by the Mon people: (1) belief in Kalok (spirits) or Bajū (gods or devas); (2) belief in Isi (holy hermits); and (3) belief in Hinduism. Traditionally, Mon people believed in various kinds of Kaloks (spirits). The most significant of these spirits are: the family or clan kalok; the kalok of the guardian house; the guardian kalok of the town, the guardian kalok of the village; the guardian kalok of farms, the guardian kalok of the forest; and the guardian kalok of the mountain. A kalok is primarily considered to be a spirit, a demon, or an immaterial being that sometimes takes on a visible form. (Shorto, 1962,155)

## The Introduction of Buddhism in Mon Kingdom (Rāmaññadesa)

Buddhism has a long history in the Mon tradition. Obviously, It is explored that Mon tradition speaks of 12 times in which Buddhism was introduced to the Mon Kingdom (Rāmaññadesa) (Palita, 1966,42). The name Rāmaññadesa may be connected with Sanskrit word Rāmañña and Pāli, Rāmaññeyyaka meaning pleasant and lovely. The land comprised very fertile deltas of three mother rivers such as Irrawady, Sittaung and Salween. Actually, the Mon settlements were not only in Old Burma but also in Old Siam. Rāmaññadesa (Lower Burma) was the western Mon Kingdom and Old Siam known as Dvārāvati was the eastern

Mon King. Capital city of the western Mon kingdom was called Suddhamavati, meaning city of the good laws. Historians regarded it as the cradle or the first region of Buddhism in old Burma (Pan Hla, 2013, 43-44).

## **Recent Trend in the development of Mon Sangha administration**

It is explored that there have been two periods of the trend in the development of Mon Sangha administration formed in Mon in history. The first period appeared under the British colonial rules. The second period appeared in the Myanmar government rules until now. It is explored that British colonial ruled in Lower Myanmar (Mon Region) lasted for over a century, from 1826 to 1949. During this time, the Mon people and the Mon Sangha returned back to their regions in Lower Myanmar from Siam (Thailand) to establish their villages and towns and to develop their religion in Lower Myanmar (Mon Region) in 1826 again. (Pan Tha, 2016,44)

The Mon Buddhism during the British colonial ruled suffered for various reasons. The Mon Sangha were not able to play a leading role in terms of Mon national development because of they lost their Kingdom in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed that during the British colonial ruled, the British colonial government appointed the most venerable monk from Sakkhao village, Chaungzune Township, Mon State, Union of Myanmar as being the patron of the Rāmaññanikāya Sect and the most venerable monk of Sanghapine village as being the vice-patron of the Rāmaññanikāya Sect within the organization of Mon Sangha. (ibid., 53)

It is recorded that the Mon Sangha held the important three times general assembly during the British colonial ruled, the first assembly held at Koh Hnat village, Mawlamyaine district in 1920 and the second assembly held at the same place in 1925 and the third assembly held at Pannya village, Zobbu Township in 1948. It is proposed that the Mon Sangha administration of Rāmaññanikāya sect during the colonial period appeared in this third general assembly in the Mon history. (ibid., 56-59)

In addition, it is known that Myanmar gained independence on 4 January 1948. After a few weeks of Myanmar gained independence, much of central at lower Myanmar was at war. Because of civil war and fighting between the Burmese Army and the Mon National Liberation Army troops, most rural parts of the Mon region has been underdeveloped for many decades. Since then, the administration of the Mon Sangha became fragmented. Even though, the Mon regions in Myanmar gradually developed, the assembly of the Rāmaññanikāya Mon Sangha Sect could not be sustained.

It is recorded that the Mon Sangha made a united assembly at Bei Kyaik Monastery in Kyaikmaroh, Mon State, Union of Myanmar, in 2005 after gained independence. Based on the former Assembly of the Rāmaññanikāya Sangha sect. The trend in the development of administration of the Mon Sangha is recorded that two monks were appointed as Mahanāyakas; seven monks were appointed as Central Working Advisors; Twelve monks were appointed to the Central Working Sangha Committees; and twenty-two monks were appointed to as Mon Sangha members of the Central Working Committees, So, the present administration of the Mon Sangha is based on the past Rāmaññanikāya Mon Sangha Sect. (Rāmaññadhammācariya Association, 2017, 1-2)

