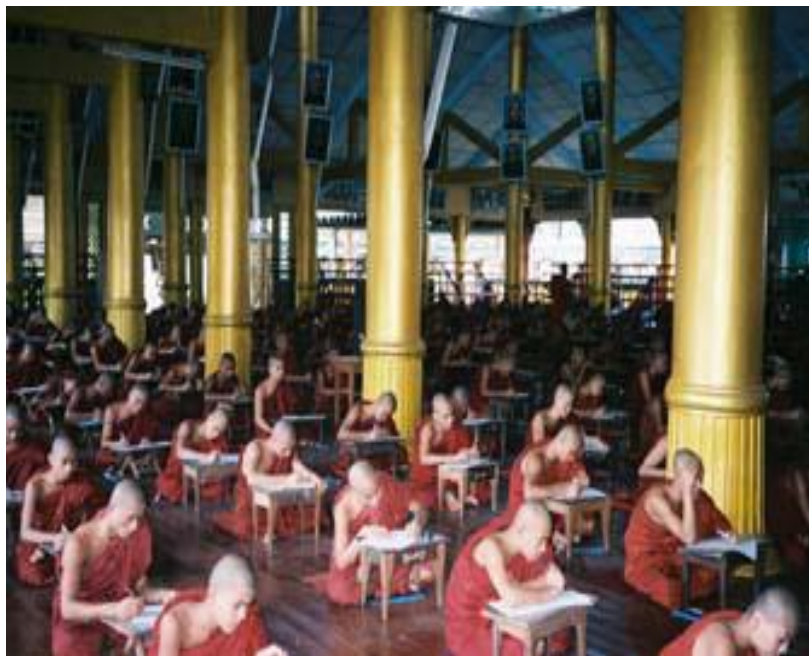


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***BULLETIN OF THE  
BURMA  
STUDIES GROUP***

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Sitting for exams, Kya Khet Wain monastery, Pegu. Photo by Jake Carbine

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**Next Issue**

September 2005  
(Submissions due August 2005)

**CONTENTS**

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Recent Contributions to the Study of Burmese Buddhism.....	2
Exploring Theravada Studies .....	3
Renunciation and Power in Burmese Buddhism .....	4
An Ethic of Continuity.....	7
Notes Toward the Study of Dhammathat Maunscripts.....	10
Ledi Sayadaw and a Controversial Pali Text .....	12
Monastic Reform and the Writing of Buddhist History .....	13
Buddhist Organizations and Buddhist Revival in Colonial Burma .....	14
Little Yangon in Tokyo.....	15
Burmese Buddhism in California.....	17

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## Recent Contributions to the study of Burmese Buddhism

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Let me introduce this issue of the *Bulletin* with a confession. Doing research in Indonesia and Burma alike, I have come to dread moments in any conversation when the topic turns to religion. I know full well that religion means a great deal to many of the people I meet in these societies and that, as an anthropologist, I should share their interest. But rather than arouse curiosity, the first mention of religious ideas fills me with dread. This response, akin to an allergic reaction to even tiny traces of some allergen, stems from having listened for many a long hour to worthy people give expression to incontestably moral sentiments and unimpeachably pious platitudes, recitations that drive me ever deeper into a kind of submissive catatonia.

In trying to analyze my irrational and regrettable reaction to these turns in conversation, I have come to understand that what makes me so bewail the broaching of religious discourse is precisely what makes it so attractive to many of my interlocutors. Speaking to people one barely knows carries a certain risk in any society. Speaking to people from very far away (such as an American anthropologist), whose aural comprehension is doubtful, cognitive habits unclear, and actual motives open to question, can only put many people on edge. In such situations, repeating obvious and universally accepted phrases on a subject, morality itself, that everyone acknowledges to be important but uncontroversial, is to take the high road to safe ground. So what looks to me like the flat expanse of the conversational doldrums looks to my interlocutors like a smooth and elevated lake

in which to paddle, perhaps aimlessly but certainly securely.

Fortunately, many scholars approach religious discourse much more open-mindedly than I do, and as a result, they are able to gather fascinating insights into people's understandings of the world and their place in it. The trick, of course, is to direct the flow of conversation away from the obvious to the particular. It is a pleasure to report that many younger scholars are finding ways to do just this and to make of the subject of Burmese Buddhism an excellent terrain on which to learn a great deal that is new, important, and intriguing. The purpose of this issue of the *Bulletin* is to acquaint our readers with some of the work that these people are doing.

It was learning from Jake Carbine that he and Guillaume Rozenberg had organized a conference on the subject of Theravada Buddhism last August in Singapore, and that only a few months later Jake was going to defend his dissertation, that gave me the idea of devoting this issue to the study of Buddhism. Jake has provided me the names of several younger scholars whose work deserves attention in this regard, and readers will find accounts, some shorter, some longer, of their work in the following pages. There are no doubt other scholars whose work I am not yet aware of. I hope that they will make their projects known to me, so that we can include mention of them in future issues.

To my delight, Frank Reynolds has agreed to write a follow-up to this issue in the form of a state-of-the-field essay on Theravada Buddhist studies. This will appear in the next issue (the so-called "September" issue, although I am not always able to fulfill my editorial duties as promptly as I would like). As a venerable *hsaya*, Frank provides a

scholarly link to the period that brought us such classic works on Buddhism in Southeast Asia as Spiro's *Buddhism and Society*, Mendelson's *Sangha and State in Burma*, and Tambiah's *World Conqueror, World Renouncer*. By continuing to work in the region, and training students, however, Frank keeps very much in touch with ongoing developments in the field, ones that promise us a whole new generation of scholarship. Gustaaf Houtman's *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics* may well constitute the first major contribution in this new wave in Buddhist studies, at least in reference specifically to Burma. But herein follows a preview of several studies, in a great range of fields, that will greatly expand our understanding of Buddhism, in Burma and beyond it, over the next few years.

