

Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar

Matthew J. Walton



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This is the first book to provide a broad overview of the ways in which Buddhist ideas have influenced political thinking and politics in Myanmar. Matthew Walton draws extensively on Burmese language sources from the last 150 years to describe the “moral universe” of contemporary Theravada Buddhism that has anchored most political thought in Myanmar. In explaining multiple Burmese understandings of notions such as “democracy” and “political participation,” the book provides readers with a conceptual framework for understanding some of the key dynamics of Myanmar’s ongoing political transition. Some of these ideas help to shed light on restrictive or exclusionary political impulses, such as anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalism or skepticism toward the ability of the masses to participate in politics. Walton provides an analytical framework for understanding Buddhist influences on politics that will be accessible to a wide range of readers and will generate future research and debate.

Matthew J. Walton is the Aung San Suu Kyi Senior Research Fellow in Modern Burmese Studies at St Antony’s College, University of Oxford. He has published widely in academic journals and in the media on a number of topics, focused primarily on religion, politics, and ethnicity in Myanmar.

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at St Antony's College, University of Oxford*



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For Abby, without whom this book never would have been written, and for Soren who provided the last bit of motivation needed to finish it.

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Chapter 6 includes excerpts from a chapter entitled “Buddhist monks and politics in contemporary Myanmar,” that was first published in the book *Buddhism and the Political Process* (2016). It is reprinted here with permission by Palgrave Macmillan.

A Note on Language and Usage

Language decisions are always a challenge in works of comparative political theory. Because Burmese terms and concepts do not always neatly map onto English translations and sometimes have different connotations or usages than the more widespread Pāli terms, there are times when it is important to use the Burmese. However, some Pāli terms will be so familiar to readers that to use unfamiliar Burmese terms could interrupt the flow of the text. In this book, I have chosen to use a mixture of Burmese and Pāli terms (and, for the first instance of each in a chapter, the equivalent in the other language). Pāli terms are used where the words are relatively common in scholarly discourse and where the Burmese usage does not significantly diverge from the generally accepted Pāli meaning. For example, I use the Pāli word *sangha* (monkhood) instead of the Burmese *thanga*. However, where I wish to highlight particular Burmese understandings or uses of a term that do differ from an accepted Pāli definition, I prioritize the Burmese term, also giving a detailed explanation of the usage in Burmese contexts. For example, I use the Burmese word *kutho* (wholesome action; merit from good deeds) instead of the Pāli word *kusala*. While this may seem complicated, I believe it is an appropriate compromise between scholarly norms of usage and my methodological commitment to value Burmese thinking on its own terms. The appendix also contains a glossary of all of the Burmese and Pāli terms used in the book.

I have tried to transliterate Burmese terms in the simplest way for non-Burmese readers, meaning that I do not always follow conventional transliteration practices. While this may be jarring for readers familiar with the Burmese language and common transliterations, I hope it makes the text more accessible since a few Burmese terms are central to the analysis.

The Burmese language uses a number of honorifics that indicate relative age as well as status. “Daw” and “U” are the female and male honorifics that are used in practice as a respectful “Auntie” or “Uncle” (even when the speaker is not related by blood) and generally correspond

to “Mrs./Ms.” and “Mr.” Monks can be accorded various honorifics but the most common are “U” and “Ashin.” A more senior monk who oversees other monks in a monastery is called “Sayadaw.” For bibliographic purposes, authors are catalogued by their names, although titles such as U, Daw, Ashin, Thakin, and Sayadaw are provided in brackets.

Scholars writing about Myanmar face the challenge of deciding which name to use for the country. The military government changed the name from “Burma” to “Myanmar” in 1989, but a number of individuals, organizations, and countries have refused to acknowledge what they consider an illegitimate name change. I use “Myanmar” when speaking about the country after the change and “Burma” when speaking about the country before the change; I also use “Myanmar” when discussing the country or state in general terms not linked to a specific point in time. I use “Burmese” to refer to the citizens of the state or the majority language. While this term is problematic because of its linguistic associations with the dominant majority ethnic group, there is no other term that is sufficiently clear or in common usage in denoting citizens of the Myanmar state.

Introduction

On September 24, 2007, tens of thousands of Buddhist monks marched down the main thoroughfares of Yangon, a sea of dark maroon robes creating the lasting image of what the media would deem the “Saffron Revolution,” after the color commonly associated with monks’ robes in the country. This was the sixth day of monastic demonstrations in downtown Yangon, the culmination of a wave of dissent that had begun with citizen protests against the removal of fuel subsidies the month before and had escalated after reports that the Burmese military had violently subdued monks demonstrating in the northern city of Pakokku earlier in September.¹ Beginning on September 18, the ranks of the monks had swelled each day and similar actions were taking place in urban areas across the country. This day they marched along with tens of thousands of lay people, although the monks had initially asked the laity not to join the demonstrations. Gradually, however, lay people did join, linking hands to create protective barriers around the monks as they marched and raising the banners of opposition groups, including the National League for Democracy (NLD) and even the long-outlawed student union.

While some monks began the march each afternoon at their home monasteries, eventually converging on Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon, growing numbers gathered at the foot of the iconic golden dome of the Shwedagon Pagoda, a mile or so north of the city center. These monks met to chant protective prayers before marching, but the significance of the location was not lost on any Burmese observers. In addition to being the most revered Buddhist site in the country (strands

¹ The 2007 demonstrations were only one of the most recent examples of monastic political activism in Myanmar. After military rule began in 1962, monks protested government attempts to expand authority over the religious order in 1965; joined students to protest the lack of government recognition of the funeral of the former secretary general of the UN, U Thant, in 1974; and joined demonstrations across the country in 1988 and 1990, even taking over the duty of maintaining public order in Mandalay after the administration essentially collapsed following protests. Monks have also been at the forefront of protests since 2012 against the recognition of the Rohingya Muslim minority, in support of controversial “religious protection laws,” and on a number of other political issues.

of the Buddha's hair are allegedly buried beneath it), it has also been a focal point of political activity since the colonial period. The martyred leader of the independence movement, General Aung San, gave speeches in front of the pagoda in the 1940s and over forty years later, his daughter, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, invigorated the democracy movement of 1988 with a speech in the same location. The rhetoric and protest repertoire of the monks in 2007 perfectly mirrored the Shwedagon Pagoda's combination of religious and political symbolism. While some monks' groups had issued statements with explicitly political demands and a number of the marching monks also chanted political slogans, the primary tactic of the demonstrating monks was to recite the *mettā sutta* (Bur. *myitta thouk*), a Buddhist protective chant that radiates indiscriminating loving-kindness out to the world. This was their chosen method of political action.

Western media coverage of the events was quick to recognize the overwhelming respect that the mostly Buddhist population of Myanmar had for the monks, and reports juxtaposed the monks' assertion of moral authority against the brutal military dominance of the Burmese regime. Some news articles discussed the religious boycott that the monks had imposed on the military regime; by refusing to accept military donations the monks denied the military an opportunity to earn merit that would bring them a better rebirth in future lives (Watts 2007). Some opined that the military government would not dare attack the monks since it would risk losing whatever legitimacy it still retained (Mydans 2007). However, while most Western media reports made reference to the moral power or authority of the monks, they also misunderstood or oversimplified statements from both monks and laypeople who believed that this mass display of piety and compassion would, as a fundamentally moral action, actually be able to bring about political change by itself (see, for example, PBS 2007, Ward 2007).

Many observers also misunderstood the complexities of the monks' tactics, either referring to them as "militant monks" or expressing incredulity that supposedly "peaceful" and "detached" Buddhist renunciates could be moved to such displays of outrage (see, for example, Fox News 2007, Beech 2007). And, as has been made clear through Buddhist political activism in Myanmar since 2012, many observers mistakenly viewed the monastic demonstrations as reflecting a unified aspiration for democracy among the marching monks, without seeking to appreciate the wide range of understandings of democracy and politics among those monks or the ways in which Buddhist ideas have influenced their political thinking. What is needed in order to fully grasp the significance and meaning of the monastic demonstrations of 2007, as well as to

understand some of the challenges facing the current political transition in Myanmar, is a sense of the shared moral framework that Burmese Buddhists inhabit.

I argue that, in order to understand the political dynamics of contemporary Myanmar, it is necessary to understand the interpretations of Buddhist concepts that underlay much of modern Burmese political thought. Other scholars have convincingly demonstrated that Theravāda Buddhism is the source of much (but not all) of the conceptual framework within which most Buddhists in Myanmar think about politics (see, for example, Schober 2011, Jordt 2007, Houtman 1999, Spiro 1970, and Sarkisyanz 1965). In this book I seek to delineate the basic conceptual apparatus of a (not the) Burmese Buddhist worldview that I argue has been the primary influence on Burmese political thinking and political discourse throughout most of the twentieth century. This Theravāda-influenced moral conception of the universe (described further in the following section) provides an understanding of the political as a sphere of moral action, governed by particular rules of cause and effect. Of course, within this framework Burmese Buddhists vary as to their interpretation of particular concepts and the degree to which they see Buddhist teachings as relevant to politics. But throughout the book I assert that this framework and the Burmese Buddhist conceptions of politics it produces continue to be salient for contemporary political practice in Myanmar.

As an examination of Burmese Buddhist political thought, this book is also a work of comparative political theory. The study of non-Western religious cultures does not merely illuminate how alternate moral codes or systems of belief can influence politics; it draws our attention to how religious beliefs can generate fundamentally different conceptions of what is political. Buddhist beliefs and practices provide a moral framework that delineates the boundaries of the political and determines what constitutes political subjects and legitimate forms of political authority and participation. However, while the overarching moral framework of these beliefs has remained relatively consistent over time, the ways in which Buddhists understand and apply them are always in flux, meaning that there is no singular, unitary Burmese Buddhist perspective on politics. Buddhists in Myanmar are created as *political subjects* by this multifaceted tradition, yet they are also contesting, refining, and reformulating those boundaries of political legitimacy, authority, and participation. Furthermore, they are doing this in ways that (while they may interact with ideas from other traditions) are drawn directly from their own Buddhist tradition and using reasoning about politics that comes from the moral framework provided by Theravāda Buddhism.

Buddhism in Myanmar has provided a repertoire of “raw materials” which people have used to make sense of their political environment. In the case of the particular moral worldview that guides the analysis in this book, those raw materials include a particular conception of human nature, an understanding of the universe as governed by a law of cause and effect that works according to moral principles, a conception of human existence as being fundamentally dissatisfactory, and the acceptance of a range of methods to overcome and escape its dissatisfactory character. Within this context, Burmese political thinkers have constructed Buddhist arguments to both legitimate and criticize various forms of political authority and political ideologies. As Peter Jackson has observed, “Fundamental to the ongoing significance of Buddhist teachings, in particular, has been their interpretative plasticity, that is, their capacity to continue to be used to confer symbolic legitimation upon the exercise of political authority and the structures of political power, whether those structures have been founded upon absolute monarchical rule, military rule or upon a popularly elected government” (Jackson 2002, 157). It is the “interpretative plasticity” of Burmese Buddhist concepts that this book explores, in chapters that examine the way those concepts are deployed in arguments regarding the nature of politics, the proper ends of politics, alternative conceptions and methods of political participation, and a range of understandings of democracy.

This Introduction begins with an explanation of the way in which I understand and use the term “moral universe” and a brief consideration of “Burmese Buddhism” as a distinct category. I then situate this research in relation to political science and policy studies that have come before it, identifying problematic approaches from those perspectives and drawing on insights from anthropology, religious studies, and history to explain how I approach the interaction of religion and politics. I also explain how my research methods complemented and expanded the relatively small corpus of existing texts. There is a brief chapter overview and the Introduction ends by positioning my exploration of Burmese Buddhist political thought in relation to the emerging subfield of comparative political theory.

A “Moral Universe” of Burmese Buddhism

Most of the academic work on Theravāda Buddhism and politics refers to the role of the Theravāda cosmology in legitimating power and providing models of political organization.² The traditional scholarly view of this

² Some prominent examples include Heine-Geldern (1942), Reynolds (1972), Tambiah (1976), and Aung-Thwin (1985a). In another work, Tambiah presents cosmologies as

cosmology was of a totalizing, self-contained framework that Buddhist rulers and officials used to explain both the physical structure of the universe and the laws that governed existence. It implied a natural hierarchy in which individuals were ranked according to their actions in the past and the results of those actions in the present. Explanations of the cosmology included detailed descriptions of the many realms that existed besides the human one, including hells filled with unimaginable suffering and heavenly abodes of bliss. The cosmology also legitimized the monarchical model of political rule by characterizing humans as driven to immorality by desire and craving and in need of a powerful leader whose position was justified with reference to his presumed moral conduct in past lives.

Previous generations of scholars tended to present this legitimating cosmology as relatively static. Stanley Tambiah famously characterized the system as a “galactic polity” where power radiated out from individual monarchs, weakening with distance and overlapping at the margins where it met with other power centers (1976, 102–131). O.W. Wolters gave a similar description but designated the system as a “mandala” (1982). Both models pictured individual polities pulsating and shifting over time, but crucially assumed that the framework that indicated people’s proper place within the social order generally persisted until the rupture of the colonial encounter. Anne Blackburn has called this assumption—that colonial encounters were the sole catalyst for social, political, or cultural change—the “sea-change” model (2010, 200).

Scholars have been challenging and refining the sea-change model for decades, as it applies to understandings of the *Theravāda* cosmology and to the religious and political thinking that took place within that cosmological framework. Charles Keyes examined transformations in practices of the Thai monkhood to show that a “totalizing” framework obscures the dynamic nature of Buddhism as a lived tradition in particular contexts (1978). Anne Blackburn (2001) demonstrated that significant social and intellectual changes took place in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka that reformulated the relationships between lay and monastic Buddhist communities and their religious texts. Similarly, Michael Charney’s (2006) study of the ways in which a small group of regional literati in Myanmar helped to transform the legitimating rhetoric and symbolism of the ruling Konbaung dynasty in the second half of the eighteenth century revealed that fluctuations in the concepts underwriting political rule took place well before colonialism provoked a crisis in traditional Burmese thought.

“performative blueprints” and “designs for living,” that help people to describe and understand the world but also provide prescriptions for action (1985, 4).

While the precolonial political model may not have been as inert as was once assumed, colonialism still did bring a series of challenges to the dominant social and political order, destabilizing many elements of the traditional cosmology and mirroring in some ways the “disenchantment” that Max Weber identified as part of the West’s move toward rationality and modernity. Juliane Schober has explored the ways in which the “galactic polity” paradigm was transformed beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century (1995). Sometimes the changes were gradual, for example through reinterpretations of Buddhist ideas; sometimes they were more abrupt, as occurred with the fall of the Burmese monarchy in 1885. Mid-nineteenth-century political, administrative, and religious reforms, instituted in Burma by King Mindon and in Siam (Thailand) by King Mongkut, altered established relationships between the state, the monastics, and the society. This laid the groundwork for what Schober has called a “rationalized” cosmology, shorn of elements that did not accord with modern science and characterized by an increased “laicization” of Buddhism, evidenced by the proliferation of lay meditation and religious study groups, areas previously reserved for monks.

Some scholars of Buddhism in Myanmar have retained a lens that sees the cosmology as both more consistent with precolonial notions and more pervasive. Burmese historian Michael Aung-Thwin made the controversial claim that the imposition of military rule in 1962 represented for Burmese people a welcome return to the cosmological sense of order that both the British colonial administration and the democratic parliamentary government (and, by implication, contemporary democratic opposition movements) lacked (1985a). Others have been less normative but have still seen the Burmese Buddhist cosmological frame as less mutable. Anthropologist Mikael Gravers has said that “the concepts and ideals of the Buddhist cosmology are universal and everlasting, and they constitute a total model of the society and for its future development” (1999, 17). Similarly, anthropologist Ingrid Jordt has written that “The totalizing force of Buddhist cosmology . . . acts as a force majeure on both the state and the civil society” (2007, 209).

I agree with Schober’s contrasting view that “modern Buddhism relinquished a totalizing cosmology in which all aspects of life cohered across cultural, social, economic, scientific bodies of knowledge” (2011, 8). This statement about the disappearance of a totalizing cosmology should not, however, be taken to mean that a clear distinction can be drawn between “traditional” and “modern” Buddhism, since there has likely been a wide range of variation within both of these heuristic categories as well as the persistence of certain beliefs. I would suggest that, while beliefs

about the material structure of the universe, the necessary position of the king, and a cosmologically ordained hierarchy may have receded among much of the population of contemporary Myanmar, the Buddhist belief in the world as a place governed by particular moral rules generally remains, anchoring the notion of a “moral universe.” The logic of cause and effect that supports this worldview has largely been bolstered rather than shattered by scientific innovations and, from the beginning of the twentieth century Buddhists in Myanmar and elsewhere have argued that their moral framework represents an important element that is lacking in the Western political tradition. The political interpretation of these moral rules has varied widely but this framework remains an important lens through which Buddhists in Myanmar make sense of politics.

I use the term “moral universe” to denote what I argue have been the aspects of the traditional cosmology that outlasted the fall of the Burmese monarchy, were altered through encounters with external ideologies and in response to domestic developments and innovations, and continue to be the dominant influence on Burmese Buddhist political thinking today.³ This particular incarnation of a Theravāda-influenced worldview came into being in mid-nineteenth-century Burma as a modernist, demystified interpretation of Buddhist teachings. It has been a predominantly elite worldview, although it has spread widely throughout the population along with the popularization of practices such as *vipassanā* (Bur. *wipathana*, insight) meditation and the study of *abhidhamma* (Bur. *abidama*, advanced Buddhist philosophy of knowledge). I use this term to refer to the moral logic that underlies the Buddhist framework of cause and effect within which much Burmese Buddhist reasoning about the world takes place.⁴ This is an aspect of the cosmology that has remained largely consistent from the precolonial era to contemporary Myanmar, albeit subjected to different interpretations.

We can understand this moral framework, along with its constituent parts and the logic according to which they collectively function, as a

³ There is not necessarily a Burmese term that corresponds with my usage of “moral universe,” which should not be surprising as worldviews are often taken as given and not in need of explication. The closest equivalent that evokes the idea of a cosmological system is the Pāli-derived Burmese word *setkya wala*. This term was also used by the nationalist writer Thakin Ba Thaung in his 1975 translation of the Indian author C.P. Ranasinghe’s book *The Buddha’s Explanation of the Universe*.

⁴ Here I disagree with Schober’s assertion that one of the universal elements of the Burmese Buddhist worldview is a “pervasive concern with the realms of existence and their hierarchy” (1989, 5–6). While these beliefs persist among a portion of the population and can influence people’s understandings of politics, they are also increasingly rejected by many Burmese Buddhists who see themselves as continuing the efforts of their early-twentieth-century predecessors to “rationalize” Buddhist belief and practice and thus cannot be said to be “universal.”

“worldview.” The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has explained a worldview as “the picture [people] have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order” (1965, 3). As will be described more in [Chapter 2](#), this moral universe has an ontology, one that distinguishes between a world of common perception and a perspective of ultimate reality. And, while the elements of the moral universe may not be as totalizing as precolonial cosmologies seem to have been, they do provide its adherents with an understanding of how the world works.

In labeling this worldview a “moral” universe, I want to suggest that Buddhists in Myanmar have tended to think about political action and political change as quintessentially *moral* practices, that is, as intrinsically connected to and influenced by the correct or incorrect conduct of individuals, the effects of which are manifested in what those individuals experience in the future. A Burmese monk who had traveled widely abroad and lectured to many foreign and domestic audiences put it this way: “Buddhism points unequivocally to the moral aspect of everyday life. Though Nibbana [Bur. *neikban*, enlightenment] is amoral, in the sense that final peace transcends the conflict of good and evil, the path to wisdom is definitely a moral path. This follows logically from the doctrine of kamma [Bur. *kan*, cause and effect]. Every action must produce an effect, and one’s own actions produce an effect in one’s own life. Thus, the kammic force which carries us inevitably onward can only be a force for good, that is, for our ultimate wisdom, if each action is a good action” (Thittila 1987, 29).

My use of the term “moral universe” does not mean that this particular framework universally describes the beliefs of Buddhists in Myanmar. The moral universe that provides the conceptual framework for my analysis in this book is one of several that could be identified as pertinent in Myanmar today and even within it there is significant variation in how its adherents interpret and use its basic concepts. The moral universe described here is the one that has provided the raw materials for the political thinking and writing that constitutes much of Myanmar’s tradition of political thought from the late nineteenth century. Taking greater account of the propitiation of spirits or various esoteric practices still conducted in the country would move one into a different moral universe—still Burmese and still largely [Theravāda](#)-influenced—but less relevant for understanding the thinking of the key political figures whose ideas I examine in this book. Throughout the book, I will use the phrase “the moral universe” to refer specifically to the conceptual framework described above.

Finally, while much of the raw material of this worldview comes from [Theravāda](#) Buddhism, we should recognize the ways in which the moral

universe of this book is distinguished not only through differences of interpretation and emphasis among Buddhists in Myanmar, but also through differences in how Buddhists in Myanmar understand specific Buddhist concepts in comparison with their *Theravāda* neighbors in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. Myanmar’s own political and religious histories have been the sources of much of this variation. Religious debates (particularly within the *sangha*, Bur. *thanga*, the community of monks) have influenced the attention that Burmese Buddhists have paid to certain subjects; at times these debates have been expanded and shaped by the political appropriation of Buddhist concepts. The relationship between religious and political authorities has also proceeded differently in Myanmar than in other countries; the relative independence and decentralization of *sangha* authority throughout much of Burmese history and the rise of a lay Buddhist ethic and practice in the last century have both posed challenges for successive political leaders. Religious and political figures in the country have been influenced by ideologies and philosophies from outside of their own tradition and have incorporated these ideas into their overall Buddhist moral framework in creative ways. Myanmar’s political history (including the experience of British colonialism, civil war after independence, and decades of military rule) has also shaped the ways in which Buddhists in the country have used their religious beliefs to make sense of politics, and is the subject of the [following chapter](#). But in further delineating the notion of a moral universe, it is also worth a closer consideration of the category of “Burmese Buddhism.”

What Constitutes “Burmese Buddhism”?

It is actually rather misleading to refer to the widely varied schools of thought and religious practices that have been derived from the teachings of Siddhatha Gotama (the Buddha) as “Buddhism” (Ling 1993). Buddhist traditions have followed very different trajectories of development as they have been carried around the globe, and significant doctrinal disagreements separate many of the main schools. Buddhists in Myanmar today generally consider themselves to be part of the *Theravāda* tradition, which is also dominant in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka. Other major schools of Buddhism include *Mahāyāna* (commonly practiced in China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam), *Vajrayāna* (a sub-school of *Mahāyāna* common among Tibetans), and Zen (which originated as *Chán* in China before spreading to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan). Of course, all of these schools have since spread beyond the boundaries of Asia to find root in countries around the world.

Buddhism is the majority religion in Myanmar, with smaller percentages of Muslims, Christians, and other groups. Official demographic data is notoriously unreliable in the country, due in no small part to the fact that Buddhism has been a primary part of the identity of the majority ethnic group (the Burmans) and, by extension, of Burmese national identity; Burmans have often been counted as Buddhists no matter what their religion and non-Burman Buddhists have also been miscategorized as Burman (Smith 1999, 30). Estimates of the Buddhist population range from 85 to 90 percent but most scholars believe that figures for non-Buddhist populations are under-reported (Jordt 2007, 175). A census was conducted in 2014 but demographic breakdowns according to religion had not yet been released as of this writing. While Theravāda Buddhism is the dominant practice, in much of the country Theravāda beliefs provide a flexible framework that has incorporated a number of traditional and animistic practices, including the worship of ancestors, natural spirits, and an officially recognized pantheon of thirty-seven *nat* spirits. Scholars of Burmese Buddhism face the challenge of appropriately describing a field of religious practice that, while containing a number of core concepts, varies widely in terms of practice in particular contexts (Brac de la Perrière 2009).

The notion of Theravāda Buddhism as a recognizable and meaningful category is also contested. The term itself is a heuristic concept used primarily by scholars and less commonly by religious practitioners themselves. The use of the category of Theravāda Buddhism to describe the religious practices of many Buddhists in the South and Southeast Asian countries mentioned above is also a political act, and a recent one at that; the term was rarely used prior to the 1950s but has been enthusiastically promulgated by certain Buddhist monks, scholars, and leaders since then (Perreira 2012). A recent edited volume provocatively entitled *How Theravāda Is Theravāda?* explores the constructed nature of the category and its essays reveal a great deal of diversity of practice and belief that is commonly ignored or oversimplified (Skilling et al 2012). I will continue to use the term Theravāda to refer to this broader frame of commonality but acknowledge that any given “Theravāda” practitioners might be divided by more than unites them.

This book also faces the challenge that has weighed on almost all of the scholarly work done on Buddhism in Myanmar. When scholars claim to be studying “Burmese Buddhism,” they refer almost exclusively to the Buddhist beliefs and practices of the majority Burman ethnicity, which makes up approximately 60 to 70 percent of the population (Smith 1999).⁵

⁵ The next largest groups after the Burmans are the Shan and Karen, each of which makes up less than 10 percent. Following these groups (and with much smaller proportions of the

Suggesting that there may be salient (political, theological, etc.) differences between the Buddhism of the Burmans and that of other ethnic groups, including the Arakanese, Karen, Mon, or Shan, might be controversial to many Buddhists in Myanmar, who see (or want to see) more consistency in practice, belief, and identity. While there is indeed a good deal of consistency, there is also evidence of significant differences in practices and beliefs.⁶ Anthropological studies of non-Burman ethnic groups were common during the colonial period but have been limited since the 1950s, hampered by ongoing violence in many ethnic states as well as by government restrictions and language limitations.

Differences in practice, in the understanding of particular concepts, and in the use of texts would suggest that, just as there are variations in Buddhism among ethnic groups in Myanmar, there are also variations in Buddhist political thought. Unfortunately, not only was the political situation in Myanmar at the time of my field work not conducive to studying non-Burman perspectives on Buddhism and politics, there is limited scholarship on non-Burman Buddhisms and even fewer primary source materials.⁷ There is a further challenge in that, in seeking to end persistent ethnic conflicts and bring about national reconciliation, both the government and many members of the democratic opposition have been critical of avenues of inquiry that might reveal, or (from their perspective) reinforce, ethnic differences. It is my belief, however, that a democratic, multiethnic, multireligious Myanmar will be strengthened by more attention to the cultural particularities of the groups that inhabit it. It is hopeful that continued political reform will facilitate the study of the political thought of different identity groups and their alternate interpretations of political concepts that have been either ignored or actively suppressed by political authorities since before the colonial era. Until then, the category of “Burmese Buddhism” has as its primary referent the Buddhism practiced by Burmans and this study of mainstream

population) are the Kachin, Chin, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine, Wa, and Naga, along with many other smaller groups. However, population figures are a contentious topic in Myanmar, and prior to the census in 2014, the last generally accepted accounting took place in 1931. Disaggregated ethnic figures from the census had also not been released as of April 2016.

⁶ For example, a recent issue of the journal *Contemporary Buddhism* devoted to Shan Buddhism discusses some of these differing beliefs and practices (2009, 10:1).

⁷ Persistent civil conflict in many non-Burman areas has created conditions in which the preservation of documents is challenging and most likely not a priority. Additionally, former military governments severely limited opportunities for teaching and learning in non-Burman languages (Callahan 2004). The result has been a gradual “Burmanization” of Buddhism in Myanmar.

Burmese Buddhist political thought generally focuses on ethnically Burman individuals.

