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**Buddhist Commentary, Discourses of Modernity, and the Political in Post/Colonial Burma: The Milindapañha-āṭṭhakathā of Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw**

Underlying the political upheaval and social instability of mid-twentieth century Burma is the ambivalence inherent in the double project facing it, that of “simultaneously adapting to and overcoming modernity” (Nak-Chung 68). This paper is an introductory investigation into whether printed Buddhist commentary participated in this double project in modern Burma. To begin unravelling this question, I am focusing on the Milindapañha-āṭṭhakathā of Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw (Miṅ’” Kun’” Jetavan’ Sayāto’, or Ū” Nārada) (1868-1955), the first known āṭṭhakathā on the Milindapañha, a text considered canonical only in Burma/Myanmar. Finished in 1940, the Second World War forced the Mingun to wait until 1948, when he published his commentary on the eve of Burmese independence. The Mingun published in the most authoritative of all Pali exegetical genres, the last set of which was composed possibly as late as the end of the first millennium (von Hinüber 148). In addition to this commentary, our author composed an āṭṭhakathā on the Peṭakopadesa in 1926 (Ñāṇamoli xiv, a three-volume auto-nissaya on the same, a vinicchaya text on vinaya economics, and several vernacular manuals on vipassanā meditation. In fact, the Mingun is credited, along with Ledi Sayadaw, with founding several vipassanā lineages which have now spread internationally through his students, like Mahasi Sayadaw, and which have become a part of Burmese statecraft and national identity (see Houtman 1999, Jordt 2007).

Though the Mingun writes that the Peṭakopadesa-āṭṭhakathā is “very helpful for the teaching” (peṭakopadesaaatṭhakathā pi sāsanassa bahūpakārā) and is “current” (pavattateva) (2) today among scholars and students, the Milindapañha-āṭṭhakathā met a different fate: instead of wide spread acceptance, it was strictly censored by the newly independent government of U Nu in 1953.
This administration was pro-Buddhist, embarking on an ambitious “Buddhist Revivalist” program throughout the 1950s (Mendelson 334), but was nonetheless hostile to the Mingun’s publication. A story still circulates that the *Milindapañha-āṭṭhakathā* was ceremoniously incinerated on the altar of the Shwedagon Pagoda, around the same time as its official ban. I was offered this account unsolicited upon inquiring about the Mingun at the State Pariyatti Sāsana Buddhist University, Yangon, in 2016. Madhav Deshpande (8) presents newspaper evidence that this text was targeted for monastic censorship as well, in part because of controversy around the Mingun’s views on *kathina-kamma* (robe-giving ceremony) reform, and full female ordination. In terms of the intersection between textual and state histories, the *Milindapañha-āṭṭhakathā* was omitted from the so-called Sixth Buddhist Council (*Chattha Sangāyāna*) in Yangon, 1954-1956; this event was a key component of U Nu’s Buddhist Revivalist program, and was presided over by the Mingun’s student, Mahasi Sayadaw. Many questions remain about the role of the Mingun’s commentary in this event, but his *Peṭakopadesa-āṭṭhakathā* was considered so important, it was retroactively inscribed in the stone slabs of the Fifth Council edition in Mandalay (*40 Myan’ mā nain’ ñan’*).

With this sociopolitical background to both my primary source and monastic author, I attempt with this project to understand how epistemic questions of evidence and authority in post/colonial Burma/Myanmar were tackled in print and public. These questions and their ensuing textual debates have an existential import into matters of society and politics, and show the broader impact of Buddhist print culture in the mid-twentieth century. After almost sixty years of colonial rule, a devastating war between foreign aggressors, and the rise of new superpowers in a nuclear age, the Mingun published amidst what Niklas Foxeus calls: “competing visions of religious authority” (85). Part of what I will try to do today is find traces of these competing visions in the
Milinda pañha-atṭhakathā, to follow contradictions and counter discourses that reveal the tensions inherent in the double project of modernity, as these tensions manifest in Pali commentary.