The Editor

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### **Exploring Theravada Studies**

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*Jake Carbine provides the following short account of the conference on Theravada Buddhism that he and Guillaume Rozenberg organized last year. While the conference covered both South and Southeast Asia, Burma-related papers comprised a significant part of the program. If nothing else, the conference conveyed the complex nature of Theravada Buddhism, and the great range of approaches its study invites.*

In November 2003, Guillaume Rozenberg approached me with an idea for an international conference dealing with scholarly approaches to Buddhist studies. At the time, Guillaume held a post-doctoral fellowship at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. His

position included funding for a workshop and/or conference on a particular theme of his choice.

After many email exchanges, we decided that the conference's theme would be "Exploring Theravada Studies: Intellectual Trends and the Future of a Field of Study." The conference was designed to afford collaborative scholarly reflection on methods, theories, and subjects of inquiry in the study of Theravada Buddhism across various Asian and other contexts. The primary objective was to bring together an interdisciplinary and international body of scholars to present genealogical and other reflections on the field of Theravada Studies broadly conceived. In light of this objective, we asked that individual papers address intellectual trends in the study of Theravada Buddhism, and/or offer original case studies suggesting innovative paths for current and future research on Theravada Buddhism. We were also particularly interested in papers and discussions that examined the implications of using the term "Theravada," welcoming perspectives that deconstructed this usage among scholars of Buddhism.

Eighteen individual papers were presented at the conference, which was held on August 12-14, 2004. In his opening keynote address, "Theravada: Now and Then," John Holt (Bowdoin College) set the conference against the backdrop of historical and contemporary developments in the academic study of Buddhism; describing the nature and status of Theravada / Southeast Asian Buddhist studies in institutions of higher learning in the US and Europe. Theravada developments in Burma were discussed in the following papers: Hiroko Kawanami's "Contemporary Position of Buddhist Nuns

in Burma: The Politics of Sasana-pyu;” Jacques Leider’s “Text, Lineage, and Tradition: The Struggle for Norms and Religious Legitimacy under King Bodawphaya (1782-1819);” Guy Lubeigt’s “Theravada Buddhism and Money: The Myanmar’s Paradigm;” Guillaume Rozenberg’s “Anthropology and the Buddhological Imagination: Reconstructing the Invisible Life of Texts;” and Jason Carbine’s “The Role of Abhidhamma in the Field of Theravada Studies: A Perspective from Burma / Myanmar.” Frank Reynolds (Emeritus Professor, University of Chicago Divinity School) provided a closing keynote address, “Theravada: Now and Beyond,” in which he suggested that one or more of the institutions of higher learning in Southeast Asia itself could and perhaps should become *the* international center(s) for the academic study of Theravada Buddhism.

-Jake Carbine

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### **Renunciation and Power in Burmese Buddhism**

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*Scheduled to appear in September, Guillaume Rozenberg’s forthcoming book certainly promises to be a worthy successor to the work of Spiro, Mendelson, and others. It documents the phenomenon of a charismatic and powerful monk and the many laypeople whose allegiance he has won. Guillaume has done us the favor of providing the following summary of its contents.*

Renoncement et puissance. La quête de la sainteté dans la Birmanie contemporaine. Geneva: Editions Olizane, 2005.

[Renunciation and power: the quest for sainthood in contemporary Burma.] By Guillaume Rozenberg.

On the first of March 1980, first day of the waning moon of Dabaung 1342 of the Burmese era, a sixty-seven years old Buddhist monk, giving up supervision of the two village monasteries of which he has served as the abbot, leaves for the forest. He sets himself up on the top of a deserted hill in the Karen State, Thamanya Hill, in order to remove himself from the world and to practice meditation. Thamanya is located in the heart of an area devastated by warfare between government troops and Karen rebels.

The secluded existence of this monk, hereinafter known as the Thamanya Hsayadaw, does not last long. First hundreds, then thousands, of the faithful, hearing stories of his spiritual perfection, come from the surrounding area, and eventually from all over the country, to pay him homage. Armed with his success and the enormous gifts he receives, the old monk turns out to be a formidable entrepreneur. Religious structures and pilgrims’ shelters soon cover the hill and its surroundings.

At the end of the 1980s, Thamanya Hsayadaw sets up a twenty-five square kilometer territory around the hill, an enclave under the authority of neither the Burmese government nor the Karen National Union (the region’s principal rebel group). Here the great monk exercises sole dominion, and, inspired by Buddhist principles, he places his domain under the sign of non-violence and Buddhist virtue. The peace and liberty he establishes soon draw inhabitants of the region fleeing the

violence of war. In a few years, surrounding the once deserted hill there sprouts a city of about fifteen thousand inhabitants. The great monk baptizes it Thayawaddy, Pleasantville.

It was late 1997, while I was studying the great Buddhist pilgrimage site of Kyaikhtiyo, that I discovered Thamanya. Renunciation of the world, removing oneself from the affairs of society, has long been noted as the signal trait of the Buddhist saint, who is the exemplary incarnation of what Max Weber called the contemplative mystic. But Thamanya Hsayadaw represented a saint whose absolute renunciation proved indissociable from a powerful investment in the world. It was not simply, as Weber suggested concerning certain religious movements, that the great monk combined both mystical and ascetic traits, or that, essentially a mystic, he had given up his passive withdrawal from the world in order to transform himself into a “mystagogue,” a personage whose state of grace is transformed, out of a sense of mission sustained by a limitless love and goodness, to assure others’ salvation. With respect at least to the quest for salvation in the context of Burmese Buddhism, the great Thamanya monk demonstrated rather that contemplation and action were intrinsically linked, that the two orientations were not so much contradictory and mutually antithetical as instead mutually implicated and complementary, in short, that the mystic and the ascetic were joined in one person. Who then was this sort of man who resisted the Weberian logic?