Studying Buddhism and Politics in Myanmar

Political scientists have been interested in the relationship between religion and politics in Myanmar for decades, mostly approaching the subject from an empirical perspective. Scholars in this category include Frank Trager (1966), Fred von der Mehden (1961), John Badgley (1963, 1965), Donald Smith (1965), Maung Maung (1980), Jan Becka (1991), and Josef Silverstein (1993, 1996), all of whom effectively cover the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.⁸ However, scholars of politics have tended to view the relationship between religion and politics through a more instrumentalist lens, not exploring or giving credence to the Buddhist worldviews inhabited by the political actors they studied. Even when they have sympathetically presented the religious influences on their subjects (and John Badgley and Donald Smith stand out in this respect), they have tended not to engage as deeply with the insights into the dynamics of Buddhism in Myanmar generated from other disciplines.⁹ As Myanmar has moved more into the public view since its political transition began in 2011, it is particularly important that studies from a political science or policy-oriented perspective take into consideration the varied understandings and usages of Buddhist ideas in the political sphere; this book adopts such an approach.

One of the areas where political science analysis is lacking is in its insistence on a clear separation between “religious” and “secular” views. The paradigms of these two poles are usually the post-independence Prime Minister U Nu, invariably portrayed as a Buddhist traditionalist, and the independence leader General Aung San, equally commonly portrayed as secularist or modernist. It should be clear from my explanation of the “moral universe” above that I see an overarching logical framework that encompasses the thinking of both of these men, in the way that they reasoned about politics as a moral activity even as they advocated for different positions vis-à-vis the orientation of the Burmese state toward religion. Political studies of Myanmar that have distinguished between “religious” and “secular” political figures have neglected the ways in

⁸ Robert Taylor’s magnum opus *The State in Myanmar* (2009) also engages frequently with the intersection of Buddhism and politics, although usually not in the ideational way it is treated here.

⁹ Some partial exceptions to this are the work of E. Michael Mendelson (1975), John Ferguson (1975), and Stephen McCarthy (2004, 2008), all of whom attend more to ideational and symbolic aspects of Buddhism as it engages with the political.

which ostensibly secular discourses are situated within particular cultural and religious worldviews. While people can and do challenge those worldviews, the fundamental conceptual structure that they provide remains deeply influential; these worldviews provide the logical structures through which their inhabitants make sense of the world around them.

This insight has long been clear in other disciplines, most notably anthropology, religious studies, and history. The discussion of the “moral universe” above draws heavily on observations from scholars in all three fields, and this book of political theory is influenced by the nuanced ways in which they have understood Buddhism, its practice, and its effects in the world. One area where this influence is particularly apparent is in critical engagement with the “sea-change” model. In addition to Michael Charney’s work mentioned above, Juliane Schober (1995) revisited the “galactic polity” paradigm to explore the continuities and ruptures in Burmese Buddhist worldviews over the twentieth century. Jason Carbine (2011) has situated the *Shwegyin* monastic lineage as a group whose roots and organizing principles reach far back into precolonial history, even as it plays a role in the modern project of orienting Burmese Buddhist practice toward the reproduction of *sāsana* (the embodied Buddhist community, a concept explored further in later chapters). Erik Braun’s (2013) study of the influential monk Ledi Sayadaw demonstrated that the origins of the “modern” Buddhism that Ledi helped to initiate (and that anchors this book’s “moral universe”) can be found in the dynamics of precolonial Burmese society as well as in the disruptions brought on by colonial rule. Alicia Turner’s (2014) work on Buddhism and activism during the colonial period situates Burmese Buddhists’ engagement with politics within their changing understandings of *sāsana* that both challenged and drew from external practices and forms of knowledge.

With regard to dynamics of Buddhism and power, Ingrid Jordt’s (2007) study of the mass lay-meditation movement that has emerged over the twentieth century reveals the ways in which the laity have created an alternate moral community that effectively takes upon itself the critical (or legitimating) role previously reserved for the monkhood. Guillaume Rozenberg’s (2010) work on monastic renunciation hones in on a critical paradox in which the moral power and authority generated by the renunciate monk always potentially threatens the imposed mundane order and legitimacy of the state, prompting political authorities to seek to control these influential figures. In studying the community of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar, Hiroko Kawanami (2013) has identified particular gendered dynamics and effects of renunciation, where, even though female renunciates lack the normative social standing of their

male counterparts, the community creates a space for self-transformation and empowerment.

Looking beyond the boundaries of the moral universe that anchors this study, Benedicte Brac de La Perrière (2009) has deftly challenged studies that presume or privilege a unitary notion of Buddhism in Myanmar, while also revealing the ways in which other religious practices are situated in relation to an overarching Buddhist field that structures the broader Burmese religious landscape. Niklas Foxeus (2011) has investigated the continuing influence of esoteric practices and millennial beliefs on Burmese Buddhism through his study of a Buddhist organization that has sought to reinforce the galactic polity model as a response to post-colonial modernity. And an edited volume on the cults surrounding *weikza* (variously understood as “wizard” or “superman”) displays a remarkable diversity of understanding and practice among just this single, rarely studied phenomenon (Brac de La Perrière, Rozenberg, and Turner 2014).

This book owes its greatest intellectual debts to two scholars. The one political scientist who truly paved the way for this study, and who unsurprisingly situated his analysis in a more interdisciplinary manner, informed by religious studies, anthropology, and history was Manuel Sarkisyanz (1965). His work on the Buddhist roots of contemporary Burmese political situated U Nu’s political project within a context of moral reform and renewal that was explicitly shaped by a prior tradition of Buddhist political thinking. Importantly, his research was predicated (as is mine) on the belief that “Burma too has its intellectual history” (*ibid.*, 237).

Similarly, Gustaaf Houtman’s *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics* (1999) revealed persistent motifs in Burmese Buddhist perspectives on politics as well as the influence of Buddhist ideas on political thinking and practice among both the military leadership and the democratic opposition.¹⁰ My research has been strongly influenced by their commitment to presenting Burmese Buddhist political ideas in a context that is accessible to those outside the tradition yet faithful to Burmese

¹⁰ Many readers have found the concept of “mental culture” in Houtman’s book difficult to grasp. As an English translation of the Burmese word *bawana* (Pāli *bhāvanā*), this practice includes all of the activities that cultivate a beneficial mental state, such as *vipassanā* (insight) meditation, observance of the moral precepts, and the development of qualities that assist individuals in progressing on the path to enlightenment. The confusion regarding Houtman’s use of the cumbersome term “mental culture” (perhaps “mental cultivation” would be clearer?) indicates the challenge that accompanies projects of comparative political theory in which one language has neither the linguistic nor conceptual resources to adequately express ideas that are common in another culture.

conceptualizations. This book also expands on their work, organizing Burmese Buddhist ideas thematically to develop a clearer picture of how the understanding and deployment of particular concepts has changed over time.

Adopting a perspective that takes political speech and writing by Burmese Buddhists to be reflective of a tradition of political thinking rather than merely the instrumental exploitation of religious symbolism also requires engaging with the question of what constitutes a tradition of political thought. Farah Godrej (2006) has attempted to lay out a set of guidelines for scholars engaging in the study of political thought from non-Western cultural or religious traditions. She suggests that, for a work to be considered “political theory, it must engage with concerns regarding political life and must do so in a way that is both provocative and enlightening (*ibid.*, 88ff). Godrej wisely rejects the common requirement that works be “rational” or “systemic” but also wants to distinguish between examples of philosophy and theory as opposed to folk traditions, which usually lack the critical element of reflection or reflexivity (*ibid.*, 103ff).

Godrej’s criteria are a useful starting point in looking beyond the Western canon but they also highlight the general dearth of writing by Burmese Buddhists (and by Buddhists in general) on political topics. I would argue that we can easily categorize the writings of the nineteenth-century minister U Hpo Hlaing, the early-twentieth-century poet Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, the military ideologist U Chit Hlaing, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as works of political thought. This is in addition to essays by leftists from the 1930s to 1960s, including General Aung San, U Nu, U Ba Swe, and Thakin Soe, and the monks writing in underground journals in the months surrounding the 2007 demonstrations. Additional articles from journals, newspapers, and other publications provide perspectives that reinforce, shape, and challenge the ideas contained in the more theoretical reflections. Here we might usefully make a distinction between political “theory” and political “thought.” While there are limited examples of the former in the Burmese Buddhist tradition, there are resources that contribute to our understanding of the latter, less formal (but no less influential) category and they also inform the analysis in this book.

Research Methods

Although there is not a large corpus of texts of Burmese Buddhist political thought, other textual sources provide rich data for an expanded understanding of the subject. Accessibility of libraries in Myanmar remains a challenge for many scholars (although restrictions have eased somewhat

since 2013), and even though I was not permitted to use university libraries at the time of my field work, several colleagues provided me with an introduction to other libraries with extensive, specialized collections. Between these resources, several private collections, purchases in book stores, and assistance from Western scholars who have digitized some material, I was able to assemble a wide range of books, pamphlets, journals, magazines, periodicals, and recordings. There is still much work to be done in recovering texts and documents but if the current political reforms continue, it is hoped that more materials will become available for study.

Faced with a limited number of textual sources on which to draw, I augmented my research with data drawn from field work in Myanmar and among Burmese communities in Thailand, conducted from January to August 2011 and shorter follow-up trips throughout 2013 and 2014. I conducted several dozen interviews with monks, scholars, political activists, and members of civil society groups. The data from these interviews serves the important complementary purpose of giving a sense of how differently situated Buddhists in Myanmar today continue to interpret politics through a moral lens, particularly with regard to conceptions of democracy and political participation. In many cases a formal interview was either impossible or would have appeared rude or culturally inappropriate; in those instances, the interview appeared more like a conversation that I guided with occasional questions, writing up notes later in the day. Due to security concerns, I rarely recorded interviews and also avoided speaking with the most prominent opposition figures in the country (although their views are usually accessible through regular media appearances). This approach allowed me to include a wide range of perspectives from people who might not primarily identify themselves as *political* actors, but whose views nonetheless make up part of the field of Burmese Buddhist political thought.

Monks are one of the strongest and most consistent influences on Burmese Buddhists, reinforcing the moral laws of Buddhism and connecting them to political and social situations through their writings and video messages, public sermons, and daily interactions with lay people. The spread of new communication technology has meant that monastic teachings move more quickly through the population, and watching DVDs of monks preaching and sharing books on Buddhism with friends are part of many people's daily religious practice. I attended dozens of public sermons (mostly in Yangon) and a number of public and private religious ceremonies at monasteries and homes and also assembled a large collection of recordings of monastic sermons.

While it is not common to use collected qualitative data in the field of political theory, this method can be particularly useful in studying non-Western political thought. Where formal political theory texts are rare, other media can provide a fuller picture. Field data adds nuance and depth to the political and religious concepts that emerge from textual analysis. This approach also provided a method to track some of the ways in which people understand and use those concepts in contemporary Myanmar, allowing for an assessment of how those understandings and usages have changed over time. Attention to these temporal changes, as well as the general diversity of understandings and interpretation of key concepts is what guides this study.

Chapter Outline

The first four chapters of the book provide an overview of the historical context and conceptual building blocks that I use in my analysis of Burmese Buddhist political thought. [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) in particular draw mostly on traditional ideas, Buddhist texts, and historical writings and analysis. [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#) focus on specific concepts or phenomena, elucidating the historical context but dealing mostly with contemporary understandings and dynamics.

[Chapter 1](#) (A Brief Political History and Cast of Characters) provides a brief historical sketch from about the mid-nineteenth century, highlighting events and dynamics that have shaped the contexts within which Burmese thinkers have, at different times, engaged in political thinking. This chapter also includes short descriptions of some of the individuals whose views appear frequently throughout the book.

[Chapter 2](#) (Building Blocks of a Moral Universe) lays out the fundamental concepts that make up the “moral universe” of this study, including the Five Precepts (a basic moral code of conduct) and the Four Noble Truths (the Buddha’s primary insights that describe the problematic nature of existence and the path to overcoming it). It also examines several concepts that Burmese Buddhists frequently use to talk about both Buddhism and politics: *taya* (alternately understood as “truth,” “laws,” or “the Buddha’s teachings”), *thila* (Pāli *sīla*, “morality”), and *kan* (Pāli *kamma*, a universal law of cause and effect that refers to both intentional actions and their results). As a moral concept, the latter can serve either as an explanation/justification for present circumstances or a progressive doctrine of human empowerment, depending on how it is interpreted. Finally, the distinction between *lawki* (Pāli *lokiya*, the worldly realm) and *lawkouttara* (Pāli *lokuttara*, the path to overcoming worldly dissatisfaction), as well as the range of views on the distinction

between these two realms, is considered as one of the most important factors in conditioning variation in Burmese Buddhist political ideas.

Chapter 3 (On Human Nature and the Nature of Politics) considers two *suttas* (teachings of the Buddha) and Burmese interpretations of the lessons they hold for understanding how political authority came to be, why it is necessary, and how it can be limited. The *Aggañña Sutta* tells of the degeneration of humanity from a perfect state and the subsequent institution of political authority for the purpose of creating and maintaining order. The *Cakkavatti Sutta* contains advice for an ideal king, a vivid description of the collective consequences for humanity when rulers do not act morally, and an account of the perfect future king whose rule will usher in the age of the next Buddha. There is an ambivalence here that fundamentally structures Burmese attitudes toward politics and political authority: are humans primarily defined by their desire-driven natures or by their capacity for liberation and enlightenment? Additionally, this chapter explores the implications of the Burmese Buddhist belief that the moral actions of both leaders and members of communities have tangible effects in the material world.

Chapter 4 (Order and Freedom/Liberation: Purposes of Politics) posits two primary arguments from Buddhists in Myanmar regarding the proper ends of politics. Emphasizing the desire-driven, acquisitive, and corrupt aspects of human nature, one argument stresses the need for a form of political authority both to maintain order and to instill moral discipline in the population. However, in the rhetoric of legitimation, a second argument is made in which order is often subordinated to a higher goal of politics: freedom/liberation. Conceived of in an ultimate religious sense as total liberation from suffering and continued existence (enlightenment), this also included more proximate goals such as freedom from desire or moral defilements. Burmese thinkers posited causal connections between these religious senses of freedom/liberation and more mundane conceptions, including freedom from political and economic conditions not conducive to moral development and, for Marxist-influenced figures, freedom from economic inequality. Political understandings of freedom have ranged from freedom from British colonial rule to freedom from repressive military rule and have also been causally connected to religious or moral accounts of freedom.

Chapter 5 (What is “Politics” and What Constitutes “Participation”?) begins by noting that there is no word or phrase in Burmese that encapsulates the connotations and implied practices of the English term “political participation.” After the fall of the monarchy and the disintegration of aspects of the traditional cosmology, some Burmese Buddhists began to develop arguments for citizen

participation in politics rooted in a more empowering interpretation of *kan* (cause and effect). Many, however, have continued to question the moral worthiness of inherently flawed human beings to effectively participate in practices of self-governing. Nevertheless, there are some innovative interpretations and practices among monks and civil society actors, including the emerging belief that social work (Bur. *parahita*) and donation practices constitute a form of political participation. Some also argue that individual moral practice can constitute a method of political participation, a view that, in its orientation toward overcoming the “self,” contains the potential to foster more inclusive, community-focused practices of politics.

Chapter 6 (Discipline, Rights, and Morality: “Democracy” in Contemporary Myanmar) examines understandings of democracy among disparate groups, including the former military government, the democratic opposition and other activists, and monks, finding some differences but also consistency in conceiving of democracy as a fundamentally moral practice. Individuals from across Burmese society commonly qualify their discussions of democracy with reference to rhetorics of “discipline” (Bur. *si kan*) and “morality” (Bur. *thila*). The understanding of democracy as a moral practice where individual actions might need to be limited or “disciplined” exists in some tension with familiar Western conceptions of democracy that emphasize liberal individualism or protection of basic rights. At the same time, some individuals also hint at a broader conception of democratic practice that looks beyond electoral politics to include a sort of “democratic” (and, not surprisingly, Buddhist-inspired) ethos in all interactions with others.

The **concluding chapter** looks comparatively at Buddhist political thinking in Myanmar in relation to what is found in other *Theravāda*-influenced countries. It also looks forward in time to the reemergence of a vibrant tradition of Buddhist political thought in Myanmar, albeit one that can peacefully coexist with other religious and secular iterations of political philosophy. This is particularly critical because Myanmar is a religiously and ethnically diverse country, and contesting and transforming the hegemonic dominance of Buddhism (especially the Buddhism of the ethnic majority Burmans) will itself be a central component of continued political reform in the country. While the influence of the moral universe on political thought is likely to transform over time in response to internal and external debates, I reiterate the argument that animates this book, that its logic will continue to provide an influential framework within which Buddhists in Myanmar reason about politics.

On Comparative Political Theory

This Introduction concludes with a brief consideration of how I situate this study of Burmese Buddhist political thought within the relatively new field of comparative political theory (CPT), which has encouraged scholars to see non-Western systems of thought as just that: coherent *systems* of thought, with distinctive epistemological and ontological assumptions that sometimes differentiate them from the Western tradition in which most academics operate. We can see this growing subfield not only as a “corrective” to the cultural specificity of the Western canon in political theory, but, increasingly, as an important contribution to learning in other fields, particularly in a globalized and interconnected world. CPT is thus an enterprise that contains the possibility of transformative encounters, but also the necessity of risk (the potential to destabilize one’s own views). When conducting comparative projects one must be conscious of overstating both similarity *and* difference, and an essential element of CPT is the tension that characterizes attempts to translate and re-present ideas in different cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, [Chapters 5 and 6](#) present a number of challenges in trying to assess Burmese Buddhist attitudes toward “political participation” and conceptions of “democracy,” neither of which has a direct translation in Burmese.

As a comparative political theorist I seek to display the diversity of perspectives *within* non-Western traditions, belying overly simplistic accounts that claim to represent the (singular) perspective of “Buddhist political thought.” Therefore, I try to recognize the range of different interpretations of fundamental concepts and ideas put forward by Burmese Buddhists. One purpose of research in the subfield of comparative political theory is to expand the range of ideas available to theorists through the study and description of non-Western traditions of thought, making cross-cultural theoretical engagement possible.

At the same time, Leigh Jenco has highlighted the difficulty that scholars face when we attempt to conduct cross-cultural inquiry (2007). Her concern is that the common method of conducting comparative theoretical work – the inclusion of non-Western “voices” in a dialogue about political ideas – too often loses the words and meanings of these “voices” because much of what they say remains unintelligible when interpreted within the conceptual framework of Western political thought. Thus, an initial task of comparative political theory is to investigate and explicate other systems of thought *on their own terms*, questioning the confining political concepts that we often assume are unproblematic, while also remaining continually aware of the dangers of misinterpretation and misrepresentation.

Misinterpretation is always a risk simply because of the essential unknowability of the other. However, this should not paralyze our research as much as provide us with motivation for examining and explicating the limits of what we can say about and to others. For central and recurring ideas, I use Burmese words and concepts, making them accessible to English speakers but not letting an English concept stand in for another term inappropriately. I often describe a Burmese term in detail (sometimes noting explicit differences with similar concepts in Western political thought) in order to continue using it throughout the text, rather than using a more familiar but less precise English word. In this way I recognize comparative political theory to be an inherently cross-linguistic and cross-cultural field, one in which researchers have a responsibility not to obscure or do violence to terms and concepts in the process of comparing different traditions of thought.

This book is an attempt at presenting a diverse tradition of Burmese Buddhist political thought on its own terms and using its own logic while at the same time trying to make these nuances and particularities intelligible to individuals situated outside that tradition and its specific moral framework. For that reason, I consider this to be a work of interpretive, rather than normative political theory. It is necessary groundwork to enable myself and others to engage in further cross-cultural comparative work and hopefully helpful for Burmese Buddhists who want to engage more with their own cultural and intellectual history, now that many of the sources I examine here are once again accessible. I hope that this thematic analysis provides a starting point for the future refinement of particular topics while also providing a useful framework for understanding contemporary politics in Myanmar.

1 A Brief Political History and Cast of Characters

This chapter provides a short account of Burmese political history from about the middle of the nineteenth century to the present. Although it necessarily gives a broad-brush overview, the purpose is to provide context for the actors and events in the following chapters. It also includes short descriptions of some of the individuals whose ideas about politics are analyzed throughout the book.

To the best of current knowledge of Burmese history, the region during the precolonial era consisted of a succession of kingdoms and smaller political units, whose nebulous areas of control expanded and contracted through warfare and intermarriage.¹ The Burman king Anawrahta founded the Pagan Dynasty in the early eleventh century and [Theravāda](#) Buddhism and Burman language and culture gradually became dominant over the next few centuries. The rulers of the final Konbaung Dynasty (founded by King Alaungpaya in 1752) were forced to contend with the incursions of the British, losing territory in stages beginning in 1824 and ending with the British deposition of King Thibaw in 1885 and the formal annexation of the entire country in 1886.

The penultimate king of the Konbaung dynasty, Mindon, instituted a series of reforms in the economic, political, and religious spheres, designed to strengthen the Burmese state against the colonial threat, but was unsuccessful in this respect, especially as by that time he only directly controlled upper Burma (Koenig [1990](#) and Myo Myint [1987](#)). Mendelson describes Mindon as “something of a bridge between the old royal order and the new world of the Europeans, and there is evidence that he was amply conscious of this” (Mendelson [1975](#), 83). Indeed, there were a number of innovative policies enacted during his reign that support this characterization, including an attempt to have greater control over the flow of information by publishing a newspaper (Charney [2006](#), 199).

¹ In the interest of brevity, I have compressed this precolonial period to a few sentences which cannot do justice to the diverse forms of political organization that existed in the territory now known as Myanmar. For more detailed studies, see Lieberman ([1984](#), [2003](#)) and Aung Thwin ([1985b](#), [2005](#)).

Faced with a severely weakened political base, Mindon sought to shore up his religious standing through reforms in that field as well, although this should not be seen as a purely instrumental move, as most descriptions of Mindon present him as a genuinely pious and religiously engaged ruler. However, Mendelson suggests the possible explanation that, in seeking to enhance his direct control over monastic activities, Mindon engaged in a divide and rule strategy that allowed the previously central monastic authority to be dispersed and connected more directly to him (Mendelson 1975, 112–114). Whatever the political or religious motivations, the end result was a rapid factionalization of the *sangha* (Bur. *thanga*, monastic community) into multiple sects, commonly called the “Mindon sects.” The origins of this split occurred in a dispute between the head of the royally recognized *Thudhamma* sect and the stricter *Shwegyin* sect, that resulted in Mindon officially recognizing *Shwegyin* as independent of *Thudhamma* authority, although the exact method and timing of this and other splits remain unclear (Carbine 2011, 18ff).

Several of Mindon’s ministers pushed for even more significant political and economic reforms. One was the *Kinwun Mingyi* U Kaung, whose diaries of his diplomatic missions to Europe provided accounts of developed states that both intrigued and worried Burmese elites when they were published in the country. Another influential minister was U Hpo Hlaing who, like U Kaung, also served under Mindon’s successor, Thibaw, the last king of the Konbaung dynasty. As something of a gadfly to the king, U Hpo Hlaing put forward – in both his ministerial capacity and through the books he wrote – political and social views that challenged the status quo while remaining rooted in Buddhist religious and cultural traditions. His ideas figure prominently in this book as precursors of strands of Buddhist political thinking that have remained influential in Myanmar until today. Both men sought to curb what they saw as the excesses of royal power and increase the influence of ministerial advisors and continued to advocate these views to King Thibaw, although they were generally unsuccessful in pushing for reform (Cady 1958, 115). U Kaung has even been labeled a traitor in many Burmese accounts of the end of the monarchy, pilloried for what his defenders portray as a series of last-ditch efforts to stave off total defeat. Unable to resist the British, Thibaw was deposed at the end of 1885 and sent into exile, paving the way for British colonial rule over all of Burma.

The abolition of the monarchy by the British threw much of Upper Burma (the last area that the British had conquered) into disarray. Multiple insurgencies and rebellions broke out in the years following annexation, some of which were led by charismatic men with royal claims who sought to restore the monarchy and some of which were led by

monks. *Sangha* authority was also in a state of disorder as Thibaw had appointed two *thathanabaings* (Bur., head of the monkhood) but their authority had only extended to Upper Burma and in any case, the British were in no rush to endorse monastic authority that could be used against them. The colonial government initially refused to appoint a *thathana-baing*, only consenting to do so in 1904, after almost two decades of agitation from Burmese Buddhists (Mendelson 1975, 179–193).

Many Burmese worried that this lack of religious authority was exacerbating a perceived decline in moral conduct among both monks and lay people. Some of the first mass membership organizations in the country (including the Young Men's Buddhist Association, YMBA, founded in 1906) were founded to combat this moral decay and to reinvigorate a Buddhist community that they perceived to be threatened (Turner 2014). The activities of the famous monk Ledi Sayadaw were particularly notable during the first two decades of the twentieth century as he traveled across the country engaging the laity in Buddhist practices in ways that had never been open to them previously, including the study of *abhidhamma* (Bur. *abidama*, Buddhist philosophy) and the practice of meditation (Braun 2013, Chapters 3 and 4).

Alicia Turner has offered an important corrective to the standard historical narrative of Burmese Buddhist organizational life in the first decades of the twentieth century as nationalistically oriented. She argues that a 1920 pamphlet entitled *The History of Myanma Buddhist Associations* was written by the “winners” of the 1919 debate within the YMBA over whether the organization would take up political issues (Turner 2009, 47ff). This faction went on to found the General Council of Buddhist Associations (GCBA, renamed the General Council of *Burmese* Associations in 1920) and its version of history became the dominant one that was reproduced. The effect was to obscure the diversity of interests and objectives among Buddhist groups during the period from about 1890–1920, overlaying a nationalist orientation on activities that had been primarily directed at the protection of the *sāsana* (Bur. *thathana*, Buddhist religion).

However, beginning in the 1920s, anticolonial sentiment and agitation did begin to shift more explicitly from a Buddhist orientation to a nationalist one. A number of prominent monks were at the forefront of this wave, spreading the desire for independence and self-rule to the rural population (Maung Maung 1980). U Ottama, an ethnic Rakhine (Arakanese) monk who was educated in India, brought back techniques of boycotting and civil disobedience from the Indian independence struggle and gave fiery speeches denouncing colonialism and imperialism. He died in prison during a hunger strike in 1939, following the pattern of

another famous Burmese monk U Wisara, who died from a hunger strike in 1929. An ex-monk named Saya San led a rebellion from 1930 to 1931 that took the British by surprise and served as an inspiration to the generation of Burmese nationalists that rose to prominence in the 1930s (Herbert 1982 and Aung-Thwin 2011).

Burmese historians have used the term *wunthanu athins* (“nationalist or patriotic associations”) to refer broadly to the many groups formed throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century (Ba Maung 1975), although Western scholars usually use the term to denote a particular loose network of rural groups that were associated with the GCBA. These groups emerged from “a popular desire to see Burmese life purged of the corruption, drunkenness, and crime into which it had fallen during the period of British rule, and restored to good order, with a reformed *sangha* [monkhood] able to take the lead in promoting moral and social welfare” (Ling 1979, 84). Indeed, in many cases it was the monks who brought these rural and urban groups together and Saya San had been deeply involved with *wunthanu* activities. The General Council of *Sangha Sameggi* (GCSS, formed in 1920) was a monastic organization that sent hundreds of monks out to the *wunthanus* to offer moral guidance and, in many cases, political training (Moscotti 1974, 32).