### **The Trend in the development of Mon Pariyatti (learning), Mon Patipatti (practicing), and the Mon Sangha dissemination and Its work**

Historically, it is known that the trend in development of Mon Pariyatti (Learning) was founded at Htaw Plang village, now in the Karen State, Union of Myanmar. Since the historical lineage of Mon Pariyatti from the late Mon Era 1200 (AD 1838) cannot be found, it was recorded that the Mon Pariyatti (learning) was established during the Mon Era between 1200 (AD 1838) to 1214 Mon Era (AD 1852) (ibid., 1997: 46-47). Later, the Mon Pariyatti education monasteries were extended throughout the Mon regions of Lower Myanmar until the present day. According to the record of monasteries under Rāmaññanikāya Sect, it has over 90 Pāli Pariyatti (learning) monasteries established in the Mon region of Myanmar. (ibid., 2016, 106).

Regarding the Mon Patipatti (practicing), it seems that the daily routines of Buddhists practice among the Mon people are merit-making and practice meditation. The Merit-making is the most common path undertaken by Mon people. The Buddhist practice of Mon monks were preaching and teaching and also practicing meditation. The Buddhist practice of Mon laity focused on observance of the five precepts, donating things to the Buddha and the supporting religious education and maintaining scripts known as Pitaka, donating to the Sangha and practicing meditation.

Regarding the dissemination and its work, it is believed that in the Mon language the word ‘dissemination’ is ‘paton Sāsanā’ and ‘prah Sāsanā’. Historically, the significant development of such dissemination appeared in Mon with the Most Venerable Buddhaghosa; second, with the Venerable Araham; and third, by 22 Mon monks along with 22 Mon novices; and, finally, the Mon monks of the present.

## **Analysis of trend in development of Buddhism in the Mon region of Myanmar in next decade**

Within the next few years, the future trend of Buddhism in the Mon region is set to become an important component in Mon Nations. Research has found that because the current trend of Buddhism in Mon region is not equivalent to that of the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the new century, Buddhism in the Mon region is favorable in political, economical, ideological and cultural environment. To put it another way, the researcher uses the theory of SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat) analysis to analyze the future trend of Buddhism in the Mon region.

It is said that the strengths of trend in the modern development of Buddhist cultures and its rites are that with the new trend, the Mon Buddhist arts, Buddhist paintings, Buddhist sculptures, Buddhist architectures will possibly be developed by the individual outstanding of the Mon people who knew the historical background of the Mon and the Mon Buddhist cultural history. Furthermore, due to the economics and society are changing in modern times, the trend of performing of the Mon rites are going to change too, for instance, in each month of a year, the Mon the ceremony of religious festival are held by the Mon people more than in the previous decades.

In relation to Buddhist culture of Mon in the next decade, it is worth noticing that the youth of Mon people today is take more interest to uphold their culture. In the public, in daily life of Mon, in the religious ceremony of the temple, pagoda, the Mon traditional customs are more used by the Mon youth of today. The Mon national clothes are not only worn by the Mon people but also are worn by the ethnics groups in Myanmar even in Thailand today.

According to interviewee, Nai Jam Naing, a prominent Thai-Mon Scholar, stated that in the previous decades the Mon people in Thailand were very shy and afraid. However, when the Mon Nation marked the Mon national day in Mahachai, Lobbury and some other parts of in Thailand and when the Royal Thai King Rama 9 and 10 birthday, they were not shy and afraid to wear their National costumes, culture, and tradition to perform their costumes, culture, and tradition in the public areas in Thailand.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with **Nai Jam Naing**, Thai-Mon Scholar, September 12, 2019.

What is more, the strength of trend in the development of Mon Sangha administration in the next decade will be more potential development. For instances, over the past decades, teaching of Buddhist scripture in Mon language in several Mon monasteries and teaching of Mon language in government school and Mon National schools in Mon State were prohibited by the military government in Myanmar. However, research has found that due to the struggle of Mon Sanghas and Mon people, teaching of Buddhist scriptures in Mon language in the Mon monasteries are in relevant again. Obviously, it is stated for the first time that students at government schools in Mon State of Myanmar will also be allowed to take some classes in the Mon language during regular school hours in nowadays. (Lawi Weng, 2019)

Regarding the strengths of Mon literature in Mon region of Myanmar, researcher has found that in the Rāññmadhammācariya Association, many of Mon literatures in Tipitaka translation books, Magazines, have been published and Buddhist Scriptures books printed by the Mon Tipitaka Translation group in Mon also developed Mon literature. Besides, the Mon literature describing Mon Buddhist cultures and Mon daily life in Mon Magazines and weekly journals published by the Mon Writers Association and by the Mon Journalists in nowadays are increasing.