My interest aroused, my attention was then drawn to other figures considered to be saints. It soon became apparent that while the trajectory and works of the great

Thamanya monk were, due to regional circumstances, in some respects unusual, they were by no means unprecedented in type. In fact, they illustrate the major, although not the sole, path to Buddhist sainthood in contemporary Burma. My forthcoming book, which gathers together a certain number of articles I have published elsewhere, in addition to unpublished portions of my dissertation, seeks to describe and analyze precisely this path to sainthood.

To make sense of the process by which sainthood is produced in contemporary Burmese society is thus to make sense of the paradox that the Thamanya phenomenon immediately presents: how the aspiring saint combines a maximal detachment with a politics of power. The book investigates this paradox of the dual face of sainthood in three principal respects.

I first examine the constituent elements of Burmese Buddhist ideology concerning sainthood. Two terms come up repeatedly in Burmese Buddhist discourse about the person of the saint: *taw htwet* and *weikza*, meaning ‘[the monk] gone to the forest,’ and, for want of a better gloss, ‘superman.’ These two terms define the value system encompassing the ideology of sainthood and express its two complementary bases, complete renunciation and supernatural power. They imply a certain number of practices (living in the forest, ascetic rigors, meditation, alchemy, etc.), but these are not analyzed in and of themselves. The emphasis falls instead on the whole that they constitute, on the particular impression of sainthood that they convey, and on sainthood’s place in Burmese Buddhism. My point then is not to describe these

practices ethnographically but rather to reconstruct and represent the Burmese Buddhist conception of sainthood that they take up. To reveal, that is, the qualities that show an individual to be a legitimate aspirant to sainthood.

The book then takes up three types of activities—predicting lottery numbers, building religious structures, and redistributing gifts—by means of which a monastic figure demonstrates both the high degree of spiritual accomplishment he has attained and his power. These are what enable him to display his sainthood, to inscribe it on the social and even physical landscape. Analyzing these activities, which operate as both the means of production for and the certification of sainthood, points up the various relations that develop among the aspiring saint, the faithful, and other religious persons. It reveals the dynamics by which belief in a figure's exceptional spiritual accomplishment gathers force. So I am concerned to approach from three different angles the functioning—with all its workings and its participants—of the great social machinery of sainthood.

The third and last part of the book is devoted to an analysis of the particular relationship that binds together the state and aspiring saints. This relationship, ordinarily marked by a certain complementarity, usually also entails a certain ambivalence, the holy man tending, as Stanley J. Tambiah has emphasized and the Thamanya Hsayadaw well illustrates, to assimilate in his person the theoretically distinct figures of the monk and the sovereign. If, furthermore, forest monks have benefited greatly by the state's embrace of the Buddhist religion since 1988, their attitude toward the authorities is never

unambiguous. These monks are well aware of the risk that too great a proximity to political power poses to perceptions of them, a proximity seen in a certain regard as polluting. The veneration the most powerful men of the country show them, the honors and gifts that the monks receive from those men—precisely those things most likely to generate desire and longing—are capable of harming their image of detachment. The faithful are even given to labeling such monks with the pejorative phrase “government monks,” which denotes a certain dependence upon the state for a monk's advancements in his monastic career. In such cases, even those monks benefiting most directly from government support are at pains to maintain, by some symbolic gesture, their distance, and to make some show of their indifference to official honors, such as by refusing some honorific title proffered by the state, or by making their scorn for the state's official cult publicly known. In short, if the state fosters sainthood, too much of the state kills sainthood.

So no matter from what angle it is observed, the phenomenon of sainthood in the Burmese context reveals a dominant principle: the complementarity and mutual articulation—not without tension and contradiction—between world renunciation and involvement in the world, between detachment and power, the manner in which the aspiring saint remains at once at the heart of his society's affairs and above them. The paradox of sainthood's two faces turns out, on closer scrutiny, to be more apparent than real.

Nevertheless, no matter how fervent the veneration he enjoys, no matter how

numerous the faithful who see in him the ultimate incarnation of the Buddhist ideal of spiritual perfection, the forest monk remains condemned, tragically enough, to the status of aspiring saint. The verification and definitive affirmation of a living person's saintly status constitute a problematic question, if not an irresolvable one, in Burmese Buddhism. From a doctrinal point of view, there exists no positive criterion making it possible to establish beyond any possible contestation a person's spiritual perfection. In theory, only a Buddha or an accomplished saint is capable of making such a pronouncement irrefutably. But the lack of any line of saints that can be traced back to the time of the Buddha, and whose contemporary representatives would thus be in a position to pass judgment on claims to sainthood, makes this principle moot. The process of producing saints can never be definitively completed; it can never reach its true goal, which is the universal acknowledgement of a person's spiritual perfection. No one in Burmese society ever quite makes it to sainthood.

-Tr. Ward Keeler

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### **An Ethic of Continuity**

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*Guillaume's book demonstrates how a great religious virtuoso becomes the focal point of a large and powerful movement. But as Weber taught us long ago, charismatic figures cannot guarantee the viability of their legacy when they have passed from the scene. As a matter of fact, the recent death of a pope gave us all a crash course in the drama and excitement that surrounds moments of transition in large religious institutions. Buddhists started wrestling with*

*the question of how to assure the perpetuation and vitality of their faith-based communities long before Christians did, and our assistant editor, Jake Carbine, made this problem of continuity, and challenges to it, the focal point of his dissertation. Jake provides us with the following summary of that work.*

An Ethic of Continuity: Shwegyin Monks and the *Sasana* in Contemporary Burma/Myanmar (University of Chicago, 2004).