To find such traces, contradictions and counter discourses in the text, I begin by examining the Mingun’s commentary on the pubbayogakaṇḍa of the Milinda pañha, the “Chapter on the Previous Connections.” This chapter details the meeting of Milinda and Nāgasena in a previous life, and is a kind of framing story (bāhirakathā) to the rest of the text. The Mingun begins by analysing the title of this chapter, which allows him to launch into a discussion on the “knowledge of previous states (of existence)” (pubbenivāsāṇa). He asks the reader, presumably another monastic trained in Pali: “Who is to relate this [knowledge]? The person who has acquired remembrance of his former existence—he is to relate it” (taṃ kena kathetabbaṃ/ yo pubbenivāsāṇaṃ labhati) (7). As we will see, the discussion is about the possibility of remembering—of dismembering, sort to speak—the content of past lives. As we analyse the Mingun’s response, it will hopefully become clear that the idea of possibility is tied up with proof: who has the epistemic standing to speak, indeed, the moral imperative to relate past lives to others, especially to a large audience in print form? According to the Mingun, one who has the right to share their proof is one “who has made the necessary preparations for the knowledge about his former existences” (yo pubbenivāsāṇaṃ parikammam karoti/ tena laddham) (7). This preparation, we are left to assume, consists of scrupulously following the pañcasīla and vinaya code of discipline, as well as reaching advanced states of meditation, which might be an allusion to the Mingun’s own vipassanā training and teaching.
Next the Mingun invokes the classical commentarial convention of the unnamed detractor, suggesting that there are contemporary discourses around *pubbenivāsaṅāṇam* in which our author wishes to intervene. He writes: “It should not be said that “but this talk is not to be spoken about only as an impossibility. Why?” (*na heva kho panesā atṭhāne kathetabbā ti na vattabbaṃ/ kasmā*) (7). We cannot be sure if the Mingun is responding to an actual person, an anticipated critique of his own stance, or whether these detractors are fellow monastics or laypeople. Yet it seems from numerous references to foils and antagonists in the sections of the commentary I have translated so far, that the Mingun has taken a somewhat combative, polemical stance. Later in this chapter, for instance, the Mingun uses references from canonical sources to chide younger monks for insubordination and disrespect to the *saṅgha* hierarchy, which might indicate that the Mingun is using the *Milindapañha*-atṭhakathā to weigh in on multiple controversial fronts.

In answer to his own question of why *pubbenivāsaṅāṇam* should not be spoken about as an impossibility, the Mingun states: “When the teaching of the Buddha has decayed, those who obtain various sorts of *iddhi* are not many” (*buddhassa hi bhagavato sāsane parihīne iddhividhaṅāṇalābhi pi bahulo na hoti*) (7). The decay of the Buddha’s teaching (*sāsana parihīna*) is a reoccurring trope in commentarial literature. In Burma, however, this concept took on a renewed importance and underwent many detailed elaborations, especially in *nissaya* form, where the order, stages and content of the *sāsana*’s decay were made explicit in many subsequent texts, such as in the 1831 *Thathanalinkara Sadan* and the *Sāsanavamsa* group of texts. Scholars suggest this sense of urgency about the *sāsana* coincided with British imperial aggression, which culminated in the full annexation of Burma in 1886. Here, we have a contemporary commentator explicitly placing his *atṭhakathā* in the age of *sāsana* decline, but unlike his predecessors in
The Mingun’s concern for the wellbeing of the sāsana is first evident in his nidānakathā, where he states his reason for writing this commentary. After clarifying that he is filling in a commentarial lacuna around the Milindapañha, our author writes that this commentary was “well composed… for the augmentation and increase of the teaching of the canon which has become the basis for the teaching of practice and attainment” (suṭṭhu viracitā… paṭivedhapatiṭipattisāsanānaṃ mūlabhūtassa pariyyattisāsanassā vuddhiyā virūḷhiyā ganthavācakānam) (2). In this formulation, the Buddhist canon (pariyatti) is at the root of practice (paṭipatti), which leads ultimately to attainment (paṭivedha). It is in the commentarial tradition of Buddhaghosa where we first see the elevation of canon to the core of the Buddhist sāsana (Endo 143), not as the first or even last component of the sāsana to disappear, but as the element that makes everything else possible. In this lineage, the Mingun is reasserting the historical hegemony of the atṭhakathā genre.