All the interviewees indicated that the educations of Mon people in nowadays are growing in numbers including Mon monks who are learning in abroad. They further stated that because of Mon monks and Mon people are educated not only in Myanmar but also in foreign countries, Our Mon nations can lead our nation in the rapid changing world. This is strength that the Mon Buddhism will be developed in the near future by the educational purposes.

Besides, the strength of Buddhist monastic education (Pariyatti) also will be developed in Mon Monasteries. In addition, it is believed that there have been lots of Mon learning Sanghas taken the Mon Pariyatti Examination and a growing numbers of educated Mon Sanghas and Mon lay people who were graduated from the colleges and University in Myanmar and in foreign countries are increasing year by year.

Moreover, the strengths of Mon Patipatti (Practicing) in Mon are more developer than in the previous decades. In reality, the Mon Sanghas in nowadays are playing a crucial roles in preaching Dhamma talks and explaining meditation method not only in the practice centers in Mon region but also they go to spread the Buddha's teachings around the world where Mon people live.

Besides, existing meditation centers have become revitalized and new centers have been established to meet public interest. According to Most Ven. Baddanta Kesara, he claims that now there is four meditation centers have been opened in Mon State, Union of Myanmar. Their names are 1. Pa Auk; 2. Pha Gala 3. Janudho; and Thanlyin Tawya meditation center. Apart from that there are also individual meditation masters who are open the meditation method by their own in Mon region. A growing number of Mon people take to meditation.<sup>2</sup> In the next few years, the strength of Buddhism in Mon region in Myanmar and where the Mon people live, likely to have seen the material development such as building the Pagoda, temple, Rest-house, and meditation centers. Sixty percent of those interviewed stated that Mon people are generous to donate their wealth on the triple gems; Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

In contrast to the strengths of trend in development of Buddhism in Mon region of Myanmar in the next decade, the weakness of Buddhism in Mon region in the next decade will be analyzed. The weakness trends of Mon Buddhist cultures and its rites in the next decade will likely to decline are that there is no archeological conservation organization due to lack of collecting budget from the state government. It seems that the ancient Mon Buddhist cultures are scattering every place in Myanmar.

In reality, it is stated that the weakness of Buddhism in Mon region in the next decade will possibly be declined due to deteriorating politic support. For Example, Buddhism had generally relied on the support of Kings or the Government. According to Dr. Min Nwe Soe claimed that there is no representative of Mon ministers on behalf of Mon nation in the Mon region in Myanmar. The Mon Sanghas do not granted for financial Aids from the Burmese government for their religions. However, due to get the supporting funds from the Mon Buddhist laypeople and immigrants Mon people from abroad, the Mon Sanghas continue to exist in nowadays.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, it should be worth noticing that the weakness of Buddhism in Mon in the next decade is based on the Mon economics. Personally, research has found that due to the lack of industrial development and social change in Mon State, at least one household

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<sup>2</sup>Interview with **Most Venerable Baddanta Kesara**, the Secretary of Rāmaññadham-mācariya Association, All Mon Region, head abbot of Rāmaññikāya Botataung Mon Pariyatti Monastery, Seik Kan Township, Yangon Region, Myanmar, on May 24, 2019.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with **Dr. Min Nwe Soe**, Retired Ministry, Planning and Economics Ministry, State Government, Mon State, Myanmar, May 20, 2019.

member of Mon people is gone abroad. Having collected money from abroad, if the Mon people will not do a business in their region, it would be more difficult to support Buddhism.

For instance, even the Rāmaññarattha Buddhist University has been established in Motmalorm (Mawlamyine), Mon State, Myanmar, there are no financial aids from the state government to support the higher education in that university. However, due to the efforts of most famous Venerable Tlagoon acar Silacara got the supporting funds from his Dhamma talk activities in Mon and from the Mon community of around the world and the generous Mon people in Mon region the Rāmaññarattha Buddhist university in Mon is in progress as usual in today.