My dissertation focuses on what I call an "ethic of continuity" among a sect of contemporary Burmese monks, the Shwegyin. I invoke the phrase in order to analyze how Shwegyin monks, and others like them (e.g. other Theravada monks), situate themselves, in their thoughts and practices, in relation to the Gotama Buddha (ca. 6th-4th centuries BCE), the *Sasana* (P. Dispensation), and the Buddha's revered monastic successors, including the founder of the Shwegyin sect. I show how Shwegyin, and arguably other Theravada monks, take part in the working out of *Sasana*-oriented ideas, interpretations, and practices in communal interaction over sustained periods of time. In other words, as an interpretive rubric, an ethic of continuity enables me to explore Buddhist social ethics, as exemplified by Shwegyin monks.

In reflecting on an ethic of continuity among Shwegyin (and other Theravada) monks, I draw attention to the relationship between embodiment of the *Sasana* on the one hand and textualization of the *Sasana* on the other. For Shwegyin monks, and for many other monks like them, the human body is, clearly, an important repository of memories



concerning the Buddha, other monastic exemplars, and the *Sasana*-based lifestyle for which they advocated. In wearing the robes, in shaving their heads, in holding community transactions (P. *samghakamma*) such as the higher ordination (P. *upasampada*), in adhering to the Discipline (P. *Vinaya*), in teaching the Fundamental Law (P. *Abhidhamma*), and in doing many other monastic things, monks in their minds and on their bodies sustain memories of the Buddha, other exemplars, and the *Sasana* itself. As such, monastic life is, especially but not only according to the Shwegyin material, intended to be a collective embodiment of the kind of world depicted above all in the “*Sasana* as it is studied” (P. *pariyatti Sasana*).

Nevertheless, I also discuss how, over and against any kind of embodiment of the *Sasana*, it is essential to recognize the significance of the continual (re)textualization of the *Sasana* as another component of monastic memory and practice. From the perspective of the continuity of the *Sasana*, the (re)production of a non-embodied, textual corpus is crucial. Even if Shwegyin and other monks fail to embody the *Sasana* in their daily actions, they can still assist in the process of retaining in the world textual repositories of what the Buddha and others have taught *vis-à-vis* the transmission of the various texts of the *Sasana* itself.

Investigating an ethic of continuity among Shwegyin monks requires me to focus not only on embodiment and textualization of the *Sasana* but also on narratives about the decline of the *Sasana* – narratives which are central to the Shwegyin ethos, as well as to the socio-religious ethos of many within the

wider Theravada orbit. As narratives of *Sasana* decline and discontinuity suggest, when and if the teachings of a Buddha become both thoroughly disembodied (i.e. no human beings—or any beings anywhere for that matter—are capable of embodying any part of the *Sasana*), as well as thoroughly detextualized (i.e. the (re)production of all *Sasana*-texts stops), a *Sasana* has run its course, and it vanishes. Thus, through their collective efforts, many Shwegyin monks and others try to facilitate, in the day-to-day contexts of communal interaction, the back and forth movement of embodying and textualizing the *Sasana*, so that it does not vanish. That back and forth movement constitutes the focal point of my study and provides a basis for my use of the term ethic of continuity.

I should point out that my study of an ethic of continuity is inspired by yet seeks to steer clear of structuralist / functionalist studies that address continuity in terms of different kinds of stasis and repetition that take place on sociological and other levels. For example, for Shwegyin monks and others like them, there are certain structures of law (both Discipline and Fundamental Law) that condition their lives. Any analysis of an ethic of continuity among Shwegyin monks and other Theravada Buddhists should consider these and other structures. Yet notions of structure and function, and of stasis and repetition, do not capture the overall dynamic I explore. As an interpretive rubric, the ethic of continuity presumes that there is an inherent difficulty in the maintenance of any and all patterns of socio-religious continuity, regardless of how static and repetitive they may seem.

Each chapter of the dissertation focuses on select thematic evidence from the Shwegyin milieu. Chapter 1, “The Shwegyin *Nikaya*,” examines links made in Shwegyin thought and practice between leadership and administrative structures and practices, on the one hand, and the socio-historical continuity of the Shwegyin *nikaya* (P. sect), on the other. I describe some of the specific ways in which Shwegyin leaders and administrators (e.g. *Sasana* Proprietors, Executive Officers) have drawn on parts of the *Sasana* to frame their sectarian activities, focusing particularly on “All Shwegyin Meetings Concerning the *Sasana*.” The point of the chapter is to discuss an ethic of continuity in terms of the ways in which Shwegyin leaders and administrators try to nurture Shwegyin monks as an embodiment of the *Sasana*.

Chapter 2, “Lineage and Disciple-Sons of the Buddha,” examines how monastic histories and biographies of Shwegyin monks are used pedagogically to gather monks into socially and historically continuous communities purportedly dating back to the time of the Buddha – communities whose members are responsible for the work of embodying and textualizing the *Sasana*. To develop this point about the educational use of texts in creating and sustaining monastic communal identity and practice, I lay out a theoretical and literary account of the genre of Buddhist monastic histories and biographies, in and beyond Burma / Myanmar. I then explore representative Shwegyin historical and biographical material. One of my major objectives is to discuss a very important Shwegyin solution to a classic conflict in Theravada notions of *Sasana*-oriented continuity. That conflict is between

individual progress on the religious path, on the one hand, and the promotion of collective life in the *Sasana*, on the other. Though they may overlap, the two goals may at times be in very significant tension, and I show how and why members of the Shwegyin sect have often given a priority to communal life in the *Sasana* at the expense of emphasizing the importance of individual soteriological attainment.