The Mingun is not alone in his preoccupation with sāsana parīhina, as Erik Braun has shown how this trope animated Ledi Sayadaw as well, the forerunner of the Mingun in the spread of the new method of vipassanā meditation; but what may be unique is the Mingun’s linking of these historical concerns with a Pali exegesis on psychic powers, especially in the authoritative atṭhakathā form. Covering almost 70 pages in Madhav Deshpande’s transliteration from Burmese to Roman script, it appears the bulk of the pubbayogakaṇḍa’s commentary is dedicated to a protracted discussion on paranormal powers, including the ability of some monks to fly over the
peaks of the Himalayas. In the first paragraph of this chapter, the Mingun enumerates these powers, writing that in the age of sāsana decline,

attaining knowledge of magic bodies is also not extensive…, attaining knowledge of the divine ear is not extensive, attaining knowledge of reading other’s mind…, attaining knowledge of former lives…, attaining knowledge of the divine eye…, attaining knowledge of future times, attaining the knowledge of experiencing [the results] according to one’s actions is not extensive, they are few, [as] person[s] endowed with the path and also endowed with the fruit are few too. (7)

iddhividhaņñalābhi pi bahulo na hoti/ dibbasotaņñalābhi pi bahulo na hoti/ cetopariyaņñalābhi... pubbenivāsaņñalābhi...
dibbacakkhuņñalābhi... anāgataṃsaņñalābhi...
yathākammūpagāņñalābhi pi bahulo na hoti/appako va hoti/
maggasamaņgiko pi phalasamaņgiko pi appako va hoti

All told we have seven psychic or supernatural powers listed here, though admittedly ‘iddhividhaņņa’ might be a general term for the higher powers as a collective. This list overlaps with but is not equivalent to the chaḷabhiņñā, the six kinds of higher knowledge, though the above list includes the mundane (lokiya) supernormal powers, without mention of āsavakkhaya, the removal of all cankers, considered a supramundane (lokuttara) quality with direct religious implications. However, it seems that several current Burmese lists of the chaḷabhiņñā consulted do not mention āsavakkhaya, replacing this supramundane power with yathākammūpagābhīņñā (56 Kyaw and Lwin), which is what we see in the Mingun’s enumeration. The ability to know the results of karmic actions has import for the religious life as well, and is perhaps considered a
suitable *lokuttara* replacement for the *āsavakkhaya* in the Burmese tradition. It is important to note here the inclusion of *anāgatāmsaṇāṇa* in the above list, knowledge of the future. This power is epistemically fundamental to central arguments the Mingun advances elsewhere in this *aṭṭhakathā*, arguments that are based on the ability of the Buddha to foresee the future, such as the Mingun’s promotion of full female ordination in the *meṇḍakapaṇhakaṇḍa*. In the introduction to his transliteration, Deshpande labels the Mingun as a “religious reformer” who “couched these reformist ideas as doctrines passed on [by the Buddha] to future monks (*anāgatabhikkūnaṃ esa nayo dinno*)” (Deshpande 7). By including ‘*anāgatāmsaṇāṇa*’ in the above list, the Mingun is attempting to interpret the *dhamma* and *vinaya* retroactively, trying to make sense of the present in terms of the Buddha’s historical intention, which operated over the *longue durée* of the *sāsana*.