The *Dobama Asiayone* (“We, the Burmans” or “We, the Burmese” Association) was officially founded in 1933, although the initial impetus of the group’s activism was the May 1930 dock riots that took place primarily between Indians and Burmans. The song that the *Dobama Asiayone* adopted as a rallying symbol called on people to cherish the Burmese country, literature, and language, ending with a rousing line of “Burma for the Burmans!”² The group was involved in a second set of riots in 1938, this time directed more explicitly at Muslims and originating in popular anger at an Islamic book that allegedly insulted Buddhism. The riots were galvanized by a mass meeting in front of the Shwedagon Pagoda on July 26 that included leading monks such as U Nye Ya as well as others who gave fiery and provocative speeches denouncing religious intermarriage. After the monks encouraged the group to march throughout the city, it came into conflict with the authorities, sparking a week of fighting that eventually spread throughout the country.

Kei Nemoto (2000) has argued that, although the namesake category of the *Dobama* was occasionally used in an exclusionary way to draw boundaries around the emerging national identity, it was actually more common for members of the group to use the opposite term, *thudobama*

² The full text of the song can be found in Khin Yi (1988: 5).

(“their Burma,” or “those Burmese”). The fact that the referents of this category were constantly changing throughout the decades of the independence struggle reflects the fact that these boundaries of inclusion (along ethnic, national, religious, even socioeconomic lines) were still being asserted and contested.

The *Dobama Asiayone* (whose members called themselves “*thakin*” or “master” to assert their right to self-rule) quickly came to include many young students who would lead both the independence movement and the subsequent national government, including Aung San and Thakin Ba Thaung (Khin Yi 1988). The philosophical father of the *Thakin* movement was Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, a poet whose social commentaries situated the tactics and goals of the nationalists within a Burmese Buddhist cultural tradition. As a child, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing had witnessed the humiliating walk that the deposed king Thibaw was forced to take through the streets of Mandalay as the first leg of his journey into exile in India and this had apparently had a profound effect on him. Not only did he defend student and other activists by providing a religious justification for the increasingly popular political tool of the boycott, he also acted as an elder statesman to the *Dobama* as well as the organization that was in some ways its successor, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), the party that would go on to govern independent Burma.

While the predominantly rural *wunthanu athins*, on the one hand, and the urban *Thakins* of the *Dobama Asiayone* certainly had different priorities and approaches to politics, it is important not to forget that they were often functioning within a similar and consistent understanding of their political environment. Political scientists have often overemphasized this divide, seeing an urban population that embraced liberalism and constitutionalism as part of their drive to independence pitted against a reactionary and conservative rural population that was looking to restore precolonial Buddhist values and institutions (Silverstein 1996, 216). This rendering actually mischaracterizes both groups, since many members of the *Dobama Asiayone* incorporated Buddhist rhetoric and reasoning in their political ideology, while the *wunthanu athins* were also using modern political organizing techniques (Aung-Thwin 2011). Political activists affiliated with both groups were also drawing widely on different ideologies, although leftist thought quickly came to be a dominant influence on elite thinking.

Marxist ideas initially came to the country through British writers, gradually gaining prominence and a wider circulation through the translation and publication efforts of the *Nagani* (Red Dragon) Book Club,

founded in 1937 by U Tun Aye and U Nu.³ To some degree, leftist thought influenced almost every prominent political group that led the drive for Burmese independence, including the *Dobama Asiayone*, the AFPFL, and the *Hsinyetha* Party (alternately translated as “Poor Man’s Party” and “Working Man’s Party”). More Burmese political activists began to incorporate Socialist and Marxist ideas into their philosophies as this literature gradually became available in Burma in the late 1930s and 1940s. Even then, they continued to draw ideas from a wide range of sources; one commentator characterized the intellectual openness of the members of the *Dobama Asiayone*: “They read voraciously and adopted freely” (Thompson 1959, 21). A small number read Marxist writings in English, but that readership only truly expanded after 1937 when the *Nagani* Book Club began printing Burmese translations of Marxist texts as well as pieces written by its own members (Taylor 1984, 3).

Some scholars have suggested that Burmese activists initially adopted Marxism because it provided a ready-made critique not only of the ways in which capitalism was impoverishing most of the population of the country, but also of the entire system of British imperialism (Sarkisyanz 1965, 167; Thompson 1959, 19). Because most Burmese encountered leftist ideas through translations and secondary or tertiary sources, there were a range of different understandings and adaptations of socialism, Marxism, and communism. Many Burmese used the terms interchangeably in the 1930s and early 1940s and continued to debate the most suitable Burmese terminology.⁴ Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, as some Burmese developed more sophisticated understandings of the various types of leftist thought, people identified more explicitly as “Communist” or “Socialist.” However, as the Socialists of the AFPFL came to dominate national politics, they also began to use the label “Communist” (and, later in the 1950s, “Marxist”) as pejorative terms

³ For more information on the *Nagani* Book Club, see the Myanmar Literature Project’s Working Paper No. 10:1 (Zöllner 2006c). The Myanmar Literature Project has also published a number of working papers translating and analyzing individual publications of the *Nagani* Book Club.

⁴ The debate over terminology is reflected in Thakin Than Tun’s Foreword to Thakin Soe’s 1938 book *Socialit Wada* (*Socialism*) (Zöllner 2006a, 18–21). Than Tun noted that the book had been advertised with the title *Sinyetha Wada* (which he translates as “Proletarianism”) but that the term *sinyetha* (which was alternately translated as “poor person” or “worker”) had been appropriated by so many politicians and parties that the term was no longer useful. He considered several other terms, including *boun wada* (“common ownership,” which eventually became popular among many leftists) but decided that, until a suitable Burmese term was found, they would use the loanword “*socialit wada*” (*socialit* being the Burmese transliteration for “Socialist” and *wada* a Burmese term roughly conforming to “-ism”). He then invited readers to give their own suggestions.

not directly linked to a defined Communist or Marxist ideology. Some of the criticisms of “Marxism” of the time did not actually engage directly with Marx’s ideas, but rather with vague notions of “materialism” or “antireligiosity.”

One challenge Burmese leftists faced was presenting Marxism to their colleagues and to the general population in a way that would make this foreign doctrine both recognizable and appealing. For this purpose, many of them drew on lessons from popular Buddhist texts and concepts from the Pāli scriptures. There were several reasons Burmese leftists used Pāli Buddhist terminology to explain Marxist philosophy. First, by connecting unfamiliar Marxist ideas to commonly accepted Buddhist ones, they were able to blunt the foreignness of the new concepts, while also appealing to a Buddhist community that already accepted the Buddhist uses of the Pāli terms. Second, Pāli was the language of the Buddhist scriptures and most of the commentaries and philosophical texts, so for practical reasons it was the only vehicle for importing foreign political and philosophical concepts without relying entirely on Western loan words. Even if the Buddhist philosophical concepts were unknown to most Burmese (and Spiro 1970 suggests that they were), familiarity with the Pāli words themselves was widespread thanks to monastic educational techniques of rote memorization. So, for example, the Communist Thakin Soe could describe the qualities of an ideal revolutionary leader in terms of the *pāramī* (Bur. *parami*, perfections) cultivated by an enlightened being, knowing that his listeners already valued these characteristics (Sarkisyanz 1965, 168).

A small band of Burmese nationalists, including Aung San, made contact with the Japanese and trained secretly with them in the early 1940s. This group, known as the “Thirty Comrades,” supported the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942 during World War II. The conflict pitted the Japanese and their mostly Burman allies against the British and their allies, drawn predominantly from the non-Burman ethnic groups. Although the Burmans eventually turned on the Japanese, joining with the British to drive them out in 1945, the atrocities of the war exacerbated ethnic tensions, producing a muddled collection of different visions of an independent Burma. It was clear, however, that by the end of the war, the British sought a quick withdrawal from Burma and they were willing to negotiate a rapid path to independence with Aung San and his party, the AFPFL.

The 1947 Panglong Conference was convened by the AFPFL to meet the British requirement that (predominantly non-Burman) residents of the “Frontier Areas” (that had been governed indirectly during the colonial period) indicate whether or not they wished to join an independent

Burma. This, however, was an incomplete effort, as it only included three major non-Burman ethnic groups and the promises of the document that emerged from the conference, the Panglong Agreement, were never implemented by the government. Even so, the event, its promises and betrayals, as well as what it seems to ideally represent, continue to exert influence on the ethnic conflicts that have persisted since independence and on contrasting understandings of national identity (Walton 2008). The prospect of national reconciliation at the time was also struck a blow when Aung San and several members of his cabinet were assassinated in 1947 by a political rival, eliminating the one figure who seemed to have gained the trust (if not the full backing) of many of the ethnic and political factions in the country.

U Nu, another former student agitator and *thakin* who had risen to prominence within the AFPFL, stepped into the leadership position vacated by Aung San and became Prime Minister when Burma declared its independence on January 4, 1948. By all accounts he was a devout Buddhist and he would often cite scriptures or Buddhist legends in justifying a policy plan. He would also sometimes retire temporarily from his government position to become a monk or meditate; while these withdrawals were likely sincere, they also would have brought tangible political support as he would have been seen to be purifying himself and by extension, the government he led. Although U Nu started out as an ardent leftist (he wrote an article in an edited volume entitled “I am a Communist”), over the 1950s he struggled with reconciling his Buddhist beliefs with certain aspects of Marxism, eventually coming to put the latter in an inferior position.

The situation at independence was political turmoil that only worsened over the next few years. Two Communist factions rebelled in 1946 and 1948; ethnic Rakhine nationalists had also rebelled prior to independence and were joined by the Karen and several other ethnic groups in 1949. Gradually the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Armed Forces) pushed back the rebels, regaining control over most of the country throughout the 1950s. In doing so, however, it effectively alienated much of the non-Burman population through its insensitive and sometimes brutal methods. Mary Callahan has argued that, through continued fighting during this period with various domestic insurgencies as well as with Communist and nationalist Chinese forces, the Burmese military gradually began to see its own citizens as potential enemies and itself as the only institution capable of holding the country together (Callahan 2003).

While politics in the country leaned left during the 1950s, there were still contentious debates over the compatibility of Buddhism and Marxism and the proper way to implement both socialism and democracy

in a Burmese context (see [Chapter 4](#) in this volume). There were also personal and political clashes, as the AFPFL increasingly turned on its leftist allies and struggled to maintain its fragile ruling coalition. An example of the factionalism in the party is the career of U Ba Swe, a *thakin* and hero of a series of nationwide strikes in 1938. He was an AFPFL minister after independence and I examine some of his speeches in this book, where he links Marxist and Buddhist thought. Ba Swe stepped in to fill the Prime Minister role from 1956 to 1957 when U Nu stepped down to focus on solidifying the party's base. But by 1958, disagreements over ideology as well as pressures from the ongoing civil conflict had taken its toll and the two had become adversaries. Ba Swe resigned from the government and joined with another former minister Kyaw Nyein to form an AFPFL splinter group opposed to U Nu.

In response to the split in the AFPFL in 1958, General Ne Win, the head of the armed forces and one of the Thirty Comrades, stepped in to lead a caretaker administration, which succeeded in efficiently consolidating law and order, albeit with sometimes harsh measures. The military handed power back to a civilian government in 1960, led by U Nu's faction of the AFPFL, but religious conflict over a proposed amendment to make Buddhism the national religion as well as demands from non-Burman ethnic groups for more autonomy in their local administration and acknowledgement of the federal promises contained in the Panglong Agreement meant that civil unrest continued. Ne Win took power again in a 1962 military coup and established Socialist one-party rule under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Some non-Burman ethnic groups rebelled before the coup, while others rebelled soon after.

The BSPP sought to implement the "Burmese Road to Socialism," an ideology developed by U Chit Hlaing that combined Marxist dialectical reasoning with Buddhist moral teachings. The country then turned inward, limiting opportunities for political organization and implementing an economic policy that was largely responsible for Burma's decline to Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 1987 (Mya Maung 1991). Sporadic periods of unrest flared, such as the student protests in 1974 against the government's minimal recognition of the death of U Thant, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, but they were quickly and violently suppressed by the government. Fighting also continued through these decades between the military and various ethnic armed groups, most situated around the borders of the country, but particularly along the border with Thailand.

Students and workers led mass demonstrations in 1988, sparked by a currency devaluation that further impoverished the population of the country. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as a leader of the democratic

opposition during this period, her status as the daughter of the country's independence hero General Aung San giving her almost instant credibility with much of the Burmese public. The protests also included monastics and for a brief period of time, Mandalay was policed by its monks, the government security forces having essentially abandoned their posts. With civil servants and even some members of the military joining the demonstrations, the BSPP government unexpectedly collapsed in a military coup and was replaced by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which quickly and violently suppressed the protests (Lintner 1990 and Fink 2009).

Surprisingly, the new rulers announced that they would hold elections in 1990. Despite facing intimidation and attacks from the government, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won the election in a landslide. Although it seems that most of the voters – as well as the NLD – believed that the vote was for representatives who would immediately form a government, the SLORC insisted that it was simply an initial step of electing delegates to form a National Convention with the purpose of creating a new constitution. SLORC continued to rule, drawing out the constitution-writing process and sporadically harassing and imprisoning members of the democratic opposition, with only a brief cosmetic name change in 1997 to become the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Although Aung San Suu Kyi spent the 1990 elections and much of the subsequent two decades under house arrest, she gave speeches at the gate of her house on University Avenue in Yangon and traveled around the country when she was not detained. The early 1990s saw her publish many speeches, articles, and books, through friends and supporters in the West who were eager to help her get her message of democracy and freedom out to the world. In these works, as well as in occasional interviews she weaved together her thinking on democracy and human rights with Buddhist ideals, revealing a complex array of political perspectives that are examined throughout this book as one of the most developed examples of contemporary Burmese Buddhist political thought.

In 2003 then-General Khin Nyunt introduced a seven step “Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy.” The government revived the long defunct Constitution-writing process over the next several years but economic pressures again triggered protests in mid-2007, this time organized by veterans of the previous student movement, calling themselves the 88 Generation Students Group. They were quickly imprisoned, but members of the monkhood took up the cause, organizing marches of tens of thousands of monks across the country, and chanting the *mettā sutta* (Bur. *myitta thauk*), spreading loving-kindness as described in the

opening of this book. Dubbed the “Saffron Revolution,” these mass demonstrations were also met with violence and the government forcibly disrobed many monks and closed a number of monasteries (Lintner 2009).

At the time of the protests, one group claiming to speak for the monks was the All Burma Monks’ Alliance (ABMA). Of course, responsibility and credit for the coordination of monks marching in cities and towns across the country must go beyond any single group, and should include networks of monks, lay supporters, and activists, as well as the often overlooked efforts of the *thila-shin* (nuns). But the ABMA (formed on September 9, 2007 by a group of six monks)⁵ was one of the most prominent and it was they who issued statements calling for the regime to apologize for having beaten protesting monks, to release political prisoners, and to address the economic suffering of the citizens. The founding group included U Gambira, who was jailed in 2007, released in early 2012, and has remained a vocal critic of the Burmese government although he has disrobed due to government harassment and persistent medical problems due to his treatment in prison. Another monastic leader was Ashin Issariya (a.k.a. King Zero),⁶ who escaped to Thailand after the protests and has remained a prominent critic of the Burmese government and advocate for democracy, founding libraries in several cities in Thailand and organizing social welfare projects to support Burmese refugees.

The government, however, continued with its incremental democratic transition, even holding a constitutional referendum across most of the country mere days after Cyclone Nargis struck the southern coast in May 2008, killing over 100,000 people. The absence of a state-led humanitarian response to the crisis galvanized civil society groups, particularly among Buddhists, who had previously been underrepresented in social service and community development projects. Much of Myanmar’s political activism of the last decade has come from the networks that were built or strengthened during the public response to this disaster.

⁵ This information is in a self-published pamphlet that includes a narrative of the founding and activities of the group as well as their communications leading up to the protests.

⁶ While the pen name “King Zero” (*min thounya* in Burmese) may appear to be inappropriately grandiose for a monk who is a democratic activist, the name has very different implications in Burmese. On the one hand, it expresses the desire to have no king or authoritarian ruler. In a deeper sense, the word *thounya*, besides meaning “zero,” can also indicate negation, so the name has symbolic power in that it attempts to negate the power of an absolute ruler. King Zero’s pen name is squarely within a long Burmese tradition of aliases that seek to symbolically undermine the authority and standing of an opponent. One of the most prominent contemporary examples is 88 Generation activist and former political prisoner Min Ko Naing, whose nom de guerre means “Conqueror of Kings” (Clymer 2003).

One of the monks who cemented his public image during the response to Cyclone Nargis is U Nyanissara, more commonly known as Sitagu Sayadaw. He took part in the 1988 protests as a monk, giving a famous sermon that criticized the government for not acting in accordance with the Ten Duties of the King. In interpreting this aspect of the Buddha's teachings he reimagined the duties as expectations of a legitimate, democratic political authority and criticized the military government for failing to live up to them. Unsurprisingly, he had to flee the country after that, but returned in the mid-1990s and began to build up a network of development projects, medical facilities, and educational institutes, including a Buddhist university in Sagaing, near Mandalay, and a monastic education center in Yangon. During this second phase of his career, he strategically balanced relationships with prominent military and government figures as well as with the opposition, creating the official support necessary to expand his social welfare activities and allowing himself to position himself as a mediator between the two sides.

In November 2010, continuing to follow the steps of the "Roadmap," the country held elections for a new Parliament, although many elected MPs were recently retired members of the military and the Constitution mandated that 25 percent of the seats be automatically allocated to active military members. Despite skepticism from observers inside and outside of the country, the new quasi-civilian government that came to power in March 2011, led by former General Thein Sein, began to implement a number of political and economic reforms. Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been under house arrest for most of the previous twenty years, was released just after the November 2010 elections, and several mass prisoner releases brought many members of the democratic opposition back into the political sphere. The NLD virtually swept a by-election in April 2012, bringing the former opposition into the government for the first time as groups inside and outside of the country continued to press for more political and economic reforms.

Under the military regimes that ruled Myanmar from 1962 until 2011, religious freedom for non-Buddhists was severely limited. Christians, Muslims, and others faced restrictions on their movement, their ability to construct buildings, and on public worship (see, for example, Chin Human Rights Organization 2012). For the ruling military-led governments – concerned about neutralizing myriad identity-based insurgency groups – religious difference, like ethnic difference, marked individuals and groups as outside the national community and potential threats to the integrity of the country. Partly as a result of this, Burmese (and Myanmar) national identity became increasingly conflated with Buddhist religious identity (a process that had begun in the early decades of the twentieth

century), conveying a sense that to be authentically a citizen of Myanmar was to be Buddhist (and ethnically Burman) (Walton 2013b). This exacerbated the dynamic of non-Burman, non-Buddhist “others” being rendered automatically suspect, a threat to the State, and often seen as tools of regional or global power interests. Outside support from Western or other foreign elements to insurgency efforts and democratic movements against the military regime fed this perception.

The contemporary reemergence of communal violence marked by religious difference began in June 2012 when riots erupted in Western Rakhine State after the rape and murder of a Buddhist girl by three Muslim men. Rakhine Buddhists retaliated by killing ten Muslims in an attack on a bus and the fighting quickly spread between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. There were casualties on both sides but most observers agreed that the Rohingya Muslim community suffered a disproportionately greater loss of life and property. In October 2012 violence again broke out across Rakhine State, bringing the death toll to at least 200 with more than 100,000 displaced (Roos 2013).

Although the conflict in Rakhine state initially appeared to be isolated, fueled by specific regional tensions, the violence soon appeared in other parts of the country. In the central Myanmar town of Meikhtila, riots in March 2013 resulted in dozens of deaths as Buddhists burned Muslim homes, mosques and schools in response to a jewelry store dispute and the murder of a Buddhist monk by a group of Muslims (Davis, Atkinson and Sollom 2013). Anti-Muslim violence also occurred in May 2013 in Lashio in the Shan State in the town of Thandwe in Rakhine State in October 2013, and in Mandalay, the country’s second-largest city, in July 2014. In addition to these major instances, there have been numerous other smaller episodes across the country, including in the former capital Yangon (Lawi Weng 2014).

Initially many of these anti-Muslim activities were led or encouraged by the 969 Movement, a decentralized, loose grouping of monks and laypeople that rose to prominence in 2012 with a boycott against Muslim-owned businesses. But in the middle of 2013, another group was formed that has not only further institutionalized Buddhist nationalist activism, it has drastically expanded its scope and influence. The Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha, in its Burmese language acronym) is primarily known for its campaigning on behalf of four controversial “religious protection” laws that were passed by Myanmar’s Parliament in 2015 and that many have criticized for discriminating against Muslims and restricting the rights of women and non-Buddhists. But the organization has also branched out into other activities related to the protection of Buddhism, such as publishing books and pamphlets,

teaching Buddhist classes to children and, more controversially, buying up cattle slaughtering licenses to prevent Muslim butchers and traders from killing cows.

A national election in November 2015 was remarkably free and fair and resulted in a landslide victory for the NLD, reflecting the overwhelming desire of the population for a change from the direct legacies of military rule. The party's win was all the more surprising because many MaBaTha monks had campaigned strongly against it, arguing that it would not sufficiently protect the Buddhist religion. The NLD-led government took power in April 2016 with a powerful public mandate but constrained by the many institutional arrangements that secured for the military influence in politics, including 25 percent of seats in all parliaments and control over the Defense, Border Affairs, and Home Affairs ministries.

The tactical shift apparent with MaBaTha's emergence saw the organization working more closely with political parties and other actors inside the system, through channels unavailable to Myanmar's civil society actors under previous authoritarian governments. It also saw politicians from the previous government and from other parties adopting the influential organization's rhetoric, publicly displaying their religious *bona fides* and speaking out strongly in defense of Buddhism. NLD politicians have been relatively quieter about the place of religion in the public sphere, but the events of 2014–15 suggest that, after a brief period of absence in electoral politics in Myanmar (during the 2010 and 2012 elections), Buddhist ideas are once again shaping the ways in which people think about politics and Buddhist political engagement itself is both dynamic and responsive to changing political opportunities.

2 Building Blocks of a Moral Universe

“Democracy means acting in accordance with *taya*.”

(Ashin Eindaga, public sermon, Yangon, January 31, 2011)

The Burmese word *taya* has multiple layers of meaning that can refer to justice, law, truth, the Buddha’s teachings or a combination thereof. Not only this, there are also multiple conceptions of “truth” that operate within *Theravāda* doctrine, as well as different levels on which people can grasp the Buddha’s teachings, dependent on their moral and spiritual progress. The above quote from a Burmese monk’s sermon illustrates the impossibility of parsing Burmese Buddhist views on, for example, democracy, without reference to the Buddhist concepts that they use to describe political beliefs and practices or to the overarching *Theravāda* moral framework within which those concepts are understood.

This chapter lays out the basic components of the modernist Buddhist worldview which anchors the Burmese political thinking analyzed in this book. I consider this “moral universe” to be a relatively consistent set of beliefs and concepts within which many Buddhists in Myanmar cognitively organize and engage with their social and political worlds. This framework draws from Burmese sources and I occasionally note areas where Burmese interpretations of these basic components may differ from the more general conceptions that scholars designate as “*Theravāda*.” I also point toward some of the ways in which Burmese thinkers have understood these principles to be relevant in navigating the social and political spheres, which are developed in later chapters. While Burmese Buddhists usually work with ideas that are part of the common conceptual framework of *Theravāda* Buddhism, the unique aspects of their perspectives on politics can come from several factors, including a stronger emphasis on a particular concept, a distinct interpretation of a common idea, a discussion or debate specific to Burmese society, or a response to a particular political and economic event or context.

As noted in the Introduction, this particular iteration of a *Theravāda* moral universe is not itself universal, although I would argue that it has

provided the framework for the dominant tradition of Buddhist political thought in Myanmar over the last 150 years and specifically for those writers, thinkers, and preachers whose ideas are examined here. Furthermore, the claim that these individuals reason from within a broadly defined, common worldview rooted in particular interpretations of Theravāda Buddhist teachings does not necessarily entail ignoring or suppressing individual agency. It is only from within specific worldviews that individual action acquires meaning, and delineating the principles that govern those worldviews helps to explain the broad effects on social and political interactions in a given context. Additionally, asserting that most Buddhists in Myanmar subscribe to an understanding of the universe as governed by moral laws does not discount the variety of interpretations of those moral principles nor the multitude of practices that complement them. I seek to highlight a range of political perspectives and interpretations of Buddhist doctrine situated within a particular modern tradition of Buddhist thought and practice in Myanmar, while also highlighting the ways in which those perspectives are conditioned by a common moral logic regarding the way the universe works.

This presentation of Burmese understandings of the Theravāda moral universe draws from books and pamphlets written by Burmese monks and lay teachers and from the work of Western scholars from a variety of disciplines. My analysis also uses sermons as source material as well as my own interviews and discussions with Burmese monks and lay scholars of Buddhism. In her work on Buddhism among Shan people in Thailand, Nicola Tannenbaum describes monks' sermons as expressing Shan concepts of "the universe, its structure, its operation, the nature of the beings that inhabit it, and the relationships among them" (1995, 101). These sources help to illuminate the logical structure of the moral universe that anchors the political thinking studied in this book.

Daily Buddhist Practice in Myanmar

Many Burmese Buddhists begin their day with a ritual veneration of the Buddha, conducted in their home's shrine area (Bur. *hpaya zin*, literally "Buddha shelf" or "Buddha altar"), sometimes an entire room but usually just an area for a small shrine. The veneration of the Buddha often includes the entire family and can be as short as bowing and reciting some brief Pāli verses or could include making offerings to the Buddha.¹

¹ Pāli is the language of the Theravāda scriptures and, as such, is a common denominator across countries that practice Theravāda Buddhism. Monastics receive varying levels of training in reading Pāli, but lay people rarely learn the language. However, most Burmese

In most cases, people would begin their daily veneration of the Buddha with a show of reverence called the *kadaṇ-kan*; they bow to a statue or picture of the Buddha and “take refuge” (a practice explained below) in the “Three Gems.”

The Three Gems are the Buddha, the *dhamma* (his teachings, Bur. *dama*), and the *sangha* (the order of monks, Bur. *thanga*). These three elements form the foundation of belief and practice for Buddhists of any tradition. The respected Chan Myay Sayadaw,² who runs meditation centers in Myanmar and in other parts of the world translates the Pāli phrase that scholars usually render as “take refuge” into Burmese terms that mean “to believe/trust” and “to serve/revere” (1992, 17). When they “take refuge,” Burmese Buddhists pay respect to the Buddha for teaching the path to liberation (Pāli *nibbāna*, Bur. *neik-ban*), they assert their faith in his teachings and they express their appreciation for and trust in the *sangha* as the protectors and propagators of those teachings.

Although for many this practice has become automatic and mechanical, taking refuge in the Three Gems is a daily reminder of the centrality of the Buddha, his *dhamma*, and the *sangha* in the lives of Buddhists in Myanmar. At a public sermon in Yangon in 2011, the monk Ashin Wiriya explained that the practice of taking refuge helps to remind Buddhists that theirs is a religion in which each person has to rely on himself to practice and reach enlightenment. In a formulation commonly used by monks in Myanmar, he emphasized that the Buddha was *not* a savior; instead, he showed humans the path to liberation. Buddhists could (and should) follow his example but it was his *dhamma*, preserved and taught by the *sangha*, that would show the way and each individual’s effort that would lead to enlightenment.³

Many Burmese Buddhists include another element in their morning ritual, the *aw-ga-tha*, a supplication that expresses the wish to be protected from various states of suffering and to attain enlightenment quickly.⁴ The *aw-ga-tha* reminds the people who recite it that proper moral conduct is not merely correct actions, but also appropriate thought and words. Another common topic of monastic sermons is the three types

Buddhists memorize verses and chants in Pāli beginning from a very young age, even without knowing what the words mean.

² *Sayadaw* is an honorific usually applied to a monk who is the head of a monastery.