Chapter 3, “The Higher Ordination,” details the ritual of ordination as a major legal and ritual strand in the ethic of continuity. According to monastic law, the higher ordination is necessary for monastic sons of the Buddha (e.g. P. *Sakyaputtiya*) to be fully ordained; its proper implementation assures a Buddhist form of apostolic succession (P. *parampara*). Focusing on a specific Shwegyin higher ordination performed in April 2001, I discuss how monastic legal and ritual specialists ensure that men are properly established in the *Sasana*, which they are to live in as *Arahants*-in-training. (An *arahant* is a spiritually and morally perfected being.) In doing so, they participate in the sect’s ethic of continuity.

Chapter 4, “The *Patthana* and *Arahantship*,” highlights the role of specialists of Fundamental Law in sustaining the Shwegyin ethic of continuity. I illustrate the importance of their role by looking at a specific “carrier of the *Sasana*,” Ashin Janakabhivamsa (1900-1977), and in particular some of his sermons to monks and lay people about the *Patthana* (P. Conditional Relations). These sermons exemplify Janakabhivamsa’s efforts to help his fellow sons and daughters of the Buddha, both monastic and lay, to comprehend the *Patthana* and to “shine bright with the light

of wisdom.” My goal is to show how fostering an experience of wisdom and light, as *Abhidhamma* specialists like Janakabhivamsa do, is integral to the ethic of continuity.

The various themes I raise (e.g. leadership and administration, notions of lineage and son-ship, legal rituals, and philosophical efforts), and the various thoughts and practices that pertain to these themes, cannot be rigorously distinguished and then assigned to separate chapters. For instance, a full member of the Shwegyin *nikaya* (chapter 1) must receive a higher ordination (chapter 3), usually but not always from qualified Shwegyin monks; this makes him part of a monastic lineage (chapter 2). Moreover, living in the *Sasana* as a monk may lead an individual to become a revered preacher of the Fundamental Law (chapter 4), or a high-ranking leader in the Shwegyin hierarchy (again, chapter 1). Nevertheless, each of the four themes provides a way to examine overlapping and interrelated aspects of Shwegyin thought and practice inasmuch as they contribute to Shwegyin continuity through time, as well as the continuity of the *Sasana*.

-Jake Carbine

Jake is currently preparing a book manuscript based on his dissertation. During the 2005-06 academic year he will be a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Religion at Amherst College where he will teach various courses on Buddhism, including a team-taught course on Buddhism and Christianity, and a seminar on Buddhism and politics. His publications include *The Life of Buddhism*, co-edited with Frank Reynolds (University

of California Press, 2000), “Yaktovil: The Role of the Buddha and Dhamma,” in *Life of Buddhism*; “Burmese, Buddhist Literature in,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, editor-in-chief Robert Buswell (Macmillan, 2003); “Sangha,” in *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, edited by William Johnston (Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000); and several articles in progress. Under agreement with the Pali Text Society, Jake is also working on a translation project on the Kalyani Inscriptions.

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### **Notes Toward the Study of *Dhammathat* Manuscripts from Medieval and Early Modern Myanmar**

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*Any textual tradition as diverse and historically deep as that of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia poses great opportunities and great challenges to the scholar who would delve seriously into its often esoteric, but real, riches. Three scholars, Christian Lammerts, Erik Bruan, and Patrick Pranke, whose work we get a glimpse of here, focus on Burmese Buddhist texts of various kinds.*

*Christian Lammerts, a doctoral student in Asian Studies at Cornell, proposes in his research prospectus to look into historical linguistics, manuscript culture, and literacy, all from the angle of a particular corpus of texts.*

*Dhammathats* are ethical and legal texts that have been known in Myanmar since at least the thirteenth century. For the student of Southeastern Asian Buddhism, literature, and history, the large and varied corpus of extant *dhammathats* in Burmese, Mon, Pāli,

and bilingual *nissaya* style provides an important point of entry for thinking about a number of topics: multilingual literary cultures and practices, manuscript production and circulation, historical linguistics and philology, ‘non-standard’ Pāli, and the Pāli-vernacular nexus. When read in dialogue with other legal, gnomic, or normative texts, dhammathats offer unique insights into the complex interplay of Sanskrit, Pāli, and vernacular textual and ethical cultures in western mainland Theravāda Southeast Asia.

Through a close reading of selected dhammathat manuscripts my research explores the place of dhammathats within Buddhist literary and ethical practice in medieval and early modern Myanmar. This involves close attention to critical and editorial problems with dating, attributing, and establishing dhammathat texts, to their intertextual and bilingual compositional styles, and to their commentarial and ancillary literatures. I also attempt to reconstruct the intellectual and literary networks of exchange within the Southeastern Asian region which served as circuits for the transmission of dhammathat knowledge, and to establish the historical and textual relationships between dhammathats and the Sanskrit dharmasāstric literature, and among regional vernacular (e.g. Thai, Mon, Burmese) dhammathats. Another aspect of my research examines epigraphic and manuscript evidence concerning the changing role and status of dhammathats within legal, textual, and ethical culture in 13<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> century Myanmar, and investigates the reading contexts within which dhammathats would have functioned. This entails a critique of the cosmologies, epistemologies, and

understandings of ethics, literacy, and the law at work in the dhammathats.

In conjunction with this project I am working on several substantial critical translations of dhammathat manuscripts and of the entire *Dhammavilāsa Dhammathat* (the first part of which was published as part of my M.A. thesis). I am also preparing, with Kyaw Zaw Naing, a bilingual (Burmese-English) integrated catalog of dhammathat-related manuscripts in Myanmar which will include a number of hitherto unpublished dhammathat bibliographies from palm-leaf. The catalog is to be published by the Fragile Palm Leaves Society.