Notice that in the previous quotation, the Mingun refrains from saying that such attainments are not possible in his age, only that few possess them. The issue of attainments is a sort of indicator species for the *sāsana*, helping humanity measure the wellbeing of the Buddhist ecosystem at a given time and place. Whether or not attainments are possible in the present age is, indeed, a question that has reverberations throughout Burmese society. The controversy surrounding King Bodawpaya, for instance, touched upon the question of attainments, that is, who has legitimate access to them. We also see the issue of attainments underpinning the Buddhist millenarian movements that sprung up in response to colonial rule and centralizing state forces in the end of the nineteenth century. At first glance, the Mingun’s *aṭṭhakathā* and Buddhist millenarian movements have little in common, but our text and these movements share a concern with the phenomenology of psychic powers and their historical significance. While exploring this shared ground of psychic powers between the millenarian movements and the writings of a *vipassanā*
leader like the Mingun might be fruitful, the Mingun’s own practice focuses on ‘dry’ means of insight meditation, which de-emphasize the use of *samadhi*. Yet this dichotomy between esoteric and so-called rational forms of meditation might not be as sharp as scholars like to suggest, at least when we examine the *Milindapañha-āṭṭhakathā*’s discussion on psychic powers.

Before delving into the description of how one remember their previous lives, the Mingun appears to criticize his contemporaries yet again: he states that there are “numerous ignorant ones who do not wish to discuss” the possibility of there being living monks “endowed with the knowledge of the path, the knowledge of the fruit, and the knowledge of the duties of superpowers” (*maggañāṇena ca samannāgataṃ phalañāṇena ca samannāgataṃ abhiññākiccañāṇena ca samannāgataṃ āyasmantaṃ atthī ti vacanamattaṃ pi akathetukāmo appas[s]uto va bahulo hoti*).

These ignorant ones, who are either reacting to or products of the *sāsana parihīna*, “do not have faith” (*na saddahati*) (7), that is, do not have faith that the attainments are possible. Strictly speaking, of the six higher knowledges, only *āsavakkhaya* can be considered a worthwhile attainment, and the Mingun does not even mention the removal of cankers as a *chalabhiñña*; yet psychic powers are by-products of *paṭivedhā*, and for him, a legitimate part of the *sāsana*. Thus when the Mingun criticizes those “numerous ignorant ones,” he might have in mind western trained, Burmese intelligentsia who attempted to “demythologize” Theravāda doctrine and praxis to suit a more modern sense of what is and what is not possible. It is hard to be certain about the identity of these faithless ones, with only a few such quotes in hand for now, but the presence of a ‘modern’ audience might explain the Mingun’s concern with verifiable proof, empirical evidence and justified true belief.
The Mingun’s concern with proof (sādhaka) is first evident in the ganthārambakathā in an obscure explanation of Milinda’s initial encounter with Nāgasena. In the root text, Milinda correctly picks out Nāgasena from the crowd of monks, and thinks to himself: “Today, without any doubt, I will be defeated” (nisasayam parājayo mama ajja bhavissati). For this episode, the Mingun offers the following cryptic explication:

The first word (‘nisasyam’) was said with the authority of a proof. “He (Milinda) should know that proof.” But why ought it not be said: “he should know (that proof) by just this little? For that (proof) is not to be rejected merely because (Milinda) did not see (Nāgasena) beforehand” (5).

Admittedly, the compound ‘anolokitapubbaṃ’ is contextual, and I previously translated it as referring to the proof “that was not examined previously”; however, after the emphasis given to supernormal powers of body and perception in the following chapter, this phrase seems now to be discussing the ability of Milinda to recognise Nāgasena straight away without aid from his ministers. Indeed, the question becomes: how could Milinda, without having seen Nāgasena beforehand, identify his competitor, and more importantly, why does he know, with all certainty, that we will be defeated? The answer, as suggested by the Mingun, is rooted in the attainments of Nāgasena, which are immediately recognizable at first sight. The point that the Mingun is trying to make is that these attainments are subject to a different kind and level of proof than that professed and understood by ‘ignorant ones.’ By referring to proof (sādhaka) in relation to a paranormal episode between characters in the beginning of his commentary, perhaps the Mingun
wanted to set the scene to challenge modern standards of proof, especially when applied to *sāsana* vitality and the present possibilities of *paṭivedhā*.