³ Ashin Wiriya, public sermon, Yangon, March 22, 2011.

⁴ These states of suffering vary in different forms of the recitations, but can include the four states of woe (rebirth in one of several hell realms, as a demon, as a ghost, or as an animal), the three disasters (war, famine, and epidemic), and the five enemies (kings, thieves, fire, water, and other foes) (Chan Myay Sayadaw 1992, 11).

of actions: physical acts (Bur. *kaya-kan*), speech acts (*visi-kan*), and thoughts (*manaw-kan*), as well as the effects of those acts. Proper Buddhist moral conduct must encompass right action, speech, and thought, since the mind is where the intention to perform any act originates, whether good, bad, or neutral. These increasingly refined levels of moral purity inform Burmese Buddhist conceptions of human nature, multiple and interrelated understandings of “freedom” and “liberation,” and the relationship between moral purity and political participation, all of which are considered in later chapters.

An additional common element of regular individual ritual practice is taking the five precepts (Bur. *nga pa thila*, Pāli *pañca-sīlāni*). Many Burmese Buddhists claim that, unlike the ten commandments of Christianity, the precepts are not direct prohibitions, although the expected outcome of proper moral behavior may be similar. That is, the result of breaking the precepts is not a “punishment” but rather the outcome of a consistent, relatively predictable and unavoidable process of cause and effect, rooted in the moral character of a given action. Each time they take the precepts, Buddhists commit to abstaining from actions that will harm themselves and others. The Burmese monk U Thittila described the precepts as the “preliminary ideals of a virtuous life” (1987, 19). As such, they form the basis of a Buddhist conception of correct moral conduct. The five precepts are:

1. To abstain from taking life.
2. To abstain from taking that which is not given.
3. To abstain from sexual misconduct.
4. To abstain from lying.
5. To abstain from taking intoxicants.⁵

The reasoning behind precepts 1–4 should be clear, as they are common to other religions. The fifth precept’s importance comes from the perception of intoxicants as a gateway to other immoral or inappropriate practices. When Melford Spiro interviewed monks in Burma in the 1950s, many told him they believed that the fifth precept was the most important because intoxication promotes reckless behavior and increases the likelihood of breaking the other precepts (1970, 98–102). In addition, many monastic sermons and writings place a high value on mental control and restraint, as it is one of the most important elements of successful

⁵ Although these five precepts are the most common, there are also additional lists of eight, nine, or ten precepts, taken by monks, nuns and occasionally by lay meditators. The first four precepts contain moral injunctions, whereas the fifth precept (and the additional precepts in the longer lists) marks a shift to a particular disciplinary practice that assists one’s progress on the moral path.

meditation practice. As such, any mental impairment caused by intoxicants is contrary to the ideal of awareness and mindfulness of the present moment, which is the foundation of meditation. Of course, in practice very few Buddhists in Myanmar (or anywhere) follow this strict prohibition and adherence is generally only expected of monks and nuns.

These three daily practices (taking refuge in the Three Gems, the supplication of the *aw-ga-tha*, and taking the precepts) are commonly undertaken by Buddhists in Myanmar, although many add additional elements. The first and last are also common practices among Buddhists in the other Theravāda countries (Gombrich 1995, 76). They are included here because they serve as an introduction to the daily orientation toward correct moral practice that is reinforced through regular rituals. But underlying these rituals is a series of concepts that further delineate the logic of the moral universe and the conditions of human-kind's existence within it.

The Three Characteristics of Existence: *Amicca*, *Dukkha*, *Anattā*

The Buddha taught that everything that exists is characterized by *amicca* (impermanence, Bur. *aneitsa*), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness, Bur. *doukkha*), and *anattā* (no-self/no control, Bur. *anatta*). The characteristic of *amicca* can be understood with reference to multiple time frames. On a longer view, we know that things are impermanent. All living things will eventually die. All created things will eventually deteriorate and decompose, albeit at different rates. Likewise, feelings, emotions, and states of mind are impermanent. Of course, we tend to recognize the transience of joyful situations more than miserable ones, but upon reflection, all of these also come and go. In Burmese people often explain *amicca* as *ma mye bu* which means “not permanent.” In their sermons, monks also use the verb pair *hpyit* and *pyet* (meaning “to come into being” and “to cease to exist”) as shorthand for *amicca*. Everything that comes into existence will inevitably pass away, whether thoughts, feelings, material objects, or living beings.

A common Burmese gloss for *dukkha* is *hsin ye gyin* which generally means “misery” and conforms to the common English translation of “suffering.”⁶ It can also mean “poverty” and Burmese people use the word *dukkha* in a more mundane sense to indicate “trouble” or

⁶ Both the *Myanmar Dictionary (Abridged)* (1978) and the book *How to Live as a Good Buddhist* (1991), published by the Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana, give *hsin ye gyin* as the definition of *doukkha*.

“difficulty.” A more precise (but still incomplete) rendering into English might be “unsatisfactoriness.” However, this definition also needs to be clarified. *Dukkha* includes the sorts of everyday difficulties that we might describe as suffering, but its scope is actually much wider. In order to understand the deeper meaning of *dukkha*, we must also understand *anattā*, the doctrine of “no-self.” The characteristic of *anattā* applies not only to human “selves” but to all phenomena of existence. Because everything is impermanent, existing only from moment to moment and arising and passing away instantaneously, there can be no permanent, lasting essence of anything. Therefore, according to the Buddha’s teachings, there is nowhere to situate a self that is permanent, even within our own minds and bodies.

Although scholars and writers consistently translate *anattā* as “no-self,” Buddhists in Myanmar also use a different expression. In all of my interviews and all of the sermons I attended or watched, both monks and lay people explained *anattā* as “*a-so ma ya bu*” or “no control.” Another variation on this, used by Ashin Eindaga, the Twante Sayadaw is *nga ma pain bu* or “no ownership over the self.”⁷ In a study of Shan Buddhist communities in Thailand, Nicola Tannenbaum also noted a similar interpretation of *anattā* as “no control” (1993, 1995); however, she posited this as a particular Shan construction of Buddhism, whereas it appears to be a common aspect of the worldview I examine here as well. An understanding of *anattā* as “no control” or “no ownership over the self” would appear to be more relevant in its application to daily practice, since the concept of the soul remains abstract.⁸ This could help to explain why monks in Myanmar also describe *anattā* as “no control,” since their goal is to help their audiences realize the value of non-attachment and the unhappiness that follows from assuming permanence and control.

Ledi Sayadaw, a famous Burmese monk who was partly responsible for developing lay interest in meditation and advanced Buddhist study in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, combined both conceptions of *anattā* in his explanation: “Often the world shows us that things do not do what we want—in other words, that we often cannot control what we take to be our soul. Thus, because a person cannot control them, physical and mental phenomena are not the essence of a person, which means that

⁷ Ashin Eindaga, public sermon, Yangon, January 31, 2011.

⁸ This formulation is not completely foreign to the *Theravāda* tradition. As Steven Collins points out, the “Discourse on the Characteristics of *Anattā*” contains the argument that the constituents of the body are “not-self because there is ‘no exercising of mastery’ over them” (1982, 97). However, this understanding does not appear to be common in any other contemporary *Theravāda* countries and has likely, as Collins surmises, come to be expressed through aphorisms that emphasize the unavoidable nature of sickness, old age, and death.

a person has no essence” (cited in Braun 2008, 378). As a scholar of Buddhist philosophy (*abhidhamma*, Bur. *abidama*), he would have been sensitive to the doctrinal understandings of *anattā*, but as a teacher who was invested in imparting to his students an experiential understanding of Buddhist concepts, “no control” would have been a useful formulation, and remains so for monks in contemporary Myanmar.

With this explanation of *anicca* and *anattā* we can now return to an explanation of *dukkha*. We experience “suffering” (or dissatisfaction) when we encounter unpleasant things, when we are prevented from encountering pleasant things, and when pleasant experiences do not last. While pain is obviously *dukkha*, pleasure is also *dukkha* because it will not last.⁹ Thus, *dukkha* refers to the suffering or dissatisfaction that occurs because of our ignorance of the other two characteristics of existence, *anicca* and *anattā*. In fact, we could extend this definition and say that *dukkha* describes and encompasses the conditioned, impermanent nature of existence itself. The Chan Myay Sayadaw connects this understanding of *dukkha* to the everyday definition of “misery” or “suffering” with a metaphor of lightning during a storm. Although there are moments of happiness in our lives, they are as brief as a bolt of lightning, and much of the rest of our time is either spent in suffering or in worrying that the moments of happiness will not last (Chan Myay Sayadaw 2006, 126).

The Four Noble Truths

This understanding of *dukkha* was the central realization of the Buddha’s enlightenment, often formulated as the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth (Pāli *dukkha ariyasaccāni*, Bur. *doukkha ariya thitsa*) is that everything that exists is characterized by impermanence (*anicca*) and is beyond our control (*anattā*). Because we are ignorant of these characteristics and live our lives as if we did have control, everything is also *dukkha*, or unsatisfactory, whether from unwanted negative experiences of suffering or from the inevitable passing away of pleasurable experiences.

Having established *dukkha* as the primary ill, the Buddha then turned to the Second Noble Truth (Pāli *dukkha samudaya ariyasaccāni*, Bur. *doukkha thamouk-daya ariya thitsa*), the origin of *dukkha*. According to his insight, the source of *dukkha* is craving (Bur. *tanha*, Pāli *taṇhā*). The Second Noble Truth of the origin of *dukkha* does not simply deal

⁹ Although *doukkha* (in Burmese) is often contrasted with *thukkha* (pleasure, Pāli *sukha*), even *thukkha* is part of *doukkha* because of its inherent impermanence. However, monks and lay teachers in the Theravāda tradition regularly posit *thukkha* as at least a proximate goal of practice, presumably to give adherents something to strive for that is less abstract than the complete liberation of *nibbāna* (enlightenment, Bur. *neikhan*).

with our craving for pleasurable experiences and our aversion to negative experiences, although that is the way in which we regularly encounter it. The Buddha taught that the *dukkha* of existence is compounded and perpetuated by a deep-seated craving for the continuation of life itself. This, according to Buddhist belief, is the reason why individuals are constantly reborn again and again in different forms, always bound to an existence filled with *dukkha*. In describing this continuous round of rebirths (Pāli *samsāra*, Bur. *thanthara*), Burmese commonly use metaphors of being adrift on an ocean of suffering or caught in a never-ending cycle of dissatisfaction.

In order to explain this cycle, the Buddha enumerated twelve causally-related stages that detail each step of a cycle of attachment, leading inevitably to *dukkha*. The crucial element of this brief explanation is the fact that the cycle begins with ignorance (Pāli *moha*, Bur. *mawha*). Because we are ignorant of the three characteristics of existence (*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*) we cling to people and possessions as if they were permanent and as if we could control them. On a broader scale, we have such a strong desire for continued existence that even at the moment of death, our craving for permanence results in continued existence in a new life. This is the doctrine of dependent origination (Pāli *paṭicca-samuppāda*, Bur. *pateitsa thamoutpa*), and it locates the origin of *dukkha* in craving and ultimately in ignorance.¹⁰

Because of this ignorance, our lives are characterized by and perpetuated through craving and desire. Suffering occurs because we act according to that craving, but with the misunderstanding that craving can actually be fulfilled. The Buddhist path to liberation (freedom from *dukkha*), on the other hand, is a path in which all craving and desire is gradually understood to be impermanent and eventually extinguished. And part of the realization of that path is the understanding that craving cannot be fulfilled, precisely because of the impermanence of everything that exists and our inability to control the conditions of our own life. This is what makes the alternate Burmese explanation of *anattā* so compelling. While the lack of a self may be abstract and difficult to grasp, our ultimate lack of control is evident in virtually every aspect of our lives, as is the suffering that comes from our ignorance or denial of this condition.

The first two truths paint a bleak picture of the world (although Buddhists might argue that it is simply a picture of the world as it is, and we bring our own subjective labels to it). Misunderstanding of these teachings has undoubtedly contributed to perceptions that Buddhism is a pessimistic or nihilistic belief system, but the Buddha's message was

¹⁰ This doctrine is also rendered in English as Conditioned Genesis or Dependent Arising.

ultimately one of liberation from *dukkha*. Thus, the Third Noble Truth (Pāli *dukkha nirodha ariyasaccāni*, Bur. *doukkha niyaṁda ariya thitsa*) states the possibility of the cessation of *dukkha* through overcoming ignorance and craving.

At this point it is probably necessary to add a few words to clarify the specific, focused nature of the Buddha's teachings. Although his initial goal upon leaving his royal life was to find a path to overcome suffering, his path to enlightenment entailed coming to an understanding of *dukkha* that was more comprehensive than just "suffering." If all of existence is impermanent and beyond our control, this means that everything we encounter, whether we take pleasure in it and cling to it or find it distasteful and avoid it, is unsatisfactory. This was a radical redefinition of the problem of "suffering" to also include every single pleasurable experience in a person's life. With such a radical redefinition came a radical solution: The only way to completely overcome *dukkha* is to rid oneself of craving and attachment completely, in every single circumstance. Simply stated, this is *nibbāna* (Bur. *neikban*), or enlightenment: a state in which there is no attachment and thus, no suffering.

While most Burmese Buddhists (and most Buddhists in general) would acknowledge the value of total liberation from *dukkha*, in practice, very few hold enlightenment as a proximate goal. Monks usually end their sermons by expressing their wish that lay practitioners strive to purify themselves, develop insight into the Buddha's teachings, and quickly reach enlightenment, but most of their preaching deals with more mundane issues of daily conduct and morality. In fact, when pressed, many of my interview subjects (including some monks) admitted that they were put off by or even frightened of a life of complete detachment, at least for the present.¹¹ Similarly, instead of being oriented toward *nibbāna*, Burmese Buddhists tend to profess more modest goals of good moral conduct in their present life so as to be born into better circumstances in the future, something explored in more detail below. I mention this not to dismiss, denigrate, or question their practice, but to emphasize the way in which Theravāda Buddhist practice in Myanmar, while retaining the horizon of the ultimate "goal" of *nibbāna*, more often focuses on moral conduct in daily life and on gradual progression on the path through multiple rebirths. This orientation also shapes the way in which Burmese Buddhists view proper conduct in the political realm and will be a part of the analysis in later chapters.

¹¹ These findings are consistent with others who have conducted research on Buddhism in Burma, including Nash (1965, 1966) and Spiro (1970).

Table 2.1 *The Eight-Fold Noble Path*

1. Right understanding (also called <i>right view</i>)	Wisdom aspects
2. Right thought (also called <i>right intention</i>)	
3. Right speech	Morality aspects
4. Right action	
5. Right livelihood	
6. Right effort	Concentration aspects
7. Right mindfulness	
8. Right concentration	

Although the goal of *nibbāna* and the cessation of *dukkha* may be far removed from most Buddhists' daily expectations, the Buddha provided a clearly delineated path in the Fourth Noble Truth, the way to the cessation of *dukkha* (Pāli *dukkha nirodha gamini patipada ariyasaccāni*, Bur. *doukkha niyawda gamini patipada ariya thitsa*). Buddhists refer to this as the Eight-Fold Noble Path (Pāli *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*, Bur. *mekkin shitpa*):

These are the eight facets of correct practice which, according to the Buddha's teaching, will lead one to complete liberation from *dukkha*. Like the precepts and the three characteristics of existence, the Eight-Fold Noble Path is a common subject of monastic sermons and books. The list is not necessarily consecutive, meaning one does not first master right understanding, then move on to right thought, and so on. Cultivation of the "morality" aspects is probably the most common focus in monks' sermons in Myanmar, but in general, greater development of any aspect of the path can lead to the cultivation of a deeper level of practice or understanding of another. For example, taking up meditation practices that would cultivate the "concentration" aspects can result in a deeper level of wisdom. Even these deeper levels of wisdom operate on multiple levels, as evidenced by various Burmese Buddhist notions of "truth."

Taya and Truth

The Burmese word used for "truth" in naming the Four Noble Truths is *thitsa* (Pāli *sacca*), however, another word that can also signify "truth" is *taya*. *Taya* carries several meanings, dependent on context. In a mundane sense *taya* can refer to laws or a piece of litigation (although in this context it is usually clarified as *taya upadeh*, where *upadeh* means law in a legal sense). It also has a general meaning of justice/fairness. It can refer to

nature or a law of nature (although in this context it is usually *thabawa taya*, where *thabawa* means nature or natural). *Taya* can also refer to moral principles, moral teachings, or a sermon. Finally, in a more explicitly Buddhist sense, *taya* refers to the “law” of the Buddha, the *dhamma*. While only the last sense refers explicitly to Buddhist doctrine, a Buddhist context is implicit in most of the other definitions. The Burmese historian Than Tun has explained that, while *taya* used to be a broader term encompassing any type of law, with the ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism in Burma, *taya* “became analogous with *dhamma*” (Than Tun and Strachan 1988, 30). So, to speak of *taya* as a “law of nature” usually refers to the Buddhist understanding of natural, moral laws; *taya* as “moral teachings” usually refers to the specific moral teachings of Buddhism; and *taya* as a sermon most often refers to the sermons given by Buddhist monks. *Taya* can carry multiple meanings because, from a Buddhist perspective, this last, overarching definition (the Buddha’s *dhamma*) encompasses all of the other definitions. According to Theravāda teachings, the *dhamma* that the Buddha professed reflects natural law, applies equally to all beings, and provides humans with guidelines of proper moral conduct.

Thila and Morality

Just as *taya* can mean *dhamma*, it can also imply another Buddhist concept, *thila* (Pāli *sīla*), one of the central organizing principles of the Theravāda moral universe. *Thila* can refer explicitly to the Buddhist precepts or to morals and moral conduct in general and, in an interpretation common in Myanmar, is also the basis for any other progress on the path to *nibbāna*. In sermons, monks repeatedly stress the futility of “higher” practice, such as meditation, if the practitioner has not already purified her moral practice. In a formulation commonly taught by monks, the well-known and influential Sitagu Sayadaw described *thila* as the first stage of practice, consisting of bodily control and verbal discipline.¹² The emphasis here is on actual practice, as opposed to mere conceptual understanding of even the higher “truths” of Buddhism. Ashin Thittila, a Burmese monk who lived and taught in Burma and abroad throughout much of the twentieth century declared: “Practice of the moral life is the very core and essence of religion. It is action and not speculation, it is practice and not theory that counts in life. The will to do, followed by the doing, is the actual virtue; the will does not count much unless it is fulfilled” (Thittila 1987, 54).

¹² VCD of a sermon given by Sitagu Sayadaw in Kuala Lumpur on February 18, 2010.

Monks and lay teachers often compare the practice of *thila* with another common Burmese word, *si kan*, which means “rules” or “discipline.” Of course, it makes sense to see moral practice as discipline and, although the precepts are more properly understood as vows, many people do follow them as a set of rules. Later chapters return to these related notions of *thila* and *si kan* to examine their implications for action, effects, and legitimacy in the social world from a Burmese Buddhist perspective, especially in relation to democracy and democratic practice.

Kan, Kutho, and the Doctrine of Cause and Effect

One of the other primary conceptual building blocks of this moral universe is *kan* (Pāli *kamma*). *Kan* literally means action. In a broader Theravāda Buddhist context, *kan* refers to the entire complex of processes associated with an action. *Kan* includes the action itself, as well as the result(s) associated with that action. Burmese Buddhists regularly make reference to *kan*, especially in describing their own life experiences. One short example will demonstrate the importance of this concept as well as the fact that even a single individual might hold multiple interpretations of it. A young, HIV-positive Buddhist activist living outside of Yangon explained to me that he had contracted HIV because of his past actions. By “past actions” he was referring to the specific actions through which he had contracted the virus as well as the unknown “bad” actions further in the past that had generated the *kan* that resulted in his HIV-positive status. However, while he recognized that this was unavoidable due to the logic of *kan*, he chose to focus on the ways in which his present actions, if conducted with proper intention and moral discipline, would lead to morally and materially productive situations in the future.¹³

Because Buddhists believe that the moral nature of an action determines its result, the Buddhist worldview is one of a universe governed by fundamentally moral laws. While the binary categories “good” and “bad” are too simple and rigid to appropriately describe the moral character of an action, they are the most common ways in which Buddhists in Myanmar gloss the moral nature of action. Burmese use the words *kutho* (Pāli *kusala*) and *a-kutho* (Pāli *akusala*) to distinguish between “good” and “bad” action and results.¹⁴ The moral quality of the action,

¹³ Group Interview #28 in Yangon; July 1, 2011.

¹⁴ Common Burmese usage of *kutho* to mean “merit” or “meritorious action” differs slightly from the meaning of the Pāli word *kusala* (skillful), although it seems to be consistent with popular usage of similar Pāli-derived words from other Theravāda countries.

either *kutho* (commonly translated as “wholesome” or “virtuous”), *a-kutho* (unwholesome), or neutral, determines the nature of the outcome and the circumstances which it produces. Thus, in a very real and direct way, each individual is responsible for the circumstances of his or her own life. A person’s past actions condition the situations in which he finds himself, with regard to wealth, health, social standing, abilities, and even psychological profile.

Many people translate *kutho* into English as “merit,” and the practice of “making merit” (*kutho ya gyin*) provides the basic structure of many Burmese Buddhists’ daily practice. Certain daily practices, such as taking the precepts or making donations to monks, have a wholesome quality and, when done with correct intention, can also purify the mind. These proper moral actions will generate wholesome and beneficial results in the future. Although some teachers discourage thinking of *kutho* and *a-kutho* as a sort of cosmic ledger with positive and negative accounts, monks frequently reinforce the notion that good actions bring good results, most often highlighting future prosperity in this life or a better rebirth in the next. In this way, earning *kutho* can be a strong motivating factor for any religious activity, from something as momentous as building a pagoda to something as trivial as moving closer to the stage at a public sermon to make room for latecomers.

Of course, the notion that certain types of actions bring certain types of consequences did not originate with the Buddha. In the tradition of early Indian religious thought, *karman* (the Sanskrit word for *kan*) was the result of actions, usually either the correct performance of or the violation of ritual action. The quality of these actions would determine a person’s rebirth (Gombrich 1996, 31). However, whereas the existing understanding of *karman* was limited to action and its results, the Buddha virtually redefined the word to mean *volitional* action. The effect of this was to ethicize the concept, making intention central to the results of any deed. In some instances, intention itself is sufficient to bear some degree of consequence. So, for example, simply thinking unwholesome thoughts will have (some) negative effects. Those effects, of course, are magnified by actually committing an unwholesome deed. The important alteration in the Buddhist theory is in distinguishing between action in general (which does not necessarily generate *kan*), and intentional action (which does generate *kan* according to its nature).

Other interpretations of *kutho* also exist among Burmese Buddhists. Sayadaw U Zawtika, a popular contemporary monk and prolific author, writes: “The things we call *kutho* and *a-kutho* are just a type of natural law. *Kutho* is a good type of *seit* [mind/attitude, Pāli *citta*]. *A-kutho* is a bad type of *seit*. The benefit of a good type of *seit* is that it brings good situations,

good experiences, and a good life. The bad kind of *seit* brings bad situations, bad experiences, and a bad life . . . Once you understand this natural law, if you want a good outcome, you have to have a good cause. If you want the conditions of your life to improve, you need to improve your *seit-hta* [attitude/nature]" (Zawtika 2002, 44–45). U Zawtika's explanation of *kutho* highlights the importance of intention in actions and their results, the ultimate responsibility that each individual holds for the conditions of her own life, and the critical role played by the mind in guiding speech and action, the other two activities that generate *kan*.

Since *kan* operates over time periods ranging from the briefest of moments to virtually uncountable eons, humans cannot fathom the specific and complex networks of cause and effect that connect actions and results. Ashin Thittila considers situations in which people claim that "right" action has led to a negative result. In this case, he says, we need to look at our actions further back in the past because, according to the doctrine of *kan*, "whatever comes to us is always just and must be accepted in the right spirit" (1987, 36).¹⁵ Ashin Thittila clearly intends this "right spirit" to be one in which we review our actions with the intention of correcting unwholesome behaviors. He explains: "If properly understood, the doctrine of *kan* teaches us to be careful with our thoughts, words, and actions in daily life so that, as time goes on, it makes us better human beings, willing to perform better and nobler actions towards all and live more harmoniously with our fellow human beings" (1987, 35). Ashin Thittila's advice was no doubt intended to encourage people to reflect on their actions and alter their conduct in appropriate ways, an empowering message, but belief in the workings of *kan* can also have a strongly conservative effect on perceptions of society, legitimating hierarchies and conditions of suffering and inequality.

It is important to stress that *kan* is not deterministic. Instead, we should think of it as conditioning our lives. That is, the present circumstances of someone's life (her social, economic, and political status; her particular skills and abilities; etc.) are, at least in part, the result of her *kan*, her actions in the past. "According to Buddhism, the inequalities that exist in the world are due, to some extent, to heredity and environment, and, to a greater extent, to a cause or causes [*kan*] which are not only present, but

¹⁵ The Burmese legal scholar and former Supreme Court Justice U Chan Htoon distinguished between two kinds of injustice (Chan Htoon 1958). The first he called "human injustice," which was a situation that people had the power to resolve. The second however, what he termed "natural injustice," appeared to be unjust but was actually simply the result of previous actions. Correct understanding of *kan* would help a person to distinguish between the two and to realize that the latter instances were in fact "just" according to the logic of cause and effect.

proximate or remote past” (Thittila 1987, 178). People can use *kan* to explain (and in some cases, justify) present conditions, including extreme poverty, excessive wealth, moral authority, or political power, thus influencing the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies and shaping perceptions of political legitimacy.¹⁶ Negative perspectives on *kan* still seem to dominate popular conceptions and usage; however, this could be the result of environmental effects. That is, decades of living under a colonial government and then a military government that severely limited citizens’ freedom of action could reasonably strengthen a fatalistic view of *kan*. But, as evidenced by the account of the HIV-positive Buddhist at the beginning of this section, the past-oriented and future-oriented logics of *kan* are two sides of the same coin and usually reflect a difference of emphasis rather than a complete rejection of one or the other.

Kutho is related to a similar, but more elevated concept of *parami* (Pāli *pāramī*). Burmese use the word *parami* in an everyday sense to refer to talent or ability, but it carries a specifically Buddhist meaning of “acquired virtue.” The ten principal virtues are charity, morality, renunciation, knowledge, effort, honesty, forbearance, loving-kindness, equanimity, and resolution. Wholesome actions that contribute to the development of these qualities not only result in related future benefits; many Burmese see these as the most important qualities one must develop on the path to moral purity, calling them the ten “perfections.” While one’s present circumstances are always to some degree the result of past actions, development of *parami* is explicitly connected to one’s circumstances with regard to progress toward *nibbāna*. For example, in order to even encounter the opportunity to become a monk, one would need to accumulate sufficient *parami* (Spiro 1970, 405). The *parami* of lay people is “held to be inferior to that of monks, and thus, they would be incapable of renouncing worldly life” to join the monastic order (Jordt 2007, 17). Similarly, some of my interview subjects explained the disparity between their high valuation of meditation and their lack of actual practice of meditation as a result of their lack of *parami*. That is, either they did not possess the mental abilities to concentrate in meditation, or the circumstances of their life did not allow them to devote time to the practice.