-Christian Lammerts

Christian studied philosophy, classics, and religion at Williams College, where he received his B.A. in 1997. After living for several years in East and Southeast Asia, in 2002 he was awarded an M.A. in Southeast Asian History by the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. In 2005 he earned an M.A. in Southeast Asian Studies from Cornell University, where he is currently a Ph.D. student in Asian Religions working under the supervision of Anne Blackburn and Christopher Minkowski. His contact details are as follows: Department of Asian Studies, 350 Rockefeller Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853. Email: [DCL33@cornell.edu](mailto:DCL33@cornell.edu).

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## Ledi Sayadaw and a Controversial Pali Text

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*Whereas Christian Lammerts intends to look at an entire genre of Burmese Buddhist writings, Erik Braun is embarked on the study of a specific Burmese Buddhist text, one that, like any good commentary, caused an uproar on its appearance.*

My dissertation concerns the widely known and highly regarded monk Ledi Sayadaw, who lived from 1846 to 1923. I have spent the last six months in Burma, investigating his life and work. In the course of my research, I have become particularly interested in one of his Pali works, the *Paramatthadipani*.

The *Paramatthadipani* is a commentary on a foundational Abhidhamma treatise, called the *Abhidhammatthasangaha* (the AS, for short). A pithy introductory text popular throughout Southeast Asia, the AS was immensely famous in Ledi Sayadaw's lifetime, and it remains so to this day. Ledi Sayadaw's *Paramatthadipani*, published in 1897, incited much controversy because of its author's willingness to criticize and correct other august commentaries on the AS. To identify imperfections in commentaries considered nearly canonical appears unheard of. Yet Ledi Sayadaw did it boldly, over 250 times in his book, often using the Pali words "*tam na sundaram*," or "that is not good." Monks responded to his challenge with over forty Pali and Burmese books challenging Ledi Sayadaw's critiques. Meetings of angry monks were held all over Burma to call the Ledi to account.

Newspapers in both Mandalay and Rangoon published debates on the matter.

The issue that intrigues me most about this controversy concerns tradition and change. Ledi Sayadaw's conception of the sasana and his place in it allowed him to produce what seems from a historical perspective to be an unorthodox work. As someone training to be a professor of religion and Buddhist studies, I am interested in the way and the degree to which the Ledi's work represents a real change in the understanding of tradition. Or rather than a sign of change, could the *Paramatthadipani* instead reveal a tradition of critique and contestation present in the Burmese, and perhaps wider Theravada, tradition, albeit a relatively unnoticed one?

To answer such questions about change and tradition, and to better explore the nature of the *Paramatthadipani* itself, it's important that I understand the corpus of Ledi Sayadaw in its context. So I continue to read Ledi's works and all the materials, in Burmese and English, I can find about Ledi Sayadaw and his writings. In addition to working at the Yangon University library, I have also read parts of the *Paramatthadipani* with a monk-scholar in Sagaing who specializes in Ledi's books. I will spend the rest of this academic year (and summer) in London, examining colonial sources and improving my Burmese.

-Erik Braun

Erik is a doctoral candidate in the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard University. He anticipates finishing

his degree in 2007. His email address is ebraun@fas.harvard.edu.

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### Monastic Reform and the Writing of Buddhist History

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*If reading esoteric texts proves difficult but rewarding, translating them ups the ante in both respects. Patrick Pranke has risen to the challenge with his annotated edition of a late eighteenth-century text. (If I might add a personal note: those of us who first met him in Rangoon in the late 80s know that no one could be better suited to the task of explicating the arcane than Patrick, since he is, like any truly erudite scholar of religion, an astonishingly contradictory combination of ascetic, hedonistic, and scholastic passions.)*

The ‘Treatise on the Lineage of Elders’ (*Vamsadipani*): Monastic Reform and the Writing of Buddhist History in Eighteenth-Century Burma (University of Michigan, 2004).

My dissertation examines the history and historiography of Burmese Buddhism during the early modern period. It consists of a critical study and annotated translation of the *Vamsadipani*, a Burmese Buddhist chronicle written c. 1799 during a state-sponsored reform of the Burmese Theravada Sangha known as the Sudhamma Reformation. To justify that reformist agenda, the chronicle, which is attributed to the Vinaya jurist, Mehti Sayadaw, documents the implementation of reform in the Burmese kingdom within the broad context of Buddhist history, as conceived by the Theravada, citing legendary, historical

and legal precedents stretching back to the lifetime of the Buddha.

The *Vamsadipani* is of particular interest because it is the first of a series of Buddhist ecclesiastical chronicles or *thathanawin* written during the Konbaung dynasty (1754-1885), Burma’s last royal era before British conquest, and one noteworthy for the production of this style of historical writing. All Konbaung-era *thathanawin* are similar in that they purport to trace the history of the Buddha’s religion, or more precisely, the Theravada Sangha, from its inception in ancient India, through cycles of decline and restoration in India, Sri Lanka, and Burma, up to its contemporary condition in the Konbaung kingdom. All were also written from the same perspective, that of the influential Sudhamma Council, a royally appointed ecclesiastical body charged with governing the Buddhist Sangha of the realm. Collectively, these chronicles summarize the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world-view of Burma’s elite monastic colleges and royal court, a world-view that in the twentieth century significantly influenced modern Burmese notions of Buddhist national identity through the dissemination of published editions of the *Vamsadipani* and related *thathanawin* texts.