Thus far we have discussed the words and interpretations of the Mingun himself, but now we turn to his selection and use of sources, which are almost as telling as his own explications. In her recent book, *Traditional Theravāda Meditation*, Kate Crosby claims the Mingun is one of the founders of a “modernised reform method of meditation” that he formulated from the “normative account of meditation derived from and authorised by the 5th century CE commentator Buddhaghosa” (12). In the *Milindapañha-aṭṭhakathā*, the Mingun quotes extensively from Buddhaghosa when detailing the process by which one can remember their past lives. The Mingun’s selects from the *Visuddhimagga’s* Part II, Chapter XIII, “Other Direct-Knowledges” (according to Ñāṇamoli’s translation). This section includes instructions for a monastic practitioner to access memories of previous existences, quotidian process according to the text. Over several pages taken verbatim from Chapter XIII, the Mingun selects excerpts that deal with the memory of past lives in two temporal directions, what Steven Collins calls ‘*paṭiloma*’ (backwards) and ‘*anuloma*’ (biographical) time. An example of *paṭiloma* time is found in the following excerpt chosen by the Mingun, where a monk attempts to access his past lives after coming back from an alms round. First, he

> should attain the four jhānas in succession and emerge from the fourth jhāna as basis for direct-knowledge. He should then advert to his most recent act of sitting down, next, to the preparation of the seat, to the entry into the lodging, to the putting away of the bowl and robe, to the time of eating, to the time of returning from the village, to the time of wandering
for alms in the village, to the time of entering the village, to the time of setting out from the monastery… (406)

In the description that follows, this process is extrapolated days and decades into the past; the practicing monk can take this process to the very end of this life (this series of aggregates) and beyond. Indeed, once the monk is able to break through the death and rebirth linking (cutipaṭisandhi) moment of this life, and provided they are sufficiently spiritually advanced, then they can theoretically use this step-by-step process to continue back into their sojourn in saṃsara indefinitely.

From the “academic perspective” he takes in his own article, Collins describes the Visuddhimagga as an “imaginative project,” thus denying the paṭiloma process above any “phenomenological” reality. To this claim the Mingun might disagree, for this account of remembering past lives seems to be acting as evidence or verification of legitimate experience, if not of his own, then others potentially living in the present. With this portrayal of the solitary monk proceeding through his succession of circadian recollections, we are offered a very rational, empirical, and individualized account of something usually considered quite extraordinary, the remembrance of past lives. This observation becomes more relevant when we realize that the Mingun skipped altogether the accounts of the destruction and creation cycles of this world-system, the endless, geological phantasmagorias of samsara that were found in the original. These fantastical scenes are the extreme end of the paṭiloma process in Buddhaghosa’s text, where the practitioner and reader witness the “aeons of world contraction” (410), representing a prosaic description of fifth century C.E. Buddhist geo-cosmogony. Yet in our commentary, the Mingun omits this description entirely, going from the deep ruminations of the solitary monk (414 in the PTS edition), to Buddhaghosa’s
enumeration of eight types of object for the remembrance of past lives (433). Instead of offering us epic scenes of world destruction, where oceans dry and second suns appear, the Mingun selects an abstract discussion on the “Knowledge of past lives [which] occurs with respect to eight kinds of object, that is to say, as having a limited, exalted, or measureless object, path as object, a past object, and an internal, external, or not-so-classifiable object” (425). For someone who practices and promotes vipassanā meditation, the focus on ‘objects’ makes sense, but compared to the scenes of mountain destruction and world systems catching fire, this image-less discussion on objects is extremely dry. Indeed, the contrast between aeons of contraction and the eight types of objects is so vast, it appears the Mingun is trying to present a sanitized version of the psychic powers, without the cosmological trappings offered by Buddhaghosa.