Burmese social and political life has also been influenced by the related concept of *hpoun*. I translate this word as “merit” or “power achieved

¹⁶ The same phenomenon is common around the world; see the “just world” theory pioneered by Melvin Lerner (1980). However, the belief that social, economic, or political inequalities are the “just” results of *kan* is not entirely incompatible with concerns of social justice. See the analysis in Jaquet and Walton (2013, 58–60).

through merit,” while the dictionary also lists “glory/influence” and the “cumulative result of past meritorious deeds.”¹⁷ Any position of authority held by an individual can be explained or justified with reference to his *hpoun*.¹⁸ The Burmese concept of *hpoun* is related to understandings of *kan* in that *hpoun* refers to worldly power held by an individual that is attributed to a great store of *kutho* (merit) from past action. Both *parami* and *hpoun* result from meritorious moral actions in the past and, while both can refer to worldly or material results, it is more common in Myanmar to use *parami* to discuss progress and success on the Buddhist path of moral purification and *hpoun* to discuss efficacy in the political or economic spheres.¹⁹

According to the Burmese scholar Min Zin, *hpoun* is the underlying assumption and logic of all unequal relationships in Myanmar and functions in all areas of society, not just the political realm. The challenge that *hpoun* represents in the social and political realms is that its logic is “self-legitimizing”; the possession of power is demonstration of the stores of merit that justify that power (Min Zin 2001).²⁰ In explaining *hpoun*, Ingrid Jordt contrasts the logic of Burmese politics with Western conceptions, arguing that in the traditional Burmese Buddhist configuration, the king’s power is not constrained by a social contract between the ruler and civil society. Instead, it functions according to a moral causal law (*kan*), where power is the product of meritorious actions of the past, demonstrating that those with power deserve that power (Jordt 2007). This brief explanation highlights one critical aspect of my argument: conceptions of politics among Buddhists in Myanmar must make sense within a Burmese Buddhist worldview and the logic of *parami* and *hpoun* is consistent with the logic of *kan* and the rest of the moral universe described in this chapter.

¹⁷ *Hpoun* has referents in other Buddhist cultures, such as *bun* in Thailand.

¹⁸ I specifically use the male pronoun in this instance because in the Burmese worldview *hpoun* is a type of power/merit reserved exclusively for men. See Harriden (2012) and Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2012) for more on the gendered aspect of *hpoun*.

¹⁹ The word *hpoun* is part of a common name for monks, *hpoun-gyi*, which means one with great amounts of *hpoun*. While the discussion above indicates more resonance between *hpoun* and worldly benefits, the fact that Burmese monks are also seen as having great amounts of *hpoun* is a reminder of the ways in which spiritual practices and benefits often overlap with material practices and benefits in the moral universe I am describing.

²⁰ John Wiant explains how people viewed Ne Win, the military dictator who ruled Myanmar for decades, through the lens of *kan*: “I continually encountered *karmic* explanations of his power; that is to say, that he ruled today not for any nominally political reasons but rather as the result of the *kan* he had acquired in an earlier existence. With his power derived from *kan* it makes little sense to challenge it since the source from which it was drawn is already lost in the past” (Wiant 1981, 62). According to Min Zin, Burmese people saw Ne Win as the “king who never dies,” because of his seemingly endless store of *hpoun* (Min Zin 2001).

While *kan* does condition the circumstances of our present life and our future, it is not the only factor involved. Since *kan* is closely connected to correct moral action, it is a common subject of monastic sermons, but monks and lay teachers continually remind their listeners that there are three forces that combine to determine the effects of our actions. Besides *kan* are *nyan* (wisdom, Pāli *nyanna*) and *wiriya* (effort, Pāli *virīya*). In this case, *nyan* does not just mean general intelligence or wisdom but also one's understanding of Buddhist truths, as it is this particular type of knowledge that will lead one toward right view and right action. Buddhists in Myanmar often relate variations of a metaphor that demonstrates the importance of *nyan* with regard to the effects of one's actions. When faced with a door whose handle is burning hot, the person who knows the handle to be hot (who has the wisdom of right view) will touch it delicately and hurt herself less. However, the person who does not know that the handle is hot (who is afflicted by ignorance), will grasp it strongly, doing more lasting damage to herself in the process. Similarly, an understanding of cause and effect as a moral process helps people to be more cognizant of the effects of their actions.

U Nu, the Prime Minister of Burma for most of its first fourteen years of independence, wrote a short story that illustrated the role of *nyan* relative to *kan*. The headman of a village refuses an inoculation, arguing that he cannot do anything to oppose the results of his *kan*. The health officer replies, "Buddha didn't say that your karma [*kan*] is the only deciding factor. He said that there were three deciding factors, your karma, your intelligence, and your industry. Be intelligent, for Buddha's sake, and have this inoculation" (cited in Butwell 1969, 77). Sayadaw U Zawtika, the contemporary monk cited above, explains that, of the three (*kan*, *nyan*, and *wiriya*), he places the most importance on *wiriya*. *Wiriya* is the source of progress in the other two aspects, providing the motivating factor for increasing one's wisdom and combining with the right view of developed wisdom to encourage correct action according to the principle of *kan* (Zawtika 2006, 46).

This understanding of *kan* motivates a reappraisal of the five basic moral precepts (the vows to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consuming intoxicants). The fact that the precepts are not commandments handed down by a deity is relevant in understanding this aspect of the moral universe of Theravāda Buddhism. There is no one who "punishes" those who break the precepts. *Kan* is an impersonal, yet unavoidable process. In outlining the precepts, the Buddha was giving his followers guidelines for correct action. Any "punishment" for performing incorrect actions is merely the result of a naturally occurring process of cause and effect. Additionally, since the precepts are conscious vows to

abstain from wrongdoing, we can see them as intentional acts. From this perspective, taking the precepts is in itself a merit-making activity (it generates *kutho*), regardless of the outcome. Of course, actually abiding by the precepts is more meritorious, but taking the precepts on a regular basis is valuable in that it reorients practitioners to the basic foundation (*thila*, morality) upon which the other elements of Burmese Buddhist practice are built.

Taking the precepts is not only a personal daily practice for many Buddhists in Myanmar, it is also often a central part of any public religious ritual. The five precepts are some of the first Pāli words that any young Burmese Buddhist will learn. Monk sermons, group recitations, offerings to monks, visits to pagodas, and other activities commonly include a monk administering the five precepts to a group of lay people. This practice reinforces the standing of monks and their position as both teachers and guardians of community morality. Just as importantly, it renews in the participants a sense of sharing in a common moral community, one bound by particular beliefs and one in which there is common agreement on the outcome of either following or breaking the moral precepts.

***Lawki* and *Lawkouttara*: Mundane and Ultimate Perspectives on Reality**

One of the other primary distinctions that defines this moral universe is the balance between worldly actions and actions designed to advance a practitioner along the path to *nibbāna*. U Hpo Hlaing, a prolific nineteenth-century Burmese writer and minister to the last two Burmese kings before British colonial rule, regularly addressed this dilemma in his writing. In his *Rajadhammasangaha* (Rules for a Just King), he warned against mixing knowledge appropriate to different paths, cautioning that the laws and maxims for prosperity in the worldly realm do not lead to spiritual or moral attainment. These laws, and the corresponding appropriate actions, are in fact opposed to each other because the benefits are appropriate to their respective realms (Htin 2002, 156).

Many monks and political figures have reinforced this view, and it remains prominent in Myanmar in discussions of Buddhist doctrine and Buddhism and politics, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters. The Burmese terminology for this distinction separates the realm of *lawki* (Pāli *lokiya*) from that of *lawkouttara* (Pāli *lokuttara*). *Lawki* is relatively easy to define, as it consists of the entire material world, the world of social interactions, economic transactions, and politics. We could also say that *lawki* is the world of perception, both physical and mental.

Lawkountara is more challenging to define, not least because many monks in Myanmar tend to explain it in the negative, contrasting it with *lawki* rather than defining it directly. Contrasting it with the “everyday life” orientation of *lawki*, the Galon-ni Sayadaw, an influential Mandalay monk, described *lawkountara* as the way to become free of the defilements of *lawba* (greed), *dawtha* (anger), and *mawha* (ignorance). He also clarified that practicing *thila* and even following the Eight-Fold Noble Path were all *lawki*, in that they led to benefits in this life and future lives, but would still keep one tied to the world, in the repeated cycle of rebirth.²¹ Several other monks I interviewed in Mandalay and Yangon made it clear that *lawki* work wouldn’t get a person to *nibbāna*; that could only be accomplished through *lawkountara* actions. However, one added, it was possible to gradually accumulate *parami*—by acting for the benefit of others—that would ultimately bring *lawkountara* benefits.²²

Although it is common to describe *lawki* as the “worldly realm,” it is not entirely correct to understand *lawkountara* as a realm or sphere of its own, although that is often how scholars and teachers describe it.²³ Instead, *lawkountara* can refer more accurately to a method of perception that is consistent with Buddhist right view and right understanding (many monks use the phrase *lawkountara a-myin*, which means “view” or “perspective.” *Lawkountara* means seeing the world as it truly is (according to the Buddhist perspective) instead of seeing it through eyes clouded by ignorance of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. It can also refer to the path toward that understanding or insight into Buddhist truth and is defined as “the way to escape from worldly desires and attachments.”

Epistemologically, *Theravāda* Buddhist doctrine recognizes two distinct notions of “truth,” each corresponding to the separate understandings of “reality” generated by *lawki* and *lawkountara* perspectives. Ultimate truth (Pāli *paramattha sacca*, Bur. *paramattha thitsa*) is that which can be ascertained by the direct experience of phenomena, by knowing things according to their characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. These characteristics, rather than any names or conceptual definitions humans assign to things, represent the intrinsic nature of reality and together are the “truth” that ideally guides Buddhist doctrine. Of course, when speaking about and acting in the world, we use concepts and terms that, while not technically “true” according to the standards of ultimate

²¹ Personal interview in Mandalay, July 24, 2014.

²² Personal interviews in Mandalay, July 24, 2014 and Yangon, July 28, 2014.

²³ It is common to see these two terms translated (from Burmese or Pāli) as “mundane” and “supramundane.” I avoid that English translation here because simply indicating that something is “beyond the mundane” does not give an adequate indication of what the concept signifies in a Buddhist context.

truth, are necessary for our existence in the world and interactions with others. So, for example, although the Buddha taught that the perception of a “self” as a permanent, abiding entity is actually a *mis*-perception based on ignorance of the characteristics of existence, in everyday practice, even he used words such as “I” and “self.” This is known as conventional truth (Pāli *sammuti sacca*, Bur. *thamouttiya thitsa*) and can often be effective in discussing Buddhist doctrine since the use of these common (albeit ultimately false) terms can help us to grasp concepts of ultimate truth.

In a public sermon in Yangon in 2011, the monk Ashin Wiriya explained the distinction between these concepts by clarifying the appropriate action for each.²⁴ First, he distinguished between the two types of truth, describing conventional truth as “conceptual truth” (*that hmat kyet a-hman*) and ultimate truth as “true truth” (*ta-geh a-hman*). One uses the first (conventional) type of truth to pursue the path of *kan* (better rebirth through meritorious actions). Put another way, one uses this type of truth when acting in the world, from a *lawki*-oriented perspective. Whether *kutho* or *a-kutho* (positive or negative action), because one is acting according to conventional truth, one generates *kan* through these actions. The monk contrasted this with using the second (ultimate) type of truth to pursue the path of *nyan* (wisdom achieved through insight). Again in this case, rather than simply referring to “mind,” *nyan* indicates a higher spiritual development from a *lawkouttara* perspective; it connotes right view.

This monk did not, however, discount any action taken on the path of *kan*. Instead, his point was to identify the action appropriate for each type of truth. In order to be in a position to act according to ultimate truth, moral purity is a necessary step. However, the dictates of ultimate truth and of *lawkouttara* (two different ways of stating the same thing) are not conducive to correct moral practice because they transcend form, concept, and even the duality of right and wrong.

Correct moral practice begins at its most basic level with the five precepts, which deal with basic interactions with others. However, seeing the world from a *lawkouttara* perspective means perceiving things according to their true characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. If, according to these characteristics, everything in existence has no permanent “self,” concepts such as “you” and “I,” “hers” and “mine,” and “true” and “false” have no meaning. Conventional truth is absolutely necessary (at least provisionally) in order to develop correct moral practice. And, this monk reiterated, ultimate truth is useless for this practice; in fact, when

²⁴ Ashin Wiriya, public sermon, Yangon, March 22, 2011.

used without proper understanding, it can lead people away from correct moral practice in the world.

Another example demonstrates that this challenge of balancing *lawki pyinnya* (worldly knowledge, Pāli *lokiya paññā*) and *lawkouttara pyinnya* (ultimate knowledge, Pāli *lokuttara paññā*) has been a concern of thinkers throughout the approximately 150-year period I examine in this book. The royal advisor U Hpo Hlaing also wrote a text in the late nineteenth century about the correct practice to achieve enlightenment, the *Wimouttiyatha Kyan* (Taste of Freedom). In it he claimed that, while following the precepts and performing acts of generosity were admirable and necessary practices, they were not sufficient to move one along the path to enlightenment; only *lawkouttara*-oriented practice could accomplish this goal. The Mahavisuddha-yon Sayadaw (a leading monk of the era) criticized the work, saying that, although U Hpo Hlaing was not technically incorrect in marking these practices as *lawki* actions, the effect of his writing would be to convince ignorant or lazy people that there was no need for them to follow the precepts (Htin 2002, 78)!

Navigating this moral universe then not only requires understanding and balancing these two types of knowledge/perception/action, it also requires one to be able to discern the correct situations in which to apply one or the other. This is not an easy task, especially from the perspective of monastic teachers who see themselves as not only stewards of the Buddha's teachings, but as guides of public morality. Another Burmese monk, the Khan Tee Sayadaw, describes the elusive balance in this confounding manner: "Speak in terms of concepts with common vocabulary, but know in terms of ultimate realities" (quoted in Mehm Tin Mon 2010, 29). This is also a challenge faced by those Burmese Buddhists whose writings and speeches I examine in this book as they have attempted to find appropriate ways to apply the Buddha's teachings to worldly, political matters.

Related to this distinction is the presumed binary of action versus contemplation, usually associated with *lawki* and *lawkouttara*, respectively. Many scholars have criticized this artificial distinction, initially made by early Western interpreters of Buddhism and perpetuated by some later scholars. In his study of sainthood in contemporary Myanmar, Guillaume Rozenberg examines the life and activities of the Winsein Sayadaw. This monk combined contemplation and widely acknowledged moral purity with great success in propagating Buddhism in Myanmar, building many pagodas, statues, and other religious structures. According to Rozenberg, this reflects the fact that, "in Burmese Buddhism, contemplation and action are intrinsically linked . . . they are mutually defining and complementary" (Rozenberg 2010, 6). While

I agree with Rozenberg that this is a model for many Buddhists in Myanmar, I would add that a critical aspect of this linkage is that—in the eyes of many of the writers and thinkers examined in this book—the key to success, both spiritual and material, is the proper *balance* between these two poles and applying the proper methods in the correct realms.

My further interest in these concepts, then, is to understand Burmese thinkers' different positions on the degree to which *lawki* and *lawkouttara* interact and to ascertain what, if any, relevance a *lawkouttara* perspective has for action that takes place in the *lawki* realm. This is a tension that runs through Burmese Buddhist political thought and sometimes manifests in ambivalence regarding the nature of the political realm, a subject examined in the [next chapter](#). Briefly, we can see an example of this tension in the prediction made by one of the court Brahmins at the Buddha's birth. The Brahmin declared that the Buddha would either become a world-conquering king or a renunciate who showed the world the path to liberation. Although the future Buddha's store of merit had elevated him to a position where either path was a possibility, the methods of accomplishment in each path were almost diametrically opposed.

There is an additional important dimension of action undertaken in the *lawki* realm. Buddhism in Myanmar, as in the rest of the Theravādin world, exists alongside and intertwined with other spiritual beliefs and practices. Burmese Buddhist scholars and monks often stress the supposed "purity" of Buddhism in Myanmar, but Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière reminds us that the picture is more complex (Brac de la Perrière 2009). Practice for many Buddhists in Myanmar includes worship (or at least propitiation) of *nats*, local spirits typically associated with certain places or activities; wearing tattoos, amulets, or other protective devices, imbued with power by holy men; and other activities which Theravāda purists would deem "non-Buddhist."²⁵ For Brac de la Perrière, these practices and beliefs, many of which predate Buddhism in Myanmar, complement Buddhist ones and have been incorporated into the Theravāda moral universe.

Many practitioners see no dissonance in combining these beliefs, which accord with the logic of appropriate practices for the *lawki* and

²⁵ Spiro (1996[1967]) deemed these practices of spirit worship "Burmese supernaturalism," a religious system that was distinct from "Buddhism." Subsequent scholarship has challenged his artificial separation (based on the idea of Pāli Buddhism as the "great" tradition and local variants as "little" traditions), revealing the ways in which Buddhist and "non-Buddhist" practices adapt to each other and the ways in which local beliefs are situated within a broad contextual Buddhist framework (see, for example, Tambiah 1984; Brac de la Perrière 2009).

lawkountara realms, respectively. That is, while many Burmese Buddhists value the path to enlightenment, they also hope to gain material advantages in this world. Since the Buddha is no longer accessible for supplication, worshipping and giving offerings to *nats* can convince these spirits to use the powers they have gained through spiritual attainment to help humans acquire power or standing in the world. Similarly, *weikza*, powerful beings who have developed supernatural powers (the Burmese word has been roughly translated as “wizard” or “superman”) can intervene in the world directly on behalf of their followers or by passing on their knowledge and techniques.²⁶

This is similar to the logic of *hpoun*, and highlights the different perspectives on the separation of *lawki* and *lawkountara*. Some Burmese Buddhists maintain that the Buddha’s spiritual teachings were meant to encourage progress on the moral path to enlightenment and any worldly powers or standing that an individual accrues because of attainment on that path are incidental and not to be used. Others see that standing as the logical outcome of correct practice and argue that it should be used and enjoyed in the world. According to this view, *nats*, *weikza*, and other powerful beings, while still ultimately subject to impermanence, have the ability to act in and on the world in ways beyond normal human capability. Thus, paying homage to them or learning from them is an acceptable way to gain material benefits in the *lawki* world and is not necessarily incompatible with other Buddhist practices.

The Dynamics of Lay–Monastic Interaction

The final element of this general discussion of the moral universe that provides a cognitive framework for the thinkers in this book is the *sangha* (Bur. *thanga*), or community of monks and nuns.²⁷ The Buddha initiated this body so that dedicated practitioners could remove themselves from worldly concerns and relationships in order to more effectively cultivate proper moral conduct and non-attachment. In the millennia since, this loosely organized collection of individuals, in theory bound together only by a common code of discipline, has become a set of more formalized societal institutions, with varying degrees of centralization and hierarchy and subject to different levels of state control, depending on the country.

²⁶ An excellent recent edited volume on *weikza* reflects a renewed scholarly interest in the subject and a surprising diversity of belief, practice, and understanding on the topic in Myanmar (Brac de la Perrière et al 2014).

²⁷ Nuns (Bur. *thila-shin*) have been consistently overlooked and underappreciated as members of the *sangha*, both in scholarship on the topic and within Burmese Buddhist society. For one of the few studies of the order of nuns in Myanmar see Kawanami (2013).

Over the past two centuries the *sangha* in Myanmar has been one of the least centralized among Theravāda countries, although state reforms in the 1980s and 1990s have resulted in stronger government oversight and influence (Tin Maung Maung Than 1993).²⁸

While scholars and practitioners alike have reinforced the alleged monastic ideal of separation from society and its attachments, in practice monks often share close connections with lay people. This is particularly true in Myanmar where, in contrast with some other Theravāda Buddhist countries, membership in the *sangha* is rarely a lifelong vocation. Traditionally, most young Burmese Buddhist men would “take robes” at least twice in their lives, once as young boys and once as young men, although more seem to be delaying or foregoing altogether this second initiation period. While some choose to remain in the order and pursue a life of scholarship, teaching, or meditation, most return to their lay lives after a short period, ranging from a few days to a few months. As a result, while there is a small and likely consistent population of “career” monks, much of the *sangha*’s population is transient, maintaining closer ties with their families and communities.

Before the British took control of Burma, education was mostly centered on the *hpoungyi kyaung* (monastery), although monastic education efforts were in some places supported by schools run by the laity but using the same curriculum (Schober 2007, Dhammasami 2007). Although the educational role of monks was greatly reduced by the British during the colonial period and remains limited today by the prevalence of state and private schools in urban areas, many children, especially in rural areas, go to monasteries for parts of their education and monks and nuns often direct orphanages. Since 2012, the practice of holding “*dhamma* school” classes has expanded rapidly across the country, with organization and teaching done by both monks and the laity. Additionally, lay people consult with monks about personal difficulties and monks provide a form of counseling and moral guidance. Monasteries are also traditionally known as centers for information gathering and dissemination, thanks to visitors, traveling monks, and through other communication technology. Finally, monks and nuns have become increasingly involved with local development projects. All of these factors combine to suggest

²⁸ This is by no means a new phenomenon in Burmese state-monastic relations. Charney notes that Bodawhpaya (who ruled from 1782 to 1819) was the first king to make a “significant and sustained attempt by the court to bring about a complete reform of the Religion” (Charney 2006, 91). Mindon, the penultimate king of Burma, also attempted a number of monastic reforms, but, because of his deteriorating rule over his shrinking territory, the result was a proliferation of sectarianism (Ferguson 1978; Mendelson 1975, 84–118).

that the idealized image of the monk as detached from worldly society (*lawki*) and focused entirely on spiritual (*lawkouttara*) matters is a mistaken one. In addition, monks' close ties to the lay community are reinforced through ritualized practices of donation, called *dana* (Pāli *dāna*).

The word *dana* means “charity” or “generosity” and Buddhists in Myanmar most often use the word with regard to donations or alms given to monks. For some this is a daily practice of joining with neighbors to provide food for the monks at a local monastery. Others occasionally donate supplies to monks such as robes or toiletries.²⁹ *Dana* also includes donations made for larger religious projects, such as publishing a pamphlet, sponsoring a monk's sermon, or building a monastery or pagoda. Apart from proper moral practice in their daily lives, *dana* given to monks is one of the most common ways in which lay Buddhists in Myanmar gain *kutho*.

The modalities of the practice of *dana* have generated various interpretations. According to Spiro, in an interpretation still shared by many Myanmar Buddhists, religious donations, which include donating food and material requisites to the *sangha* as well as constructing religious buildings, provide the most *kutho* (Spiro 1970, 104). In this interpretation, the moral worthiness of the recipient influences the *kutho* generated by a donation. A counterview was explained to me by multiple monks involved in various social work activities, who believed that the merit of a donation was in part contingent on the *need* of the recipient.³⁰ They recognized that this “social work” (Bur. *lu hmu ye parahita*) and its accompany logic of merit was not the norm among Burmese Buddhists, but they believed it to be increasing and I examine the concept of *parahita* as a political practice in more detail in Chapter 5.

Others argue that intention (Bur. *sedana*, Pāli *cetanā*) is of greater importance in generating merit. From this point of view, it is the selfless intention of the lay donor (along with the qualities of the monastic recipient) that determines the resultant worthiness of the donation.³¹ From another perspective, the quantity and repetition of giving enhances its efficacy, hence a rich person can earn more merit through the act of giving to monks, regardless of his mindset. Connecting *dana* to right view,

²⁹ The Buddha allowed monks to possess eight “requisites,” the minimum number of items needed for life and practice. These include three robes (outer, inner, and a thick robe for winter), an alms bowl, a razor, a needle and thread, a belt, and a water strainer. Lay people can donate these items in addition to daily food, shelter, and medicines as *dana*.

³⁰ Personal interviews in Mandalay, July 24, 2014 and Yangon, July 28, 2014.

³¹ See Jaquet and Walton (2013) for an extended discussion of the role of intention in donation in Myanmar.

one monk reminded listeners at a sermon that “You must donate with *nyan* [wisdom],” otherwise there would be no *kutho* [merit] from the donation.³² All of these interpretations represent a wide range of views on *dana* among Myanmar Buddhists.

For Juliane Schober, *dana* designates an interaction between monks, as recipients, and the lay community, as donors. They are linked by a ritual exchange system with the objective for lay people of gaining both religious merit and social status (Schober 2011). Naoko Kumada argues that this interaction can also take place among laypeople, between monks and laypeople, among monks, and even from monks or laypeople to other sentient beings that are part of the Burmese cosmology (i.e., spirits, animals, etc.). She interprets *dana* as a lay form of asceticism, by which a layperson can partially practice renunciation regardless of her economic and social status. Kumada also suggests that the use of the term itself by the actors has a social dimension: “It is important to note that the border between *dana* and ordinary giving is not always clear. In the real world *dana* is not free from its social context and is bound with worldly elements” (Kumada 2004, 4).

The ritual of giving *dana* also draws monks into the worldly interactions and concerns of lay people and keeps them aware of the material conditions of their lay supporters’ lives. Monastic involvement in demonstrations in the summer of 2007 began with some monks’ insistence that the government take steps to assuage the material, economic suffering of Myanmar’s citizens. Apart from a general concern with alleviating suffering overall, their reasoning was as follows: If government mishandling of the economy has led to poverty, lay Buddhists can no longer afford to donate to the monks. This deprives lay people of one of their primary sources of *kutho*. In addition, the monastic community is completely dependent on lay support. Therefore, economic hardship also has a negative impact on the work of the *sangha*, especially their role in preserving the Buddha’s teachings and maintaining public morality.

Conclusion: The Logic of a Moral Universe

Weaving together the concepts described in this chapter and looking ahead to their utilization in specific political contexts, we can say that the *Theravāda* moral universe that provides a cognitive framework for the thinkers examined in this book is governed at its base by *kan*, a logic of cause and effect, understood as an impersonal yet morally oriented

³² Ashin Eindaga, public sermon, Yangon, January 31, 2011. Here, in addition to meaning “wisdom,” *nyan* implies right view and the correct intention.

system in which each individual is directly responsible for his present circumstances, as a result of his past actions. Although from an ultimate (*lawkountara*) perspective good and bad are also simply constructs, in a worldly (*lawki*) sense there are certain behaviors that help to purify the mind and assist practitioners in gaining insight into the Buddhist truths of existence. These behaviors form the moral basis of this worldview. Made up of the precepts, the eight-fold noble path, the ten virtues (*parami*), and other practices of morality (*thila*), they not only provide a template for proper conduct, they also reinforce the omnipresence of *kan* in every facet of Burmese Buddhists' lives.

Taken as a whole, Burmese monks present *kan* and the logic of cause and effect not just as teachings of the Buddha, but as natural laws that govern the workings of the universe. Chan Myay Sayadaw declares that "The law of nature that no one can refuse is the law of causal relations. The relationship/connection between cause and effect is natural law" (Chan Myay Sayadaw 2006, 39–40). The consistent view among Buddhists in Myanmar and elsewhere is that the Buddha did not create this process, he merely came to understand the natural law and was able to explain it to others. Furthermore, even if there are particular types of action that are appropriate for the *lawki* and *lawkountara* realms, the principles of the *lawkountara* perspective are the ultimate truths that characterize everything in the universe, from the machinations of the gods to the fortunes of a political regime.³³

Moreover, the appropriate course for effective action in the *lawki* realm is rooted in the moral path that the Buddha developed from his insight into the way the universe functions. And, as Ashin Thittila attests, "the practice of the moral life is the very core and essence of Buddhism; character is the product of daily, hourly actions, daily acts of kindness, charity, and unselfishness. By doing just actions we come to be just, and we judge strength by the power of action" (Thittila 1987, 15). However, proper moral action is not only the path to spiritual purity and eventual liberation from *dukkha*, it can also result in tangible, material benefits such as wealth, social standing, and political power.