In my analysis of the *Vamsadipani* I show that it belongs to a genre of juridical and historical writing called *sasana-katikavata* and as such represents a continuation of a Buddhist literary tradition traceable to the 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century reforms of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka when the first of such texts were written. I further show that the Sudhamma Reformation was the culmination of a related historical trend that began in the same period; namely, the

gradual ascendancy in Burma of reformed Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism, which was first introduced into the Burmese kingdom c. 1181. Having described its provenance and antecedents, I then compare the *Vamsadipani* with three later *thathanawin* of the Konbaung period and show how, on the basis of their commonalities, they can be regarded as constituting a new genre of Burmese Buddhist historical writing, one whose evolving perspectives anticipate developments in Burmese Buddhism in the twentieth century. Text critical issues are discussed in the notes that accompany the translation. Here I describe in detail the origins and evolution of the *Vamsadipani*'s episodes through classical, medieval, and early-modern sources. In addition, I identify the specific authorities, the method of composition, and narrative strategies used by Mehti Sayadaw to construct his history of Buddhism and fashion it into an apologia for the Sudhamma Reformation.

My current research concerns contemporary Burmese Buddhist hagiography and the historiography of the modern *vipassana* meditation movement. These are related popular literatures emerging out of the *vipassana* movement; in terms of content and perspective they are both greatly influenced by the *thathanawin* of the Konbaung period.

-Patrick Pranke

Patrick is at present Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Hofstra University. His email address is: [phipap@hofstra.edu](mailto:phipap@hofstra.edu)

Patrick's publications include: *Sasana Purification and the Formation of Burmese*

*Buddhist Identity, Religious Powers and Transmission in Burmese Religions*, Hiroko Kawanami, ed., Singapore: NIAS & Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, (forthcoming); *On Becoming a Buddhist Wizard, Buddhism in Practice*, Donald S. Lopez, ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1995; a review of *Myth & History in the Historiography of Early Burma*, by Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *Asian Perspectives*, December, 2001; and numerous entries in two dictionaries of Buddhism, the forthcoming *Dictionary of Buddhism*, Donald S. Lopez, ed., New York: Doubleday, and *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Robert E. Buswell, ed., New York: Macmillan Reference USA. 2004.

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### **Buddhist Organizations and Buddhist Revival in Colonial Burma**

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*To speak of religion is to speak of religious reform: even a religion that asserts its allegiance to the ways of the "elders" provides grounds on which to criticize the ways of recent elders in favor of those of older elders, at least as imagined by the local equivalent of young Turks. In Burma, certainly, religious reform has proved an extremely potent force at many points in its history. As the above makes clear, Patrick Pranke's work reveals a reformist movement's textual traces, ones that we can read two hundred years after the exercise of their polemical intent. Alicia Turner, a doctoral student at the University of Chicago, is conducting research on the role religious reform played in twentieth century Burmese history.*

My dissertation project studies Buddhist organizations and Buddhist revival in colonial Burma at the turn of the twentieth century. In this period, a variety of new Buddhist associations and leaders emerged that sought to revive and thus reform Buddhist practice. These organizations took advantage of recently introduced technologies (newspapers, journals, printed books) as well as developments in Burmese social structure and sources of authority. They created movements to promote such changes as monastic preaching reform, modern Buddhist education, the appointment of a Thathanabaing, renovation of religious sites and the preservation of relics, and individual philosophical reflection and meditation by the laity. While Buddhist organizations are best known for laying the foundation for Burmese nationalism, I am interested in their broader influences on colonial Burmese society and the ways in which language, education and morality became sites of conflict among differing groups. Through the history of this Theravadin Buddhist revival I will explore two issues: the creation of new discourses of Burmese identity, Buddhism and modernity; and how Buddhist reform became the vehicle for these changes.

-Alicia Turner

Alicia is a Ph. D. candidate in the History of Religions in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. She is currently conducting dissertation research in Burma on a Fulbright-Hayes fellowship. She can be contacted at [amturner@midway.uchicago.edu](mailto:amturner@midway.uchicago.edu).

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### Little Yangon in Tokyo

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*Jet planes and politics have conspired to send many Burmese far away from their places of origin. Among the things many of them take along, and that mean the most to them, are their religious ideas and practices. Two scholars make these diasporic Burmese the subject of their research and inquire into the ways that Buddhism continues to matter to people when they are living overseas. Naoko Kumada studies inhabitants of "Little Yangon" in Tokyo, and Joseph Cheah Burmese Buddhists in the U.S.'s Bay Area.*

*Naoko Kumada, after extensive fieldwork in Burma, now proposes to turn her attention to the Burmese living in Japan, and to ask how their Buddhist commitments inflect their experience of life in that country.*

I first became interested in Burma when I traveled to Southeast Asia as a tourist in the late 1980s. I was fortunate to be able to return to Burma under the Asian Studies Scholarship Program, sponsored by the Japanese government. I embarked upon three-and-a-half years of fieldwork, during which I had the rare opportunity of living in a village in Magwe Division, Upper Burma, for over a year. Based on the fieldwork, I completed my dissertation, "In the World of Rebirth: Politics, Economy and Society of Burmese Buddhists," at the University of Cambridge, U.K. My dissertation examined how religion, especially Theravada Buddhism, shapes, and is shaped by, the cultural, economic, and political contexts in Burmese society.



In May 2004, I organized a conference entitled 'Burmese Buddhism and the Spirit Cult Revisited,' hosted by the Stanford Center for Buddhist Studies and co-sponsored by the Toyota Foundation, the Asian Religions and Cultures Initiative, and the Southeast Asia Forum. The aim was to re-examine old themes and explore new trends. There is no need to explain to the readers of the Bulletin that our knowledge of Burmese society is still limited, due to the fact that Burma has long been inaccessible to foreign scholars. Furthermore, recent transformations the country has been undergoing since the introduction of a market economy raise a number of questions for our understanding of Burmese society and culture.

Based on this background, my current research looks at the lives of Burmese Buddhists in a Burmese community called Little Yangon in my native city of Tokyo. It deals with the role religion played and continues to play in the formation of regions, communities, histories, and identities. This role will be explored through examination of contemporary Southeast Asian (particularly Burmese) migration to Japan in its historical context. My interest is in the influence of the past on today's migration and the influence of the present on our constructions of the past.