After four full pages of direct quotation from the Visuddhimagga, the Mingun finally offers us his own commentary on this passage. He concludes, after emphasizing the “preparations” (parikammā) that one must do to reach such a stage of development, that “the one who obtains knowledge of past states should be the one who relates (it).” As soon as he has declared this fact, the Mingun immediately follows in the next sentence with “atīte kira,” a transition so sharp that it implies the Mingun is now narrating past states himself. He goes on to relate an episode during the dispensation of Buddha Kassapa, when Nāgasena and Milinda were senior and junior monastics respectively. Almost like the Buddha regaling his retinue with tales of his own past life, the Mingun here involves the reader in a tale of past lives without the mediation usually found in jātaka material. This is an important point, especially in light of the Mingun’s inclusion of future knowledge in his list of the chaḷabhiññā, because by deploying an aṭṭhakathā on a text like the Milindapañha, our author is filling in some of the same details around the text usually reserved for
a Buddha, or at least someone with highly advanced spiritual knowledge and firsthand experience of the past events. The centrality of the pubbayogakaṇḍā to the whole aesthetic of the Milinda pañña reinforces the jataka-like quality of this text, yet the Milinda pañña is not textually surrounded by the same explication and resolution mechanisms as these types of texts, like the framing story and the resolution of each character’s identity by the Buddha. The Mingun’s aṭṭhakathā, at least this section on the pubbayogakaṇḍa, is thus a type of framing story (bāhirakathā) itself, telling those of us in the present what the meaning and the moral of the story is, resolving our questions and doubts, and claiming religious authority in the process.

Unlike an ordinary disciple, the Buddha is not constrained by the paṭiloma order of memory, at least in the world view emerging from the Milinda pañña-aṭṭhakathā. In the excerpts the Mingun selected from the Visuddhimagga, the hierarchy of historical memory is topped by the forward-looking anuloma temporality of the Buddha and other highly accomplished beings. Instead of starting from this moment back to the past, as we necessarily do, anuloma temporality starts from somewhere (anywhere) in the past and continues to the present moment (and possibly beyond). The conditions of anuloma time appear essential to the larger argument being made by the Mingun, at least at this early stage in my project. For this perspective allows him to develop arguments embedded in the mind of the Buddha, who looks past us and sees the full arc of sāsana decline. Hence establishing the basis of psychic powers—of the very possibility of a different paradigm to describe history—appears key to the agenda of the Mingun in his Milinda pañña commentary.

I might go so far as to say that these powers are key to the sovereignty of the Mingun as well, hence the relevancy of the root text, the Milinda pañña, as a site to work out competing visions of
religious authority, to declare domains of proof and power over and against one another. The idea of sovereign domains is perhaps helpful, for based on the text translated thus far, and the author’s biography, meditative experience is one domain present in the Mingun’s commentary, along with canon, grammar and the Pali language itself. When we return to the issues of proof and authority that we saw in the translations above, one is reminded of the words of Crosby, who writes that vipassanā, which the Mingun helped popularize, was “placed above and outside of somatic sciences, [and] was both a product of and proof against the dichotomies of the modern era” (132). By claiming that vipassanā is both product of and proof against the modern era, Crosby is emphasizing the double move that vipassanā practice plays in the face of modernity. She is also drawing our attention to the spaces and discourses outside of modernity, places self-consciously occupied by movements like vipassanā meditation and millenarian Buddhism.

The Milindapañha-atṭhakathā, like vipassanā and Buddhist millenarian movements, is not easily categorized. With my early translations in hand, it is still unclear whether this text is performing the double move of modernity, or whether it is consciously placing itself outside these tensions. What, for instance, does the protracted discussion on psychic powers signal to the contemporary audience of this text? To end my presentation, I ask what does it even mean for a commentary to be modern, and is ‘modernity’ the most appropriate framework to work within? As far as I can tell, no other author in Southeast Asia wrote in the atṭhakathā genre in the last century; perhaps such innovation was not possible in Pali manuscript culture? Did the advent of print culture enable the Mingun to reactive the atṭhakathā genre and invoke the religious authority of Buddhaghosa? Still early in my research and my career, I am happy to have so many questions left unanswered, and humbly seek insight from my fellow panelists, discussants, and the Buddhist Studies community.
Works Cited


Myan’ mā nain’ īnan’ kyak’ āhātāṇ’ piṭakat’ yun’’’ pun’ pāḷi to’ āṭṭhakathā nhan’ ṭikā to’ māṭikāmyā. Publication Information Unknown.