The notion that one's individual and collective circumstances are unavoidably tied to moral practice is reinforced regularly in Burmese Buddhist discourse and will be examined in detail in the following chapter. The author of an article in a Buddhist journal in 1957 lamented

³³ Buddhism is atheistic in that the Buddha taught that there is no eternal creator god, only the endless chain of cause and effect in every direction in time. However, Buddhism has also merged effectively with other beliefs, incorporating gods and other powerful beings as life forms with abilities and life spans that far surpass humans', but still subject, eventually, to impermanence.

the current state of politics in the country but had no doubt as to either the cause or the solution. “What has been the result of the moral decay in the Union? The answer is obvious. If people continued to hold life sacred, followed the noble principles enunciated by the Buddha and lived their lives according to the way of their religion, then perhaps the Union would have been spared the blood baths of the past eight or nine years . . . Everywhere in the country we see manifestations of *lawba*, *dawtha*, and *mawha* [greed, hatred and delusion]” (Ba Kyaw 1957, 6).

While correct moral action takes place at the level of the individual, many Burmese Buddhists believe that its effects can be aggregated at the group level, with the collective deeds of a nation or a group of people influencing that nation or group’s development and progress. The effects of individual moral conduct can even extend to the condition of humanity as a whole, which provides a logical framework for Burmese Buddhist thinking about social and political change. U Zawtika sums up this logic very simply: “In this world, what causes evil and disrespect to increase? We could answer by saying that it is the increase of people who do bad things” (Zawtika 2006, 66).

Chan Myay Sayadaw makes it clear that correct moral behavior begins where this chapter began, with faith and belief in the Three Gems. “Let us consider a person. This person has been bad his entire life. He does not show respect for . . . the Buddha, the *dhamma*, or the *sangha*. He does not give *dana*. He does not build up his *thila*. He does not keep the precepts. He does not meditate. What kinds of things does he do? To get things he steals, fights, and brings misfortune. When he sells or buys goods he lies and deceives others. This is the way he makes a living” (Chan Myay Sayadaw 2006, 43). The chain of cause and effect extends back to the most basic beliefs and practices of Burmese Buddhism. If these are not correct, how can any right action follow? The Sayadaw’s explanation reinforces the importance of correct moral conduct as a basis for success in any endeavor, asserting the relevance of this Theravādin view of the moral universe for dealing with social and political concerns.

Finally, the notions of *kan*, *nyan* (wisdom), and *wiriya* (effort) demonstrate the range of interpretations of concepts within this framework. All three are essential elements of the workings of cause and effect in the Theravāda moral universe. However, the order of importance with which Burmese Buddhists rank them can indicate the way they understand change and the role of human agency in the world. A focus on *kan* as the central factor brings one’s attention to proper moral action according to the precepts, but it can also encourage a more fatalistic view, in which present circumstances are not only unavoidable, they are justified through reference to unknown past actions. While fewer Buddhists in Myanmar

focus on *nyan* as the primary factor of the trio, this element brings the focus to right view and seeing the world “as it really is,” that is, as characterized by *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. This focus would seem to be more oriented toward *lawkountara* concerns rather than *lawki* matters.

An emphasis on *wiriya* tends to be more empowering, focusing on the role of present efforts and actions in changing the future, rather than past actions as having conditioned the present. Given this orientation, it is not surprising that this is the message of a less traditional monk such as U Zawtika, who often mixes Western scholarship with Buddhist teachings and whose books occasionally read like self-help manuals, or of the young HIV-positive activist mentioned above. Even in this case, however, we should notice the inherent tension in adopting this perspective. An emphasis on *wiriya* encourages practitioners to take control of their circumstances, an admonishment that could appear to be in direct conflict with the common Burmese understanding of *anattā* as “no control.”

There is thus a fundamental paradox at the heart of the particular *Theravāda* Buddhist-influenced perspective on existence that motivates the varying interpretations discussed in this book. On the one hand, as U Zawtika emphasizes, the actions of each individual have real effects in the world and, although conditioned by our past actions, we are free to make our own decisions, ideally rooted in right view, and with an eye toward proper moral conduct. On the other hand, the inevitability of the results of one’s actions (*kan*) and the understanding of *anattā* as “no control” suggest a world in which human agency is severely limited, at least in an immediate sense. This perspective can limit action in the face of suffering or repression, with a justification that the punishment for evil is inevitable and impersonal and will “work itself out.” The moral universe described here provides a conceptual framework that can accommodate political perspectives that are both optimistically liberating and fatalistically compliant. The *next chapter* examines some of the basic conceptions of politics that Buddhists in Myanmar have articulated within this moral framework.

3 On Human Nature and the Nature of Politics

In the 1950s and 1960s, the political scientist John Badgley conducted research on politics in Burma at regional and local levels. He found that villagers were reluctant to use the phrase *nain ngan ye* (the common term for “politics”) to describe political activities in their own communities (1965, 71). Instead, they referred to traditional practices of cooperative action, compromise and reconciliation as *a-yu a-hsa* (beliefs) or *a-tway a-hkaw* (ideas). On the one hand, many of them saw national politics in the 1950s as sufficiently partisan and dysfunctional that they chose to disassociate themselves from *nain ngan ye* and its increasingly negative connotations. But additionally, most saw *nain ngan ye* as a state-centric, elite-level practice in which they were not included and that did not mirror their own daily practices, although many outside observers would likely classify them as “politics.”

Particular and bounded understandings of *nain ngan ye* still persist in Myanmar today. When conducting a discussion on the differences between politics and *nain ngan ye* with a class of Burmese university freshmen in July 2014, I asked them if there were any groups in the country that were not supposed to engage in *nain ngan ye*. Expecting the first answer to be monks (about which more in Chapter 5), I was taken aback when someone responded by saying “government workers.” These students understood *nain ngan ye* to inherently mean party politics, from which public servants were discouraged from participating. Over the course of our subsequent discussion, we identified many practices that they acknowledged might easily be classified as “politics” yet were certainly not understood by most people to be included in the category of *nain ngan ye*.

The idea that the word *nain ngan ye* inherently connotes *party* politics can also be seen in contrast with another popular term, *a-myotha nain ngan ye*, or “national politics.” It has been in circulation at least since the 1940s and it was common throughout the period of military rule for leaders to insist that this was the type of politics the military engaged in. Senior General Saw Maung, who led the State Law and Order

Restoration Council after the 1988 coup, repeatedly said that he did not “know politics,” meaning the party politics that the military despised (Houtman 1999, 69). And this rhetoric continues today, underlying disputes in parliament and between military and non-military MPs. Commander in Chief Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing may have seemed to say something incongruous when he stated in May 2015 that neither the Tatmadaw nor the ruling USDP participated in “party” politics (Eleven News 2015b). However, his claim makes sense if understood in the context of debates in parliament and in the public sphere over the proper orientation of political actors in Myanmar and whether or not certain individuals and groups could be seen as acting in the nation’s best interest rather than according to their own narrow desires (Lawi Weng 2015).

These various Burmese understandings of “politics” reveal a range of attitudes toward political authority, most of which are grounded in some way in the moral framework of the *Theravāda* universe described in the *last chapter*. Because of this, when considering how political authority came to be, why it is necessary, and in what ways it may be limited, Buddhists thinkers in Myanmar have tended to consider political action and political change as quintessentially *moral* practices, that is, as intrinsically connected to and influenced by the correct or incorrect conduct of individuals according to an overarching logic of *kan*. The traditional *Theravāda* Buddhist model of kingly authority, explained below, presumed politics to be an elite activity, and this sentiment has persisted into the current period. However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, many Burmese thinkers have sought to expand the boundaries of the political.

I situate Burmese views on the nature of politics in relation to two texts from the Pāli *suttas*, the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti Sutta*.¹ Both texts speak to models of kingship, with the *Aggañña Sutta*’s account of the first ruler presenting a picture of humans as fundamentally driven by

¹ The *Aggañña Sutta* is part of the *Digha Nikaya* (“Collection of Long Discourses”). In the Burmese tradition, in addition to being a part of the *suttas*, it has also been incorporated (with variations) into Burmese royal chronicles that indigenize the concept and localize it by connecting it to Burmese royal lineages. It has also been widely used by Burmese writers and incorporated into popular Buddhist narratives. The *Cakkavatti Sutta* (also part of the *Digha Nikaya*) is less commonly incorporated into Burmese texts as such but the figure of the *cakkavatti* (the universal or “wheel-turning” king), known in Myanmar as the *Setkya Min*, appears most often as an iconic figure leading millennialist revolts against royal or colonial authority in an attempt to reverse a perceived spiritual decline and usher in the age of the next Buddha (Foxeus 2011). However, the general narrative of the decline of the *sāsana* (Buddhist religion) contained within the *Cakkavatti Sutta* does appear commonly in different Burmese texts and commentaries. Alicia Turner considers one prominent example in the *Anāgata Vamsa*, a detailed account of the specific stages of this decline that was popular at the beginning of the twentieth century (2014, 28–34).

desire and incapable of controlling their baser actions. From this perspective, political authority is a necessary bulwark against anarchy and violence. Burmese uses of the *Aggañña Sutta* to both justify and limit political authority are rooted in beliefs about human nature. Here I identify an ambivalence that fundamentally structures Burmese attitudes toward politics and political authority: are humans primarily defined by their desire-driven natures or by their capacity for moral perfection and enlightenment? The constitutive relationship between these two aspects of human nature forms a productive tension that Burmese political thinkers have sought to resolve in developing and defending their particular views on politics.

The overlap between *lawki* and *lawkouttara*—mundane and ultimate perspectives on reality—provides a bridge between the *Aggañña Sutta*’s justification of political authority and the focus on moral conduct in a context of cause and effect in the second text, the *Cakkavatti Sutta*. This work also relates a story of moral and material decline, but includes the example of an ideal king whose rule will set the stage for the coming of the next Buddha. The political thinkers that I examine have drawn on one of the central lessons of the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, that the moral actions of both leaders and members of communities have tangible effects in the material world.

Politics as “Affairs of the State”

Burmese Buddhists have developed a number of different interpretations of “politics.” The most common Burmese word for politics is *nain ngan ye*, or “affairs of the state.” Prior to the colonial period, politics at a state level was an area of action reserved for kings, would-be kings, and their closest advisors; common understandings of *nain ngan ye* still put it in the realm of “high” politics. The majority of the population did not participate in *nain ngan ye* since, from the available evidence, most people believed that this was desirable or possible for only a select few. As Alexey Kirichenko notes, this characterization had the effect of “cutting down the spheres where politics was possible” (n.d., 3).

Although the common translation of *nain ngan ye* is “affairs of the state,” “state” is not an accurate label for the system of political organization that existed prior to the colonial period in Burma. Political entities in premodern Southeast Asia did not have clearly defined borders, nor did political rulers exercise power in the radial fashion of contemporary nation-states. Instead, the power of a king was strongest in his capital city and weakened the further removed it was from there (Heine-Geldern 1942). He could expand his authority by offering protection and

developing tributary relations with lesser political figures at the edge of his reach, but there was always a threat that these minor players could switch their loyalties to another encroaching power or develop as independent power centers. The result was a series of expanding and contracting zones of influence, with blurry borders and zones of overlapping authority. As described in the Introduction, O.W. Wolters (1982) designated this political system as a “mandala” and Stanley Tambiah (1976) labeled it the “galactic polity.”

The operating principles of the *Theravāda* moral universe, particularly the doctrine of *kan*, supported the belief that politics was an elite practice and these justifications were regularly deployed by kings’ ministers in their writings legitimating royal authority. According to the doctrine of *kan*, an individual’s present status, authority and abilities are all at least partially the result of his past actions. King Mindon, who ruled in the middle of the nineteenth century, claimed that he was a “righteous king who through the power of merit accumulated in many hundreds of births obtained the wealth of kingship” (quoted in Sarkisyanz 1965, 68). *Kan* can act in a legitimating, explanatory way, justifying an individual’s position with reference to presumed good deeds in the past. Once a king gained power, his position was justified through his *kan* (or *hpoun*, a similar term reserved for the highest stores of merit). However, *kan* only justifies present conditions and has no predictive power since no one can know the details of the workings of *kan*. Only after a given ruler lost his position could people explain that result as a loss of *hpoun* or as the expiration of his positive *kan*.

There is an irony of kingship that reinforces the Burmese Buddhist view of time and the universe as cyclical. An individual could ascend to the heights of economic or political power because of his past good actions. However, the actions necessary in the present to reach those exalted positions were almost invariably contrary to Buddhist moral teachings, generating *a-kutho* (demerit) for the future. Not only that, people expected that holders of high office would commit more immoral acts. The example of Asoka, a third-century ruler in what is today India, is instructive. Although commonly praised as the exemplar of Buddhist kingship and highly regarded within the Burmese tradition, Asoka began his career by expanding his empire through violent military conquest. Only after defeating his enemies and absorbing their territory did he commit himself to conquering others through the strength of *dhamma* (the Buddha’s teachings) rather than arms. In the Asokan model, the ideal ruler could rule through *dhamma* only after committing numerous morally blameworthy acts in the process of bringing the territory under his control. Kingship afforded opportunities to make great merit through donations and spreading the Buddha’s

teachings but it was an intrinsically worldly (*lawki*) undertaking, one that inevitably generated negative *kan* as well.²

Additionally, there are reasons to be skeptical of this model of premodern *Theravāda* monarchical political legitimacy and authority. First, a belief that an immeasurable number of good actions in the past justified a king’s present authority does not necessarily imply a positive appraisal of that king’s behavior in the present. Burmese Buddhists were fully aware that their rulers rarely, if ever, lived up to the moral expectations with which they justified their rule. The *Lawkaniti*, a Burmese collection of folk wisdom, lists kings as one of the “five enemies,” along with floods, fire, thieves, and disease. Many Burmese Buddhists still pray for protection from these “enemies” as part of their daily practice.

Second, the writings that praised a king’s past deeds as justification for his authority were essentially royal propaganda. While operating consistently within the conceptual boundaries of *Theravāda* Buddhist beliefs, the ministers and monks who developed elaborate genealogies and legitimating narratives of kings were acutely aware of the pragmatic need to buttress a ruler’s standing against potential challengers. For example, during the Burman Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885), a small group of monks developed an ideology that centralized and consolidated royal power by connecting the Konbaung lineage back to *Mahasammata*, the original king depicted in the *Aggañña Sutta*, described below (Charney 2006).

Third, elites (either monks or ministers) composed almost all of the (surviving) written texts from the precolonial period in Burma. As a result, there exists virtually no evidence of the views of the average Burmese Buddhist from this time. This is a common challenge faced by historians of Southeast Asia and the lack of evidence cautions skepticism toward attributing belief in these legitimating myths to a wide swath of the Buddhist population since most of the population in Burma would likely have had no involvement in and experienced limited effects of the “affairs of the state” on a daily basis. The legitimating (or de-legitimizing) aspects of this traditional model of politics would have only become apparent or relevant in times of crisis and subjects’ interactions with political authority, if they occurred at all, would have been through distant intermediaries.

² John Badgley explains, “The ethical codes assumed that political activity was an obligation upon rulers, but that it had no inherent virtue” (1965, 62). This view of politics, which not only sees political activity as morally unwholesome, but also as devoid of any inherently virtuous aspects, has presented a challenge for contemporary figures who argue for a participatory democratic system. Are there only instrumental justifications for democratic practice (the protection of human rights, for example) or is it possible to envision participation in politics as a morally productive activity in itself? I consider Burmese engagement with this question in [Chapters 5 and 6](#).

Finally, while *Theravāda* Buddhism provided legitimating symbolism, the Indian political tradition was likely a stronger influence on the practical business of statecraft; monarchies in mainland Southeast Asia often fused indigenous practices with elements of Indian legal codes and Brahmanic rituals from the Hindu tradition (Coedès 1966). While the Asokan model was the ideal for a Buddhist monarch, ruling a territory solely through the power of *dharmma* was not an appealing option to Burmese kings. Instead, Indian legal traditions provided techniques of disciplinary statecraft as well as the justification for using them (Ling 1979, 29–30). Additionally, as *sangha* authority remained decentralized in Burma until the late twentieth century, it is likely that practices of propitiation and other responsibilities related to local spirits was of more immediate relevance to much of the population than doctrinally Buddhist justifications of royal authority. Subjects related to these practices, such as astrology, numerology, and the summoning of spirits were even taught in monasteries up through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dhammasami 2004).

From what little we know of the precolonial Burmese polity then, there was likely a conceptual distinction between the affairs of the state (*nain ngan ye*) and the “political” practices that took place at a more local level. Sarkisyanz claims that “not from royal legislation but from unanimous custom were derived the regulations of the daily life of the people” (1965, 15). While he overstates the “unanimous” nature of these customs, he is right to suggest that royal actions probably had limited impact on people’s lives. The work of John Badgley and others demonstrates that, even after independence in 1948, for the rural majority, the actions of national leaders remained far removed from village life and that a bounded and more exclusive understanding of what politics is and who can participate in it persisted through the twentieth century. I argue that this restricted, elite understanding of politics is rooted in Buddhist ideas regarding human nature and the need for political authority, ideas that are clearly articulated in the *Aggañña Sutta*.

The *Aggañña Sutta* and the Legitimation of Political Authority

The *Aggañña Sutta* relates the fall of humankind from a blissful, non-material state to our current, physically differentiated, desire-driven, and generally immoral condition.³ Although it is sometimes referred to as the

³ Two of the more detailed accounts of the *sutta* in the Burmese tradition are contained in the royal chronicle *Hmannan Mahayazawingyi* and the legal text *Manugye Dhammathat*, the latter translated by Richardson as *The Laws of Menoo* (1847).

Buddhist “genesis” story, Steven Collins’ translation gives it the more appropriate title, “The Discourse on What is Primary” (Collins 2001). Instead of the genesis of the world per se (since the tale that the Buddha is recounting is merely one part of a cyclical, infinitely repeating process), the text describes the genesis of social classes. In this context, the Buddha relates the story of humans’ decline from a previous, more celestial state.

These celestial beings require no material nourishment, yet eventually one of them (described as greedy by nature) takes a taste of an “earth-essence” which has spread out across the waters that cover everything (Collins 2001, #12).⁴ Others follow suit, with the result that craving comes into being. Next, there is a sequence in which successive nourishing substances appear, and the beings consume them as well (#13–15). The result is the hardening of physical features, the recognition of beauty and ugliness, and further discord.

Finally, a huskless, ready-to-eat rice appears (#16). When the beings eat the rice this time, instead of developing aesthetic variation, they develop male and female sexual organs and more significantly, a craving for the opposite sex. Some have sex and the community immediately expels them for this sinful act. Then, in order to hide this apparently shameful behavior they build houses, beginning to create an alternative, worldlier community (#17). Initially, the miracle of the rice is that, whatever the beings gather to eat at one time regenerates without cultivation by the time they are hungry again. Thus, it is not necessary for anyone to take more than is needed for one meal or to store any of the grain. However, one greedy individual realizes that he can save time and effort by gathering enough rice in the morning for both his morning and evening meals. Others notice this and begin to imitate his practice. Eventually, the beings are gathering rice for several days at a time, which causes the regenerative properties of the rice to disappear, and the beings must learn the art of manual cultivation (#17).

The beings realize that evil things have arisen because of their craving and consumption and decide to set boundary lines around their own plots of rice to create an ordered system of ownership (#18). Again, a greedy being conspires to take more than his share and steals rice from someone else’s plot. When they discover this crime, the other beings are incensed and severely punish the thief. Thus, “stealing, accusation, lying, and punishment become known” (Collins 2001, 46). Collins notes that the

⁴ Citations refer to the section markings indicated in Collins’ text. I use Collins’ text as the basis for my initial account of the *sutta* but consider some Burmese variations and their implications for political thinking in the [following section](#).

text presents not only stealing and lying but also accusation and punishment as “bad things” (2001, 72, fn 19.1). While the degenerate state of the world may necessitate these responses, they are presumably still not ideal behaviors and are also products of uncontrolled desire.

At this point, the beings recognize the need for some type of political authority (#20–21). They choose the most handsome and charismatic among them, the one with the most natural authority, to act as judge and to dispense punishment, in return for a portion of their rice. He is called *Mahasammata*, which means “appointed by the people” (Collins 2001, 46). This individual not only acts as an arbiter but is also expected to provide a moral example for the rest of the community to combat the immorality and degeneration that have arisen. Finally, the story concludes with the development of the other social classes. The Buddha then explains to his listeners that, after these classes have solidified, some members of each, having become dissatisfied with worldly life, establish a practice of leaving the community to pursue a nobler life of asceticism. Thus, the Buddha presents the lifestyle of the monk as the most noble of all. It appears that part of the Buddha’s purpose in relating this story was to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of class and to insist that it was proper moral behavior (rather than birth into a particular class) that distinguished a good individual from a bad one (#32). However, the *sutta* also reveals the tension between dichotomous Buddhist views of human nature as inherently moral or immoral.

Burmese Buddhist Views of Human Nature

The possibility of ultimate liberation from desire and continued existence (enlightenment) for every being is an important element in the Theravādin view of human nature. Yet the description of humans as generally given over to pleasure and craving also continues to inform the Burmese Buddhist concept of the *pu htu zin* (Pāli *puṭhujāna*), a Burmese word that is commonly translated as an “ordinary worldling, enslaved to desire.” As *pu htu zin*, human beings are fundamentally driven by desire and aversion. Our actions are influenced by our need to acquire certain things and our need to avoid other things. Initially this picture of human nature appears similar to that developed by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, who also believed that desire and aversion were the motivating factors behind human action (Hobbes 1994 [1668], 34–5). However, whereas Hobbes denied the absolute existence of good or evil, stating that they were merely subjective judgments, the Burmese Buddhist moral universe of this study includes the belief that there is an absolute “truth” contained within the Buddha’s teachings and that

certain actions can be considered “wholesome” (*kutho*) or “unwholesome” (*a-kutho*).

The *pu htu zin* sits in a difficult position with regard to this truth. Life as a human is considered one of the highest states of existence because of the human capacity for reason and the ability to discern good from evil (Ba Thaung 2000, 121–123). This is what sets humans apart from animals and makes enlightenment possible. But a *pu htu zin* acts in ignorance of the ultimate truths of Buddhism: the characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and lack of control/self) and the law of *kan*. Of course, almost every Buddhist in Myanmar learns these truths and has them reinforced constantly through books, sermons and public rituals. However, what marks a *pu htu zin* is the fact that he continues to act as if the world were permanent, pleasurable, and subject to his control. He has not yet internalized the truths of the Buddha’s teachings and is caught up in mundane concerns. Because of this, the *pu htu zin* is often described as ignorant, driven by worldly desires and aversions.

Burmese Buddhists have long debated whether, being driven by desire, humans can be said to be fundamentally good or bad. The *Aggañña Sutta* reveals that it was desire that caused human degeneration from a higher spiritual existence, and that unrestrained desire is the source of all unwholesome actions. The text claims that the being that initiates this descent was “greedy by nature,” which Collins says indicates the Buddha’s practice of distinguishing between people not by social class but by “moral” class (2001, 42 & 60: fn 12.10). However, since all of the beings eventually follow the descent into craving, we might conclude that this desire resides inherently in all beings. Political writer and activist Thakin Ba Thaung, in his Burmese translation of a 1957 Indian text on Buddhism, wrote that “the nature of mind is always to pull towards evil thoughts. As a result, our natural tendency is to do evil deeds” (2000, 117–118). In a 1952 speech, U Nu expressed a similar opinion: “All living creatures relish the evil more than the good. If a human being has no religion for moral guidance to deter him from the path of evil then he is no different from other creatures of the animal world” (Nu 1953, 90–91).

Even though U Nu claimed that human beings will naturally gravitate toward evil actions, he also suggested that proper moral conduct *is* possible, but only through the medium of spiritual discipline. Development on the moral path complicates the Burmese Buddhist picture of human nature, because those who progress on the path come to embody human potentiality for enlightenment, but in doing so they transcend those qualities that fundamentally make up a *pu htu zin*. One example is the ambiguous societal position of the Theravādin Buddhist saint (Pāli

arahant, Bur. *yahan*), who paradoxically gains in status and acclaim the more he withdraws from the world (Rozenberg 2010; Kawanami 2009; Mendelson 1961). Progress on the moral path thus seems to lead a person away from at least one central characteristic of “human-ness.”

While *Theravāda* Buddhists retain the optimism of the possibility of enlightenment, they generally acknowledge that in practice very few will attain it. Overall, they agree on the fundamental nature of humans as desire-driven creatures, but there are dissenting views as to the implications of this claim. The ambivalence in Buddhist views on the subject has given political actors the space to emphasize different aspects of this malleable human nature in supporting their own views, whether advocating for stronger political authority to control potentially harmful desire-driven action or on behalf of democracy as allowing humans to realize their potential as free agents.

Two Political Responses to Two Conceptions of Human Nature

In the *Aggañña Sutta* human failings and potentialities are both on full display. On the one hand, the text presents a picture of human nature as fundamentally malleable. From a near-perfect original state, desire drove human devolution to its current incarnation but proper moral behavior could lead an individual from any social class to enlightenment. On the other hand, humans appear to be fundamentally morally flawed, incapable of controlling their behavior and prone to harming themselves and those around them. Even those near-perfect beings must have had the seeds of craving within them, making their moral fall inevitable. The *Aggañña Sutta* actually presents two responses to this dilemma: one that is explicitly political (and oriented toward *lawki* matters) and another that transcends politics and worldly concerns (with a *lawkountara* orientation).

Initially in the *Aggañña Sutta* there is no political authority and the immaterial beings exist in a blissful state. Even as craving and its effects begin to manifest in the world, the beings appear capable of living together in peaceful coexistence. Eventually, however, conflict between the beings (now devolved into human form) escalates and compels them to choose someone to mediate between them and to hand down punishments. The implication is clear: the nature of humans as desire-driven creatures results in conflict; this conflict necessitates some type of political authority. This is the way many Burmese texts have used the *Aggañña Sutta*: as a legitimization of political authority.

Burmese adaptations of the *Aggañña Sutta* consistently expanded the role of *Mahasammata* and the scope of his authority in important ways.

While the Pāli *sutta* suggests a role for *Mahasammata* as judge and executive, the Burmese chronicle *Hmannan Mahayazawingyi* uses the word *a-so ya hein min*, a combination of the Burmese terms for king and government that more closely corresponds to “ruler” (*Hmannan Mahayazawingyi* 1967, 32). Over time, chroniclers expanded both the moral expectations of the king and the scope of *raja-dhamma* (Bur. *yaza-dama*, codes for kingly rule in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha). In a pattern common to the chronicles, one author, U Kala, attributed the successful reign of *Mahasammata* to his decision to abandon the four *agatis* (biases) and rule according to the Ten Duties of the King (Candier 2007, 13).⁵

The *Manugye Dhammathat*, a collection of legal texts and prescriptions compiled by an unknown author around 1782 for the Burmese king Bodawhpaya, also begins with a description of the origins of the world drawn from the *Aggañña Sutta* and arrives at the appointment of *Mahasammata*. In the Burmese text, however (and, as Collins points out, in most of the post-canonical appropriations of the story), *Mahasammata* is presented as the *name* of the first king, rather than a title.⁶ Moreover, the *Manugye Dhammathat* asserts that he was “the first among kings, [who] possessed the law, the world and exclusive royal authority” (Okudaira and Huxley 2001, 251). The Burmese texts also refer to *Mahasammata*’s appearance on the political scene in terms reminiscent of the Buddha. The “great, noble, exalted, glorious one” was endowed with “the requisite mark of the Supreme Buddha” (*Hmannan Mahayazawingyi* 1967, 32–35). This is a definite expansion of the duties, authority, and splendor of *Mahasammata* from the original text, and demonstrates the way in which later writers used this “first king” to legitimize royal authority; some Burmese kings even tried to trace their descent back to *Mahasammata* (Charney 2006).