Over the last few decades, Southeast Asia has become one of the world's leading producers of immigrants. The significance of labor migration flows is most evident in Japan, a country that has strong ideas about racial homogeneity and whose immigration history is not as long as those of the U.S. and European countries. The political, economic, and social changes that Japan is

undergoing as it adapts to the new world economy have been the subject of a vast literature by social and political scientists. A number of these works point out the increasing visibility of migrant workers in Japan since the 1980s. The emergence of Tokyo as a global city led to the new (especially illegal) immigration flow, particularly from parts of Asia where Japan has a strong and convoluted past coupled with a growing economic presence.

Of particular interest is the way that the Buddhist practices of the Burmese immigrants in Japan are embedded in the formation of similar social, political, and economic processes in newly emerging global cities (like Tokyo and Los Angeles), and in the historical and cultural specificities of Japan-Southeast Asia relations. It is estimated that there are about 10,000 Burmese in Japan. My goal is to present a detailed ethnography on religion and globalization, in which ordinary Burmese (including 'illegal' immigrants) emerge as active historical agents.

Rather than view the regions we call 'Southeast Asia' and 'Asia' as given and permanent, I am interested in the way that regions are perceived and created. The Japanese once called Southeast Asia 'Nanyō' (meaning the 'southern seas'), but the term 'Tōnan ajia' (a translation of the English term 'Southeast Asia') was adopted after World War II. In the U.S., 'Southeast Asia' became the accepted term during World War II. The transformation of Asia since the end of the Cold War has encouraged Asianists to seek alternative ways of talking about Asia. Today, we find Burmese monasteries in Silicon Valley and Southeast Asian communities in Tokyo.

Many scholars now argue that the term Asia, as defined by the Western ‘other,’ or the ideas of areas formed during the Cold War, no longer fits the Asia of today. Taking these debates into account, my question will be: How do the Burmese immigrants in Japan conceive of Southeast Asia or Asia, if they think in these terms at all (and how does their Buddhist identity shape their thinking)? Through this research, I want to ask how the contemporary transformation of Asia encourages us to rethink the way we perceive, study, and write about Asia.

-Naoko Kumada

Naoko Kumada is a Research Fellow at the Stanford Center for Buddhist Studies, Stanford University. Her email address is: kumada@stanford.edu

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### **Burmese Buddhism in California**

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*The field of Asian-American studies is attracting ever growing scholarly interest. It is all the more welcome therefore to learn that Joseph Cheah has recently completed a dissertation at the Graduate Theological Union on the subject of Burmese Buddhism in the U.S. He provides us the following abstract of his dissertation.*

Negotiating Race and Religion in American Buddhism: Burmese Buddhism in California (Graduate Theological Union, 2004)

My dissertation seeks to address some of the shortcomings caused by a neglect of religion in ethnic studies on the one hand, and an under-theorization of race in the field of new immigrant Buddhist Studies on the other.

The operative word in my dissertation is that of “white supremacy.” I use this term in reference not primarily to the more virulent forms of white dominance over non-whites (e.g., slavery), but to a more generic way of describing a hegemonic understanding, on the part of both whites and non-whites: that Euro-American culture, values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices have become the norm according to which other cultures and social practices are judged. My study investigates the ways in which racial ideology of white supremacy has been operative both in the American adaptation of Burmese meditation practices and in the Americanization of Burmese immigrant Buddhist themselves. I argue that the adaptations of Burmese *vipassana* meditation in the American context have been rearticulated by some American meditation teachers in specific but deliberately chosen forms that help preserve the racial ideology of white supremacy. Secondly, I illustrate that this ideology has been operative in the Americanization of Burmese Buddhists and their cultural practices.

-Joseph Cheah

Joe is working on an article tentatively entitled, “An Invisible Diaspora: Burmese Buddhism in Northern California.” It will examine the presence of a Burmese diaspora in the Bay Area of San Francisco, and the function of Burmese Buddhist monastic and domestic settings in the preservation, production and transmission of an already changing Burmese American culture and identity. Joe is also working with an editor from Oxford Press to turn parts of his dissertation into a book. Combining Buddhism and ethnic studies approaches, it is an interdisciplinary study of the influence

that Burmese Buddhist specialists (Burmese Buddhist monks and lay meditation leaders) have had on both the development of the American *vipassana* movement and the establishment of Burmese Buddhist monasteries in the United States. It will examine the different ways in which Burmese Buddhist practices are adapted by both American Buddhist sympathizers and Burmese immigrant Buddhists and what those adaptations reveal about racism in American Buddhism and the agency of Burmese American Buddhists.

Joe has accepted the position of Assistant Professor in Comparative Theology at Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Connecticut, a post he will take up in the fall.

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### **The World of Burmese Buddhism Exhibit at Northern Illinois University**

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In conjunction with the International Burma Studies Conference at Northern Illinois University in October, 2004 the Center for Burma Studies presented a new exhibition entitled "The World of Burmese Buddhism" from October, 2005 thru June, 2005.

The exhibit was divided into seven sections exploring the diversity and complexity of the Art of Burmese Buddhism.

With this exhibit a series of five lectures were offered by Catherine Raymond, Director of The Center for Burma Studies. These lectures explored several topics including: Manuscripts and Tapestry, Burmese Buddha Images, Donors and Protectors and Treasures from the Court of Mandalay.

To date we have welcome over 3000 visitors. The visitors have included students, faculty, community members, local schoolchildren and international scholars.

Due to its' success we have agreed to display part of this exhibit at the NIU Art Museum in Chicago, Illinois in conjunction with Denison University opening September 9, 2005.

[www.vpa.niu.edu/museum](http://www.vpa.niu.edu/museum)

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