According to Nai Phi San Bonphok, a Thai-Mon Scholar, claimed that the new generation of Mon in Thailand is do not speak out loud of their language. Since they cannot speak Mon, it is difficult for them to be integrated into the mainstream of Mon community. In Thailand, the majority of Thai-Mon cannot speak Mon. Even though, they can speak, only a few can read and write in Mon. However, they identify themselves as Mon through culture and descents. This is the scenario of Weakness of Mon language in Thailand.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, it is supposed that even in the Mon Pariyatti monasteries, many of young Mon monks and novices can be seen but in the outside of Mon Pariyatti monasteries and in the rural places of Mon region the annual growth rate of Mon young monks and nuns also is expected to decline day by day. Nevertheless, according to Most Venerable Baddanta Ketumala and Most Venerable Baddanta Silavanta, they stated that at present time Mon children are going to Summer Mon Training Courses rather than being as novices in the Monasteries.

Having analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the trends in development of Buddhism in Mon region of Myanmar in the next decade, the opportunity and threats will be analyzed in the following. Within the next ten years, the golden opportunities of Buddhism in the Mon region seem to have more opportunity to connect and to work with the international platform of the world because of the international Buddhist studies programmes run in the Rāmaññarattha Buddhist University in Mon region.

Besides, the Mon Sanghas and the Mon people will be also had a good chance to join with the international scholars. A great example is that since the Mon monks have studied at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand, the representatives of Mon

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<sup>4</sup>Interview with **Nai Phisan Bonphok**, A prominent Thai-Mon Scholar, July 26, 2019.



Sanghas and Mon people have a chance to attend the United National Day of Vesak which is held in Thailand every year.

In addition, it is generally stated that due to the technology is rapidly changing, some of Mon monk has opportunity to do a philanthropic work for the welfare of Mon people in Mon region in connection with the Mon community in abroad.

On the whole, the threats of trend in the development of Buddhism in Mon region in next decade will be analyzed. According to a prominent Mon scholar Dr. Nai Pan Hla, claimed that the Mon language is a dying language, and it revival must be a priority for Mon leaders. UNESCO also listed the Mon language as a vulnerable language among the World's Languages in Danger. (Patrick, McCormick et al, 2011,186) According to the world Factbook, estimate the Mon population in Myanmar and in Thailand at being just c. 1.2 million. (Wikipedia, 2019)

However, Dr. Min Nwe Soe claimed that the populations of the Mon people in Myanmar are much higher, at around 4 million and 8 million in Myanmar. Most ethnic Mon live in Mon State being in the vicinity of 2 percent of the country's total population, just above 1 million. It is difficult to collect the census of Mon people in Nowadays. For example, when they make their identity in the government office, their names being forced to write as a Bamar Ethnic. That is why the Mon population in Myanmar is lower in number.<sup>5</sup>

According to Mon scholars statement from the interviews, there are, who, define them as Buddhist, 99% present Buddhist and 9 % present Christian. The Mon Christians are belonging to the Christian community in Mon State, Union of Myanmar. The Mon of today who believes in Christianity, historically, just started from mixed marriage.<sup>6</sup> Mon Sangha community has the largest population among Mon State.

It is generally accepted that due to the Mon people received new technology, some of Mon youths are spending their time in their places less than go to the temple. On the other hand, due to the social changed the Mon children do not like to be novices and Mon man rarely would like to be ordained as monks. There is less Mon monk in Thailand preserving Mon Buddhism in nowadays. All things considered, this is a great threats not only in Mon Buddhism but also the ethnic identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with **Dr. Min Nwe Soe**, Retired Ministry, Planning and Economics Ministry, State Government, Mon State, Myanmar, May 20, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings show that before Buddhism was introduced into the Mon Kingdom, traditionally, the Mon people beliefs in Bajū (gods), beliefs in Isi (hermit), and beliefs in Hinduism. Furthermore, it is also found that the twelfth times of Buddhism were introduced into the Mon Kingdom

From the data analysis of interviewees, it is forecasted that the Buddhism in the Mon region in the next decade are depending on the leading roles of Mon Sangha in nowadays. Apparently, the outcome has been highlighted that the Mon Sanghas today have taken a heavy duty on the way to develop and promote the Buddhism in Mon region in various ways. The findings further indicate that due to the lack of the governor of the Mon National State government or State self-determination, the Mon Sangha are being regarded as the leader of the Mon National by the Mon people.

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