Political authority was thus a necessary response to the inherent flaws in human nature, yet it was only a worldly (and temporary) answer to the problem. Therefore, the Buddha offers in the *Aggañña Sutta* a more lasting solution in describing the actions of those who leave their communities and take up the ascetic, contemplative life. Challenging the existing social hierarchy of his time, the Buddha declares the monk to

⁵ The four *agatis* refer to feelings that induce partiality or bias and include desire, anger, fear, and ignorance. They are a commonly occurring motif throughout Burmese Buddhist political thinking.

⁶ The current Burmese word for president, *thamada*, is derived from *Mahasammata*, indicating the democratic practice of electing the president, but also connecting this modern form of political authority with a model of rule that is both historically familiar in the Burmese chronicles and legitimized through Buddhist scripture.

be the best and highest in the community, one “in whom the fetters of existence are destroyed, who is released by Right Wisdom” (Collins 2001, 49). In overcoming desire, he has extinguished that human characteristic that is the source of *dukkha* (suffering/dissatisfaction) and conflict. Collins also notes that the end of the *sutta* suggests a connection between the state of the fully enlightened monk and the spiritual beings from the beginning of the text, but in contrast to those beings, the monk is no longer in danger of lapsing into moral decay (2001, 80: fn 31.2). Burmese versions of the *Aggañña Sutta* seem to gloss over or completely ignore this latter implication (or simply end with the anointing of *Mahasammata*), since the intent of the writers was to legitimize the political authority of the monarch. However, the sentiment that places the political authority of a king in a subordinate position to the moral authority of a monk is common within the Burmese tradition.⁷ The path of the king merely manages desire, whereas the path of the monk transcends desire completely.

These two responses to the problem of inherent human craving (political control and spiritual liberation) also mirror the dual nature of human existence. If one sees human beings as inherently and unavoidably driven by craving to commit evil deeds, then political authority is a necessary response. If, on the other hand, one recognizes the capacity of humans to transcend their enslavement to desire, the path of the monk (or the moral path in general) is not only a possibility, its solution is more complete and lasting than the transitory order instituted by political rule.

*The Aggañña Sutta, the Social Contract, and a Model
for Democracy*

The *Aggañña Sutta* is important for what it says about Buddhist political ideals, but it is equally important to notice what it does not say. Some modern commentators have argued that the selection of *Mahasammata* established an indigenous basis for democracy in Buddhist political thought, and that we should interpret the agreement between the people and *Mahasammata* as a Buddhist “social contract” (De 1955). However, as Stephen Collins and Andrew Huxley have demonstrated, notions of contract in the period when the *Aggañña Sutta* was written were very different from those that underpin Western ideas of a social contract, as they were situated within highly personalized and particular relationships (Collins 1996; Huxley 1996). Collins does admit that the arrangement between *Mahasammata* and the people could qualify as “a bilateral

⁷ See, for example, the many instances of interaction between monks and kings in Tin Naing Toe (2014).

contract between the people as a collectivity and their ruler,” but he contrasts this sharply with the prevailing model of the social contract as a convention established among and between individual citizens (in the tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau) (2001, 94).

We should also be cautious of equating the model in the *Aggañña Sutta* with elective forms of government (Reynolds 1972). While the people did choose *Mahasammata*, it was primarily for his charismatic qualities, including his physical appearance. Additionally, at least in the *Aggañña Sutta*, there is no indication that the ruler’s authority is absolute or all encompassing. In fact, it was the people (not *Mahasammata*) who initially established regulations to guide society.⁸ They expelled those who committed unwholesome acts from their community and set up boundary lines to enclose personal property. They chose *Mahasammata* only when it became clear that an executive power was necessary to make decisions and enforce their regulations.⁹

It seems likely, as a number of scholars have argued, that the *Aggañña Sutta* was intended as a sermon that was critical of the prevailing social hierarchy rather than a political philosophy text. However, what is important in this study is not necessarily to uncover the original intent of the *sutta* (if such a task is even possible) but to understand the creative ways in which its contents and ideas have been creatively interpreted and deployed by Burmese political actors. Collins claims that there is “little or no evidence that any historical agents have used [the *Aggañña Sutta*] and/or its contractual ‘theory’” (2001, 94). He acknowledges evidence from Sarkisyanz (1965) that Burmese legal texts often began with a reference to *Mahasammata*, but believes that this was simply an “inherited textual motif” rather than advocacy of a contract-based political theory (2001, 95). An examination of the Burmese chronicles and

⁸ In pressing the social contract parallel, this is a telling difference between the condition of the people in the *Aggañña Sutta* and those in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1968, esp. Book 2, Chapter 7). While Rousseau claims that the people would require a “Legislator” to create the structure that would allow them to develop a true social community in which every member was equally free, in the Buddhist story, the people already have that regulative structure. In fact, in several Burmese versions, *Mahasammata* adopts the codes of conduct that already existed as ideals within society. The challenge in the Buddhist account (and the way in which *Mahasammata* still stands apart from the rest of the community as does Rousseau’s “Legislator”) is that, while people knew the laws, they were incapable of following them and enforcing them among themselves.

⁹ There is a parallel here with Locke’s argument in the *Second Treatise* that the role of government ought to be limited to that of an “indifferent judge” (1980 [1690], 66). *Mahasammata*’s charge is to “criticize whoever should be criticized, accuse whoever should be accused, and banish whoever should be banished” (Collins 2001, 46). Because of *Mahasammata*’s presumed moral superiority, he would not be subject to the biases and prejudices of regular *pu htu zin*, making him an ideal candidate to adjudicate disputes.

precolonial legal texts seems to support Collins' argument. However, from the end of the nineteenth century, Burmese thinkers have made use of the *Aggañña Sutta* to express a number of different views on the nature of politics beyond simply legitimizing kingly authority.

Burmese Uses of the Aggañña Sutta

The Burmese minister U Hpo Hlaing wrote the *Rajadhammasangaha* as a manual for King Thibaw, presenting it to the new king shortly after Thibaw's ascension to the throne in 1878. In this text, U Hpo Hlaing refers to the *Mahasammata* story as "traditional Burmese political ideas" (Htin 2002, 165). While his version emphasizes the fact that *Mahasammata* was chosen by the people (providing historical grounding for some form of electoral governance), he also greatly enhances the status of the first king by declaring him to be a future Buddha, filled with the wisdom necessary to protect the country. U Hpo Hlaing concludes that, just as *Mahasammata* was a model of ideal moral conduct, instilling those same values in his subjects, when subsequent kings have followed the same ideal, their societies have reflected proper behavior, even to the point of not requiring locks or bolts on doors (ibid.).

U Hpo Hlaing also wrote a text called the *Mahasamataviniccaya*, which explored eleven legal decisions of *Mahasammata*. While this work appears to have been lost, U Htin Fatt (writing as Maung Htin), the editor of a later edition of the *Rajadhammasangaha*, proposed a theory as to what it might have contained (Htin 2002, 88ff). U Htin Fatt believed (given the overall reformist character of the *Rajadhammasangaha*) that U Hpo Hlaing's work on *Mahasammata* would have reinterpreted the appointment of the first king as a consent-based undertaking. In his introduction to the *Rajadhammasangaha*, U Htin Fatt stated, "I believe in my heart that when [U Hpo Hlaing] wrote his *Mahasamataviniccaya*, he had the purpose of returning to prominence the idea of a popular assembly as a guarantor" (Bagshawe 2004, 55). He even uses a Burmese term (*lu ahprwe asi badein nyin*) to describe U Hpo Hlaing's idea which can be translated as "social contract" (Htin 2002, 88). Whether or not this was U Hpo Hlaing's intention, U Htin Fatt (writing in 1960) clearly reconfigured the *Mahasammata* legend as providing the basis for a limited monarchy based on mutual consent.

As Burma was transitioning out of colonial rule, General Aung San occasionally referred to the story of the *Aggañña Sutta* in his speeches, including one to the convention of his party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) in 1947. "Various economic classes come into being, bringing along clashes of interests between one class and another.

It becomes necessary to mediate and moderate these clashing interests. The idea of the ‘State’ had its genesis in this ostensible need to achieve the commonwealth. In other words, when first the ‘State’ appeared on the scene, it did so as a result of the conflict of interests within society” (quoted in Silverstein 1993, 152). This was clearly a critical, Marxist-influenced reading of the *sutta* and one that I return to in the [next chapter](#).

Aung San also related a version of the *sutta* with a slightly different focus in an article written in the 1940s describing different types of politics.¹⁰ “Government came about because people were not able to observe proper moral conduct. If people were able to do this, then there would be no government” (Mya Han 1998, 94). In Aung San’s telling, the agreement to elevate *Mahasammata* over the population was preceded by a general agreement among the people to “invent/create politics” (*nain ngan ye htwin*) and “set up government” (*a-so ya htaung*) (ibid.). With this language, Aung San emphasized what he saw as the contractual and consent-based nature of the original agreement, going beyond the language of the Pāli texts. He also argued that, because *Mahasammata* assumed his position at the request of the people, the legitimate role of the government is to be “the people’s representative” and to act “according to the people’s desires” (ibid., 95).

Decades later, his daughter Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also sought to derive a Burmese heritage for the ideal of a social contract from the *Mahasammata* myth. She challenged the opinion that the story of *Mahasammata*’s election was “antithetical to the idea of the modern state because it promotes a personalized form of monarchy” (1991, 170). Instead, she countered, this example was a strong argument for “governments regulated by principles of accountability, respect for public opinion, and the supremacy of just laws” (1991, 173). All of these modern interpreters, writing from the period just before Burma’s independence through the early years of the contemporary democracy struggle, sought to present the story of *Mahasammata* as offering some version of a social contract. While they may have embellished the Pāli account of *Mahasammata*, they performed the important task of presenting modern institutions and practices of democratic governance within cultural, historical and moral frameworks that were consistent with the beliefs and experience of most of the population and of creatively engaging with their own political and cultural legacy.

¹⁰ Mya Han’s edited volume of Aung San’s writings lists this article as having originally been published in Dagon Magazine in December 1948. Either that was a reprint or the piece was published posthumously, since Aung San died in 1947; I have not been able to confirm the original publication date.

An Expanded Definition of “Politics”

One important message of the *Aggañña Sutta* that remains consistent through its many incarnations in Burmese political writings is the claim that kingship was established “as a necessary societal institution . . . because of imperfect human conditions” (Sarkisyanz 1965, 15). Therefore, we can see this *sutta* and Burmese uses of it as providing an explanation of the legitimacy of kingship and, later, elected government. However, in adapting the *Aggañña Sutta* to include a justification of electoral and even democratic politics, Burmese thinkers were also broadening the boundaries of “the political” more generally. This more malleable and inclusive notion of politics is best reflected in the thought of General Aung San, and continues to be in flux today during Myanmar’s political transition.

In several speeches and writings in the 1930s and 1940s, Aung San challenged the idea that “politics” pertained solely to government activities or elite maneuverings. He also challenged the belief that politics was dirty or polluting, insisting that politics was neither above nor below the average person. In a definition of politics that is commonly paraphrased by Burmese today, he said, “Politics means your everyday life . . . It is how you eat, sleep, work and live, with which politics is concerned” (Silverstein 1993, 95). Aung San recognized the need for the leaders of the Burmese independence struggle to involve the population in public life in a way that had been unthinkable prior to the colonial period. In the article entitled “Different Kinds of Politics” he made his reformulation of the term even more explicit: “Politics is all of the affairs of human society” (Mya Han 1998, 92).

Aung San often used Buddhist concepts and frames to discuss this expanded understanding of politics. In “Different Kinds of Politics,” he explained the “science” (Bur. *lawka dat*) of the Buddhist doctrine of cause and effect. This doctrine, he claimed, was actually the basis of what we understand as science. Furthermore, “in politics, only if one relies on [an understanding of] cause and effect . . . will one be successful” (Mya Han 1998, 91). While Aung San may have insisted that an independent Burma be a secular *state*, his explanations of politics—and furthermore, his view of how politics ought to be conducted—were rooted in a worldview that included the Buddha’s teachings of cause and effect, making *politics* an intrinsically moral undertaking. In a speech at the AFPFL Convention in January 1946, he reiterated this Buddhist conceptual framework: “As a matter of fact, politics knows no end. It is *samsāra* in operation before our eyes, the *samsāra* of cause and effect, of past and present, of present and future which goes round and round and never ends” (quoted

in Silverstein 1993, 97). *Samsāra* (Bur. *thanthara*) is the term for the perpetual round of rebirths to which humans are fated unless they can overcome desire and free themselves from the cycle, thereby reaching enlightenment.

By equating politics with *samsāra*, Aung San reinforced the validity of a Buddhist moral framework for understanding and participating in the world. Additionally, he reaffirmed the relevance of the Buddha's teachings to everyday life. Although he had criticized mixing religion and politics earlier in the same speech, he also extolled Buddhism as "more than a religion" and capable of becoming "possibly the greatest philosophy in the world" (quoted in Silverstein 1993, 97). When Aung San claimed that politics was *samsāra*, he could have been implying that the same (Buddhist) methods one should apply for the successful navigation of (and liberation from) *samsāra* could also be applied to political action. This was not an uncontroversial position, and leads us back to the recurring question of the *lawki-lawkouttara* divide.

***Lawki* and *Lawkouttara* Revisited**

I argued in the [last chapter](#) that Burmese Buddhists' understandings of the relationship or separation between *lawki* (the worldly realm) and *lawkouttara* (the perspective of Buddhist ultimate truth) strongly condition their conceptions of politics and of the role of Buddhism in politics. *Lawki* includes the material world of daily human experience, but the *lawki* understanding of this world takes it to be tangible, real, and lasting. The contrast with *lawkouttara* is subtle but important. *Lawkouttara* is not an afterlife or other state of existence. It refers to a perspective on the world that adopts the Buddhist understanding of all existence as impermanent, dissatisfactory, and lacking abiding essence (*anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*). *Lawkouttara* does not simply mean acceptance of these Buddhist truths, it implies an experiential understanding of them such that false views of existence are completely eradicated.¹¹

Many Burmese Buddhists have insisted that the two perspectives are mutually exclusive, like the monk from the [previous chapter](#) who explained that, without adopting a *lawki* perspective, the moral precepts have no meaning because there is no "I," "other," or "person." At certain points in the *Rajadhammasangaha*, U Hpo Hlaing was explicit about the separation between *lawki* and *lawkouttara* and the methods appropriate to each. In one section he distinguished mundane laws from the Buddha's law of *dhamma*:

¹¹ See [Chapter 2](#) for an extended discussion of these two terms.

The law [*dhamma*] is like a medicine. The drug that will send away a belly ache does not cure a fever, and the one that cures a fever won't fix a belly ache. In this way the rule of behaviour in this world holds good both for the present and for future lives, but it is not one to follow for [*lawkountara*]. If you follow a rule that is good for [*lawkountara*], it will not help in this world. The Path, its Fruit and Nibbana, belong to [*lawkountara*]. The rules that do you good in this world and the rules that bring you to the Path, its Fruit and to Nibbana are in truth opposite. If you want to be well-set for [*lawkountara*], you have to fix yourself in a tranquil spirit, take to the forest, live under a tree and practice in solitude. It is not a practice for two together. (Bagshawe 2004, 104)¹²

Success in the material world requires adherence to principles that are probably not true in an ultimate (*lawkountara*) sense. But U Hpo Hlaing also insisted this was not a concern, because they are “rules for doing well in this world and, if we follow them, we can be confident that they will hold good in this world, whether, in an absolute sense, they are false or true” (*ibid.*, 105). Burmese tradition associates living in accordance with the *nitis* (collections of aphorisms that dealt with daily conduct) with *lawki* benefits, whereas *lawkountara* benefits come only from following the *dhamma* and turning away from worldly matters to meditation. John Badgley has suggested that education and socialization processes reinforced the validity of this binary and, although detailed contemporary data is not available, anecdotal evidence from my research and others’ indicates that many people in Myanmar still subscribe to this separation (Badgley 1965). For example, when I was observing a precollegiate preparatory class in Yangon in 2011, in response to the teacher’s question about *lawki* and *lawkountara*, one of the students replied that *lawki* was “for your life” whereas *lawkountara* was for “meditation.”

In 1961, Thakin Tha Khin, the leader of the opposition in Parliament, cautioned Prime Minister U Nu and his allies against adopting Buddhism as the state religion and giving preference to Buddhists in government positions. Presenting it as a case of the inappropriate usage of *lawkountara* methods in a *lawki* setting, he compared it to the nineteenth century episode when Crown Prince Kanaung told King Mindon to build munitions factories but the king rejected the advice since his monastic advisors told him that it was against Buddhist morals. As a result, Burma was not

¹² U Hpo Hlaing also used this conceptual separation instrumentally, to advocate for particular political practices. He argued that, while achievement in *lawkountara* matters (progress on the path to enlightenment) could only occur as a result of individual action, the prospects for success in the *lawki* realm were enhanced by having many people work together (Bagshawe 2004, 91ff). For U Hpo Hlaing, who wanted to expand the role of advisors in governing the kingdom, the Buddhist separation of *lawki* and *lawkountara* in this instance provided justification for increased ministerial participation in political decision-making.

prepared to defend itself and the British took control, ultimately resulting in the decline of Buddhism (Maung Maung 1963, 120). Thakin Tha Khin's ultimate concern here was still the protection of the Buddhist religion (*sāsana*), but he regarded political methods and "religious" (*lawkouttara*) methods as appropriate to their respective spheres. U Nu himself sometimes adopted this strict separation between the two, having "once explained that the killing of rebels was a political necessity, not a religious question," a distinction between *lawki* and *lawkouttara* that allowed the devout Prime Minister to carry out policies that he might have otherwise found to be in contradiction to the *dhamma* (Von Der Mehden 1961, 175).

One conclusion that some Burmese draw from the separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* is that, while Buddhist ideals are important for individual moral practice and may have a limited restraining effect on political authority, Buddhist methods intended for the realization of *lawkouttara* truths are ineffective in the material world. One common example in Myanmar is the *Vessantara Jataka*, the story of the Buddha's final past life before being born as Siddhatha. The final ten "birth stories" of the Buddha each correspond to one of the ten *paramis* (perfections), qualities that the Buddha needed to develop before he was prepared for enlightenment. In the *Vessantara Jataka*, the Buddha was a prince who, through his practice of absolute *dana* (generosity), gave away his kingdom's white elephant, a symbol of prosperity, which led the kingdom into decline. While the perfection of *dana* was a necessary step on the Buddha's path of moral development, his actions as a Buddha-to-be constituted an example of poor political decision-making. As Maung Htin Aung related in his collection of Burmese Law Tales, a king "must also be able to look to this world as different from the next," a distinction that Prince Vessantara was apparently incapable of making (1962, 84). Aung San seemed to indicate a similar conviction in one of his speeches, saying "Religion is a matter of individual conscience while politics is a social science . . . If we mix religion with politics, this is against the spirit of religion itself, for religion takes care of our hereafter and usually has not to do with mundane affairs which are the sphere of politics. Politics is frankly a secular science" (quoted in Silverstein 1993, 96).

The separation of *lawki* and *lawkouttara* methods has led to the development of a set of practices designed to influence the material world. These include the worship and propitiation of various types of spirits and deities, the practice of alchemy and magic, and the practice of *yedaya*, following the advice of an astrologer in order to ward off evil and misfortune. Heinz Bechert explained that "relations of *sangha* and state were regulated by the principle that the Buddhist *sāsana* [religion] is in its

conception directed towards detachment from worldly affairs, i.e., it is ‘supra-mundane’ [*lawkouttara*], whereas the cult of the gods, on the other hand, serves worldly purposes” (1972, 775). A common Burmese saying also reinforces this: “Buddhism for the next life, the spirits for this life” (Mendelson 1963, 107). It is not completely correct to label these practices as separate or distinct from Buddhism, since many incorporate elements of Buddhist ritual or symbolism. Furthermore, the logic of all of these “magical” methods is consistent with the Buddhist view of the universe as operating according to the principles of *kan* and cause and effect, and there are many examples of Burmese using these “extra-Buddhist” methods to achieve success in the political world (Brac de la Perrière 2009).

At the same time, some Burmese political thinkers also acknowledged the importance of *lawkouttara* concerns to *lawki* matters. Ashin Thittila, a prominent monk, writing in the 1950s to publicize Burmese efforts to promote Buddhism through the holding of the Sixth Buddhist Synod, quoted from a resolution passed by Parliament on October 1, 1951:

That not being satisfied with the measures usually undertaken hitherto by the peoples and governments of the world for the solution of the problems confronting mankind, by promoting the material well-being of man in his present existence in the form of ameliorating his living conditions and standard of life, and also being fully aware of the fact that such measures would result only in a partial solution of the problems, this Parliament declares its firm belief that it is necessary to devise and undertake such measures for the spiritual and moral well-being of man as would remove these problems and help man to overcome Greed, Hatred and Delusion which are at the root of all the violence, destruction and conflagration consuming the world. (Thittila 1987, 210)

For Ashin Thittila, this example demonstrated the importance of Buddhist moral practice as guidance for political decision-making as well as the wisdom of the government in working closely with the monastic community to lay a strong moral foundation for the society. Here an elected government of Burma acknowledged its own political and economic solutions to be merely temporary fixes to the underlying problem of desire; moral solutions were necessary to fully address the situation.

In a 1958 speech, Burmese Supreme Court Justice U Chan Htoon insisted on the need for *lawkouttara* solutions to *lawki* concerns: “The urgent problems that confront the world today can only be solved by applying . . . moral and spiritual laws” (1958, 11). According to his analysis, social problems were the result of human beings neglecting to live in accordance with the “self-evident” causal laws of the universe (ibid.). In another speech that year, he directly challenged the common Burmese belief that Buddhist practice was not the route to success in the

world, claiming that “mastery of the external world is not in the external world but in ourselves” (1958, 31). With this provocative statement, he attempted to redirect Burmese Buddhist efforts at social change back to individual moral practice as taught by the Buddha.

Others have developed similar positions on the *lawki-lawkouttara* relationship that see the notions as either interrelated or potentially influencing each other, in some cases seemingly contradicting their other statements regarding the separation of the two. Aung San, while acknowledging that political action itself was not sufficient to reach *nibbāna*, nevertheless insisted in his writings in the 1940s that the two were interdependent. “Only if you have *lawki* [success] can you have *lawkouttara* [success]. And only if you have *lawkouttara* [success] can you have *lawki* [success]” (Mya Han 1998, 99). Aung San Suu Kyi’s comment at the start of the contemporary democracy movement on the need for a “revolution of the spirit” in contrast to mere technological solutions to the world’s problems also indicated an appreciation for the ways in which a *lawkouttara* orientation might provide positive material benefits in the world (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991). And during a 2014 interview, Ashin Eikeindara Bivamsa, the Sayadaw of a much-lauded teaching monastery in Sagaing, explained to me that “If you do *lawki* work and put the right mind-set [*seit-htat*] into it, there will be *lawkouttara* benefits.”¹³ These Burmese Buddhist political perspectives that acknowledge a closer relationship between *lawki* and *lawkouttara* invite a deeper consideration of the political effects of moral conduct, the subject of the *Cakkavatti Sutta*.

The *Cakkavatti Sutta*: Moral Conduct and its Effects

Just as the *Aggañña Sutta* provided one basis of legitimacy for political authority from the Buddhist scriptures, the *Cakkavatti Sutta* conveys a message about politics that is firmly rooted in the Buddha’s teachings of cause and effect. The figure of the *cakkavatti* (universal monarch, Bur. *Setkya Min*) appears regularly in the Burmese political imaginary¹⁴ and the lesson of the *sutta*, the way in which the moral conduct of a ruler affects the prosperity of his realm and subjects, is one that Burmese writers have examined in detail. After the fall of the monarchy in 1885, Burmese

¹³ Personal interview in Sagaing, July 25, 2014.

¹⁴ *Setkya Min* is usually a prophetic figure who will come to revive the Buddhist community, bring material prosperity and usher in the era of the future Buddha Metteyya (Sanskrit *Maitreya*); he has been a popular figure in times of crisis and transition (Foxeus 2011). Many of the early anti-British rebellions coalesced around individuals who styled themselves as *Setkya Min*, and some in the 1940s even recognized Aung San as the promised universal monarch (Prager 2003).

Buddhists expanded this perspective, claiming that it was not merely the king's actions, but the moral conduct of society as a whole that contributed to its own prosperity or downfall.¹⁵

The *Cakkavatti Sutta* begins with the Buddha reminding his monks not to rely on others in their practice, but to adhere to the *dhamma* (#1).¹⁶ He then relates the tale of a righteous, “wheel-turning monarch” named Dalhanemi. The “wheel” of this *sutta* was a supernatural phenomenon that appeared in the sky as a result of the king's great store of merit from past lives. As such, it was also an indicator of the moral standing of both the king and the society over which he ruled. As the end of his reign drew near, he designated his son to rule and retired to the life of a monk (#3). After the pious king had stepped down, the son was shocked and saddened to hear that the wheel had disappeared. A royal advisor explained to him that he could not inherit the wheel as he inherited the crown. It would only reappear as a result of the new king's own righteous leadership. The sage advised him to take the *dhamma* as his guide and listen to the advice of sages in the kingdom. By doing this, the wheel reappeared and a succession of kings carried out their duties according to the *dhamma* (#5–8).

Eventually, however, one king, upon assuming the throne, neglected to seek the advice of his advisors and the wheel did not reappear. Once he relented and asked their advice, he only implemented part of it, forgetting an admonishment to provide property to those who are in need. Because of this, poverty appeared in the kingdom and, soon after, theft (#10). In response to the first few incidents of theft, the king gave the offenders some property, but this soon set a precedent, which only increased theft in the kingdom. The king then decided to brutally punish the next offender to set an example, which compelled his subjects to begin arming themselves, leading to a proliferation of violence in the kingdom. Gradually other evil deeds appeared as part of this causal chain, including lying and adultery (#14–18). The life span of human beings also decreased as they descended into anarchy, from 80,000 years to a span of only ten years. By this point, the people had lost any notion of moral conduct and they proceeded to slaughter each other mercilessly.

¹⁵ Sarkisyanz suggests that, after the fall of the monarchy and the erosion of the traditional cosmology, Burmese Buddhists were free to reinterpret *kan* in a more liberating and empowering way, as the ability of each individual to create the circumstances of his or her own future, although the work of individuals such as U Hpo Hlaing demonstrates that some were already doing this to some degree even before the monarchy collapsed (1965, 107). This transformation of views is also explored in detail in Turner (2014) and Silverstein (1996).

¹⁶ Citations refer to the section numbers from Steven Collins' translation, Appendix 3 in Collins (1998).

At the nadir of the tale, a few people reflected on their actions and realized that their situation had degenerated because of their evil deeds. They resolved to engage in wholesome actions and gradually their lives improved. Slowly, they “rediscovered” the moral laws, reasoning backwards by observing the behaviors that brought negative results and avoiding those actions (#21–22). Eventually they became prosperous again, and at a certain point another righteous monarch appeared, named Sankha. (It is not explained in this *sutta* how the people restored the institution of kingship or when it disappeared.) Along with this “wheel-turning” king, the next Buddha, *Metteyya* (Sanskrit *Maitreya*), appeared to reteach the *dhamma* to the world (#24–25). The Buddha concludes the lesson reminding the monks once again to rely on their own efforts in their practice, using *dhamma* as a guide.

Immediately we can see similarities between this *sutta* and the *Aggañña Sutta*. The moral practice of the beings in each tale degenerates and, as a result, the prosperity of their society and the conditions of their existence also decline. The causal chain is also similar. The *Aggañña Sutta* begins more explicitly with craving as the source of conflict; jealousy leads to theft, punishment, lying, and other sinful behaviors. But, whereas the *Aggañña Sutta* seemed to be directed to the general population as a moral lesson and was used by later commentators to legitimize monarchical rule, the admonishment of the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, although told to monks, was directed at kings. It was the action (or inaction) of the king that created the circumstances under which people felt compelled to steal. Similarly, while the king’s moral negligence initiates the decline of society, it is the people who rediscover the moral principles at the lowest point of degeneracy, suggesting that subjects retain some degree of moral agency and initiative.

Burmese writers have elaborated on several of the ideas contained in this *sutta*. First, the king has a duty to organize and manage life in his realm according to the *dhamma*. Failure to do so will result in the decline of the kingdom. Second, and more broadly, the moral conduct of the king sets an example for his subjects but also has tangible effects on the prosperity of the society. The third argument expands this point to argue that the actions of those subjects, whether moral or immoral, will bear similar fruits in the society as a whole. The first point forms the basis of the discussion in Chapter 3 of “order” as a goal of politics. The second and third points, essentially political manifestations of the doctrine of cause and effect, are considered in the following sections.

Moral Conduct of Leaders and its Effects

This section first considers Burmese examples of the positive effects of good moral conduct of leaders before turning to warnings of the dangers of rulers' moral lapses. In the *Rajadhammasangaha* U Hpo Hlaing gives advice to the king on correct moral conduct and its effects. His political recommendations come primarily from two sets of guidelines, and while he draws mostly on Pāli texts or examples from the royal chronicles, he interprets these through the lens of contemporary political practices. The first set of guidelines is the four rules of *sangaha* (friendliness or good relations).¹⁷ U Hpo Hlaing presents European practices such as consultation among elected officials and limiting barriers to trade as modern embodiments of the rules of *sangaha*. He concludes that, "Because they thus in their actions give the greatest importance to the four rules of *sangaha* and to their promotion, among all the nations the peoples of the West stand out for their prosperity. As [our] great kingdoms . . . were in the past, so now the West is preeminent in power – economic, military and industrial" (cited in Bagshawe 2004, 104).

U Hpo Hlaing connects other examples of good governing techniques to another set of guidelines, the seven rules of *a-parihaniya*, meaning "stabilizing" or "not causing decay."¹⁸ Again, he looks to the West for examples, noting practices of electing members of parliament, using the media to collect and disseminate information and opinions, and most importantly, making political decisions only with the participation of a large number of people (Bagshawe 2004, 103–4). For U Hpo Hlaing, the first rule of *a-parihaniya* (meeting together to make decisions) is critical because it provides a check on the naturally self-interested inclinations and biases of any individual, even (or maybe especially) a king.

Adherence to the rules of *a-parihaniya* is also the best way to ensure that a ruler does not fall prey to any of the four *agatis* (variously translated as "biases," "corruptions," or "partialities"), which are desire, anger, fear, and ignorance. U Hpo Hlaing acknowledges the challenges of living up to these standards, admitting, "for the average person in government service there is no way of avoiding these four wrong ways in his work" (Bagshawe 2004, 174). However, returning to a theme he emphasizes throughout the

¹⁷ These are the implementation of a proper rate of taxation, the correct usage and distribution of tax money, providing capital for merchants and farmers, and the use of positive language to inspire love.

¹⁸ The seven principles are: 1. meeting together as needed and for however long is needed, 2. always ending meetings in agreement, 3. not making a law for which the people have not given their consent, 4. acting with respect and love toward elders, 5. not abducting the wives or daughters of the people, 6. honoring the guardian spirits of the people, and 7. providing for enlightened sages in the territory (Bagshawe 2004, 88–91).

Rajadhammasangaha, he claims that regular meetings will help people to avoid making decisions based on these factors:

If a number of people get together for any sort of action, there can be no question of following the *agati* way. In such assemblies what one man does not know, another will; when one man has feelings of hate, another will not; when one is angry, another will be calm. When people have agreed in a meeting and preserve their solidarity, there will be no need for fear. For these reasons, we must affirm that if a number of people conduct their business in an assembly there is no way in which the four wrong ways can be followed. (*ibid.*, 174)

A critical aspect of U Hpo Hlaing's political advice is the way he sees mental states (specifically, unwholesome states) as influencing political decisions. While, in other parts of the text he does prescribe what we might call "religious" methods (such as meditation), here he makes it clear that the specific political practice of consulting with advisors can have multiple beneficial effects. It can prevent a ruler from making decisions influenced by the four *agatis*, not only guarding against uninformed, biased, or rash decisions, but also guiding the ruler and all who participate away from self-interested action and from the negative mental states that generate ignorance and suffering and adversely influence decision-making. Following this reasoning, U Hpo Hlaing assumes that the decisions that emerge from consultation will be better for the country as a whole. Even though elsewhere in the book (as we saw earlier in this chapter) he appears to characterize the spiritual path as one that only the individual can pursue, here U Hpo Hlaing skillfully weaves together *lawkountara* insight to argue for collective decision-making as a way of avoiding individual bias and providing *lawki* benefits in the material world.

Just as policy decisions were important in fostering an ideal moral community, the king's own moral conduct could bear positive political results. Mindon, the penultimate king of Burma, found his territory diminished throughout the nineteenth century through defeat at the hands of the British. As a result, his foreign policy was designed primarily to avoid antagonizing the British in an attempt to stave off the total collapse of his rule. Because his kingdom was also weakened economically, he had few options to pursue in casting himself as a "universal monarch" in the *cakkavatti* tradition. John Ferguson suggests that, given these restrictions, Mindon chose to turn inward, practicing meditation and reading religious works in an attempt to "reform" himself (1975, 236–7). Mindon would likely have believed that, as king, his own moral purity not only was a model for his subjects, but would also have material effects on the prosperity of the realm.

After the fall of the monarchy, Burmese Buddhist thinking on these moral relationships shifted from the effects of kings' moral conduct to the connection between the moral conduct of leaders and the political progress of the nation as a whole. In the midst of post-independence civil conflict along ideological, ethnic, and religious lines, Prime Minister U Nu told government leaders that they were responsible for purifying their own moral conduct so that they would be able to "lead the people towards the right deed, the right speech, and the right thought" (De 1955, 73). In his landmark study of Burmese Buddhism and politics in the 1980s and 1990s, Gustaaf Houtman presented a picture of the leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD, the main opposition party) as responding to military restrictions placed on their party with an increased emphasis on meditation practice. They believed that their *lawkountara* actions would improve their own personal moral conduct, which would effectively counter military attempts to control the *lawki* world (Houtman 1999, 338). Similarly, Ingrid Jordt has argued that monks and laypeople associated with the mass lay meditation movement that has blossomed in the last century are indirectly claiming—through their meditational attainments—a moral high ground that allows them to implicitly critique the government and assert particular Buddhist grounds for political legitimacy (2007, 148). Their *lawkountara* actions of meditation can be seen as a type of political action that seeks to have a *lawki* impact, a topic that I return to in Chapter 5.

Just as the Burmese tradition includes examples of good moral conduct and advice for maintaining it, examples also abound of the negative effects of poor moral leadership. Some come from the Jatakas (stories of the Buddha's past lives), which tell of kings who brought ruin to their lands through their evil deeds. The effects of rulers' immoral acts could range from fruits becoming bitter and dry to natural disasters such as droughts. Thus, "immorality led not only to the ruin of the country, but also to the dislocation of natural functions in the cosmos" (Koenig 1990, 69). The Jatakas also relate the simple remedy to these societal ills: once the king begins to act in accordance with *dhamma*, following the precepts and supporting the *sangha*, the fortunes of the kingdom begin to turn (Sarkisyanz 1965, 49).

In contrast to his usage of European cases for examples of good governance, U Hpo Hlaing tends to look to Burmese society for examples of poor leadership. He identifies three "courses that end societies."¹⁹ He

¹⁹ These are 1. wrongful desires (specifically lust for one's kin or married women), 2. unfair profit (that which is gained either through dishonesty or oppressive force), and 3. failure to follow the sets of reciprocal lay duties found in the *Sigalovada Sutta* (Bagshawe 2004, 108).

then proceeds to point out ways in which the Burmese and their rulers have followed these paths, resulting in the current decline of Burmese society. The significance of this piece of advice is that U Hpo Hlaing does not necessarily draw explicit connections between specific practices of governance and the downfall of a political community. Instead, he sees immoral practices and lack of attention to social duties more generally as the ultimate source of political decline. For the king, those social duties would include implementing policies to assist his subjects in correct moral practice. U Hpo Hlaing followed the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, claiming, “In this world there is no one who will not act appropriately in any situation if an authority [completes] its function of charity to the extent that it should. If indeed government power is used in oppression, if revolution is possible, revolution will occur; if it should not be possible, people will escape from the jurisdiction” (cited in Bagshawe 2004, 117).

In his speeches throughout the turbulent 1950s, U Nu frequently stressed the Buddhist belief that the failure of a political authority to prevent moral decay would result in the downfall of a nation. In a lecture on the “Five Pillars of Strength,” he focused on the pillar of moral strength, warning that decadence of character would bring about the destruction of the Union (Nu 1953). He even suggested that Burma could look to its neighbors to see evidence of the result of moral decline (presumably referring to the rise of communist influence in Vietnam and to Thailand’s multiple coups in the late 1940s). In another speech in 1951, he introduced the Bureau of Special Investigations (BSI), a body that many of his opponents were worried would be used for political purposes and that his biographer Richard Butwell called “Burma’s FBI” (1969, 83). Not so, countered U Nu. This was a necessary step to stem the tide of degeneracy in the country. And he issued another warning, reminding listeners that “King Thibaw came to be captured as easily as a little fowl for one thing because he failed to arrest the moral decay of his country” (Nu 1953, 8). He reiterated this theme in a subsequent speech marking the creation of the BSI, explaining “how moral deterioration brought about the downfall of kingdoms and regimes” (1953, 25). From this perspective, the moral conduct of political leaders affected the political community as an extension of the law of cause and effect, whether for good or for ill.

Moral Conduct of the People and its Effects

Before the destruction of the Burmese monarchy in 1885, writings on moral action and material results would have focused on the king’s moral conduct as the key determinant of the prosperity of the realm. The king

ideally acted as an agent of *dhamma*, responsible for creating laws that enforced correct behavior and for supporting the monks that would propagate the *dhamma* among the population. Although the *Cakkavatti Sutta* hinted that individuals were capable of taking control of their moral conduct to arrest the process of decline, the Burmese chronicles more often present a picture in which the *sangha*, lesser political figures and the general population merely follow the behavior of the king, whether good or evil. In this traditional conception, ordinary citizens had little to no agency in their own moral actions and would be swept along with the circumstances, contributing to spiritual progress or moral decay. However, with the fall of the monarchy, religious and political commentators began to look to the behavior of the entire population as an indicator of the strength of the political community, arguing that everyone now needed to take responsibility for the effects of his or her own moral conduct both on the religion and on the country.

The famous monk Ledi Sayadaw provided a specific solution to moral decline in his *Nwa Myitta Sa* ("Cow Letter") of 1885 that has resonated among Burmese Buddhists since that time (Ledi Sayadaw 1987). He told Burmese Buddhists that they should not blame the British for the circumstances in which they found themselves; their political downfall had come about because of their own lack of attention to moral conduct. However, they could begin to remedy this situation by abstaining from eating beef. Ledi reasoned that, as Europeans, the British would undoubtedly consume significantly more beef than the Burmese had, and, by taking it out of their diets, the Burmese would be able to counteract this increased consumption, saving countless (bovine) lives. More importantly, this collective attention to proper moral conduct would arrest Burmese political decline, laying the foundation for a stronger community that would eventually be able to throw off the yoke of British colonialism. For Ledi Sayadaw, the initial necessary response to political problems was reorienting citizens to correct moral conduct (Braun 2008, 75–78).

Following a similar logic, much of the anticolonial activity in the first decades of the twentieth century focused initially on revitalizing the Burmese Buddhist *sāsana* through a renewed attention to moral practice, gradually shifting through the 1920s and 1930s to a more explicitly nationalist orientation. The *wunthanu athins* (patriotic associations) began to spread in a loose network across the country from the early nineteenth century, appealing particularly to rural populations. The decision by these groups to initially put their efforts into campaigns that addressed moral and social issues was at least partly strategic; at that time the British would not allow the Burmese to form explicitly political organizations. However, this course of action was also consistent with

Burmese beliefs about cause and effect and the tangible results of good moral conduct. Proper moral conduct would not only correct the collective past failures of society, it would also reverse the political fortunes of the country.

U Nye Ya, a monk who combined Buddhist symbolism and politics in his sermons during these first decades of the twentieth century, suggested that only once the Buddha's teachings were correctly implemented and all Buddhists were following the moral law, would the individual appear who would open the gates to a more perfect, peaceful future (Sarkisyanz 1965, 178). U Nye Ya's explanation about this *Setkya Min* (universal monarch) figure is noteworthy because it suggests that the people themselves are responsible for creating the conditions of a perfect moral society and the appearance of the ideal king would merely be an indicator that this had occurred (similar to the sequencing in the *Cakkavatti Sutta*). It also underscored the efficacy of the methods of those Buddhist activist organizations in the early twentieth century that sought to lay the groundwork for correct moral conduct as a necessary first step toward broader political change.

Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, a writer, poet, and political icon of the independence movement in the 1930s and 1940s, was the intellectual father of the *Dobama Asiayone*, the Burmese nationalist organization that also included U Nu and Aung San. Like Ledi Sayadaw, he linked what he saw as the current period of decline that the Burmese were experiencing to the people's own actions, espousing a more "democratized" notion of the collective effects of correct moral action on the community. In a view that was likely also influenced by some of the Marxist ideas that were beginning to enter Burma in the 1920s and 1930s, he told people that, while the conditions of the current era were the result of human action, each world age was like clay that people could mold to what they desired through their conduct (Kodaw Hmaing 1967). A community's conduct today would condition its political circumstances tomorrow and a cycle of moral degradation could be arrested and reversed, just as in the *Cakkavatti Sutta*.

U Nu followed a similar logic in his convocation speech at the University of Rangoon in 1951. Had Burmese morality been stronger, he claimed, the British would not have been able to take control of the country, and, of course, once they gained control, they did everything in their power to ensure that the Burmese remained in a low moral state, including neglecting the *sangha*. He made this point by contrasting what he portrayed as the weak moral character of precolonial Burmese society with those countries that had put all of their efforts into the "character-building of their people" and were thus able to resist imperialism (Nu

1953, 32). U Nu also quoted one observer who put the blame for the fall of the Burmese monarchy squarely on the shoulders of the Burmese themselves: “Burmese sovereignty is gone because of the Burmese people’s depraved morality. We embrace [any] new ‘ism’ provided it is upside down. I think we are a dirty, lapsing lot” (Nu 1953, 33). Lest anyone be unclear as to the source of his reasoning, he concluded, “In the circumstances it is not at all surprising why we have been facing a series of unrest and disturbances everywhere. The law of Cause and Effect works with precision” (*ibid.*, 35). Once again, the pattern of the *Cakkavatti Sutta* both explained the reasons for Burma’s political problems and suggested the way to reverse the trend: renewed attention to the collective moral conduct of members of society.

Conclusion

The framework of the *Theravāda* moral universe has conditioned Burmese Buddhist understandings of the nature of politics and political action in a number of ways. While the realm of “politics” was initially only open to kings and their advisors, Aung San and others offered alternative definitions that expanded the borders of “politics” to include all types of human interactions. In doing so, they explicitly marked politics as a *lawki* practice of the material world, oriented toward worldly success. However, some commentators developed alternate views that connected the *lawki* and *lawkouttara* perspectives and suggested that politics, properly conducted, could bring beneficial results on the moral path to enlightenment. This perspective is explored further in the *next chapter* through a consideration of Burmese reimaginings of various goals of spiritual liberation (*nibbāna*) and spiritual freedom (from moral defilements) as both dependent on and supportive of political and economic freedom.

The *Aggañña Sutta* provided a justification for political authority that later political figures generally accepted but modified in order to limit absolute political power and append electoral institutions. The *Cakkavatti Sutta* told a similar story of political decline but emphasized the relationship between morality and socio-political circumstances, where moral conduct affects political conditions in yet another example of the associations between *lawki* and *lawkouttara*. Mirroring the shift from politics as solely an elite activity, there was also a gradual “democratization” of the moral logic underlying this association, where it was not merely the actions of kings or other political leaders that could influence the circumstances of the polity, but those of the entire community. Together, the two *suttas* examined in this chapter also point to dual

perceptions of human nature in their portrayal of humans as inherently flawed yet capable of achieving ultimate liberation. The themes of human weakness and potentiality also structure the [next chapter](#), which examines the purposes of politics from this perspective as “order” and “freedom/liberation.” Along with the perpetual tension of the *lawki-lawkountara* relationship, this multidimensional view of human nature creates space for multiple perspectives on politics, all situated within the Burmese Buddhist view of the world as functioning according to inherently moral principles.

4 Order and Freedom/Liberation: Purposes of Politics

In the [previous chapter](#), I argued that the conception of human nature provided by the moral universe contains two distinct perspectives on the conditions of human existence. On the one hand, being *pu htu zin* (Pāli *puṭhujjana*), beings intrinsically driven by desire and craving, humans are destined for lives filled with conflict, harming each other and engendering a perpetual cycle of violence. From another perspective, however, humans are capable of controlling and even overcoming their enslavement to desire, living morally worthy lives and (for a select few) stepping completely out of the cycle of suffering and continued existence (Pāli *samsāra*, Bur. *thanthara*). While it is analytically useful to separate these two perspectives, they are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the conception of human nature in the moral universe necessarily encompasses both points of view. However, when looking at Burmese Buddhist arguments regarding the end goals of politics, these twin aspects of human nature inform ideas that fall into two broad categories.

If one takes human beings to be fundamentally fallible and unable to control their desires, the purpose of politics is to create an authority that has power over human actors, managing their conflicts, punishing them when appropriate, and constraining them to act in accordance with both moral and mundane laws. I call this the argument for order, most apparent in the tale of human decline in the *Aggañña Sutta*. Order not only implies political control over subjects, it also refers to the proper arrangement of society according to the laws of nature, which results in balance and harmony.

The alternative end goal of politics is freedom/liberation. Although it is cumbersome to use this term, the two words have specific connotations in the Buddhist context and it is important to distinguish between them while also understanding how Burmese thinkers have connected mundane understandings of freedom to moral/spiritual freedom and liberation. “Freedom” would include a moral/spiritual understanding based on human potential to realize the overcoming of desire as well as more *lawki* (mundane or worldly, Pāli *lokiya*) understandings such as freedom from

political and economic oppression or enslavement. Burmese arguments that reference the inter-connectedness of these two understandings generally claim that the purpose of a political system is to organize society in such a way that it encourages correct moral practice among citizens which will in turn lead to freedom from *kilesa* (moral defilements, Bur. *kiletha*).

This *lawki* understanding of freedom (usually expressed through the Burmese term *lut lat ye*) can be contrasted with a more ultimate, *law-kouuttara* (Pāli *lokuttara*) understanding of complete liberation from desire and, by extension, from the conditions of continued existence. This would be *nibbāna* (enlightenment, Bur. *neikban*), sometimes referred to in more formal treatises by the Pāli-derived Burmese term *wimoukti*. I follow common practice among scholars of Buddhism in Myanmar by using the English word “liberation” to denote this ultimate goal, distinguishing it from a slightly less lofty “freedom” from desire or moral defilements. However, when discussing political, social, or economic freedoms, Burmese commentators have used both the common word *lut lat ye*, which is almost invariably translated as “freedom” and *lut myauk ye*, which denotes much the same thing but also signifies more formal terms such as “emancipation” or “liberation” and thus I will also occasionally use these English words to refer to worldly freedoms.

The various understandings of freedom and liberation considered in this chapter accord with the principles outlined at the end of the *last chapter*, where moral actions can have tangible material results and *vice versa*. In considering how one can reach the point of freedom from *kilesa*, Buddhists in Myanmar have developed related and overlapping conceptions of freedom from political and economic conditions not conducive to moral development. And while they most often cite this more proximate goal of achieving the freedom from *kilesa* that allows for ideal moral conduct, some have also implied a connection to the more ultimate sense of total liberation from desire, attachment, and the fetters of existence.¹

¹ William Koenig used a similar classification system in his study of politics during the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885), suggesting that the basic purpose of kingship was “regulation,” while the higher purpose was “reform” (1990). I prefer the term “order” to “regulation” because I think it encompasses not only the need for political regulation, but also the idea of a cosmological and/or moral harmony in political and social arrangements. Similarly, I believe that “freedom/liberation” not only more closely conforms to the terms and ideas that Burmese actors use themselves, it also recognizes the intrinsic connections between, on the one hand, political and economic reforms that sought to free individuals from colonial rule and capitalist exploitation and, on the other, policies that were formulated for the purpose of supporting individuals in their moral practice of freedom from defilements and ultimately, liberation from existence itself.

In this chapter, I plot the philosophies of particular leaders and groups in several periods of Burmese political history in relation to these various ideal ends of politics, noting the ways in which the goals have been imagined as both complementary and conflicting. While different conceptions of order and freedom/liberation form the thematic framework of the chapter, it is roughly separated chronologically into five sections. First, a precolonial, monarchical period whose influence extended into the early twentieth century, in which the focus was on order and on primarily religious understandings of freedom and liberation. Second, a shift during the colonial era, especially from the 1920s through the 1940s, to focus on political freedom, but often connected to both moral freedom and complete liberation. Third, the engagement with economic freedom and Marxism that began in the 1930s and carried through to the post-independence period. Fourth, a concurrent return to the rhetoric of order under the post-independence Parliamentary government and subsequent military governments. And finally, a reconceptualization of the relationship between moral freedom and political freedom from authoritarian rule by the democratic opposition of the 1980s and 1990s.

Although order was a central concern for monarchs, kings and their ministers did not merely understand this as keeping control of the population; they strengthened their political authority through the maintenance of a proper hierarchical balance that mirrored the Theravādin cosmology. The chronicles and other records of Burmese kings indicate that they were also concerned with providing their subjects with conditions conducive to correct Buddhist practice that would lead to freedom from moral defilements and desire, ending ultimately (for a very few) in complete liberation from attachment and existence. This meant supporting monks in their practice, affording opportunities for lay people to make merit through donations, and providing sufficient political, social, and economic stability (through the maintenance of order) so that Buddhism could flourish.

Order was still a primary concern in the years after the British consolidated their hold on the country in 1886. Flurries of rebellions, particularly in Upper Burma, were directed against the British colonial authorities. The goal of these initial insurrections was the restoration of the Burmese monarchy as an essential element of proper order in society. In this context, freedom began to mean freedom from foreign control, specifically, non-Buddhist rule. Efforts to protect the *sāsana* (Buddhist religion, Bur. *thathana*) as the institutional framework essential for cultivating the moral practice that produced spiritual freedom from *kilesa* gave way to an increasingly dominant discourse of national political independence, although many political figures retained the links between the two

notions of moral and political freedom. Some posited political independence as a necessary condition for proper moral conduct in society (and even for the possibility of reaching enlightenment itself), while others reversed the causal connection, focusing instead on moral uplift as the route to political self-rule.

The introduction of Marxist texts to Burma in the 1930s brought a concern with freedom from conditions of economic exploitation and mundane, rather than existential suffering. After independence, Burmese leftists envisioned their economic and political reforms as leading to a perfect society in which people could follow the moral precepts effortlessly because their basic needs were fulfilled. They called this *lawka neikban*, the “worldly nirvana.” In addition to debating the policies that would usher in the perfect society, leftists of various ideological orientations also differed in their views on the compatibility of Buddhism and various aspects of Marxism, a dispute that would extend through the 1950s.

Alongside these continuing arguments regarding competing notions of freedom was a return to calls for the reinstitution of order in the country, now that political independence had been achieved. Post-independence government leaders and the leaders of a succession of military governments used this framework to delegitimize the “liberation” movements of Communist, ethnic, and religious insurgencies. Finally, several new interpretations of freedom emerged from the democracy movement after 1988, creatively combining calls for freedom from repressive authoritarian rule with a renewed focus on the worldly impact of achieving spiritual freedom from moral defilement.

Precolonial Monarchies: Earthly and Cosmic Order

As demonstrated in the [last chapter](#), one of the most compelling Buddhist arguments for order as the goal of politics comes from the *Aggañña Sutta*. Because of the inherent flaw of being subject to desire, human beings devolved from a previously immaterial and almost perfect existence. Craving was the source of all the evils present in society, from sexual immorality to theft. It was also the basis of human society itself, as people were compelled to come together to fulfill their desires, either through cooperation or through conflict. One of the lessons of the *sutta* is that human desire, if not controlled and managed, leads to conflict and suffering. The charge given to *Mahasammata* (the first Buddhist king, introduced in [Chapter 3](#)), was to punish and reward people appropriately, thus establishing a degree of order within human society. Buddhist kings in Burma generally justified their political authority in three

interconnected ways, consistent with patterns in other Theravāda countries. First, the maintenance of order guarded against anarchy and conflict. Second, the social order preserved a hierarchy that reflected the proper arrangement of the entire universe. Third, situating the goal of order as subordinate to, but necessary for, freedom from moral defilements and ideally, ultimate liberation from existence, a well-ordered society enabled and supported religious practice of both monks and lay people. This third justification forms the basis for an understanding of order and freedom/liberation that sees these ends of politics as inherently interdependent.

The Perils of Anarchy

If a political ruler could not enforce the law in his own realm, the scriptures were very clear about the results. In the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, human beings quickly devolved without someone to enforce discipline and punish those who violated rules and harmed others. The Burmese royal chronicles follow the *suttas* in exhibiting an intense fear of anarchy and in assuming that most people require assistance in restraining themselves from acting immorally. One of the primary themes is the dangers of disorder and the necessity of order for a thriving polity. The chronicles tell of good kings under whose rule morality increased, the *sangha* (monastic community, Bur. *thanga*) proliferated, and the *sāsana* flourished. They also describe bad kings who set poor moral examples for their subjects, whose lax rule allowed monastic discipline to lapse, and whose failure to strengthen the kingdom led to either civil conflict or foreign invasion.

Polities in Theravāda Buddhist Southeast Asia developed a socio-political structure in which there were two forces that theoretically acted as constraints on human action: the political authority of the king and the moral authority of the *dhamma* (Buddha's teachings), embodied and propagated by the *sangha*. Although these were ideally complementary, the demands of each institution sometimes came into conflict as they developed.² These two institutions guarded against the threat of anarchy

² See, for example, Michael Aung-Thwin's claim that royal programs of religious purification were in fact a practical response to an inherent socioeconomic characteristic of Buddhist society (1979). Any land donated by kings or laypeople to the monastic order was tax exempt. Over time monastic accumulation of land resulted in a severe decrease in funds available to the throne, prompting a response. While kings usually couched their efforts in the rhetoric of purification of the *sangha*, the result was royal re-appropriation of land. Lieberman (1980) disputed Aung-Thwin's claim that the accumulation of *sangha* land was the primary factor in various periods of decline during the Burmese monarchy, but the example still attests to the fact that royal and monastic interests sometimes came into conflict.

and the promise of moral and material catastrophe that it posed because of inherent human weakness. Furthermore, while the king acted as the supreme authority on worldly matters, the fact that the *dhamma* contained a moral code of practice designed to guide daily conduct drew these two institutions closer together; ideally they would balance one another and prevent the accumulation of absolute power on either side. After the British toppled the Burmese monarchy in 1885, Burmese discussions of political authority increasingly revolved around the appropriate relationship between government (taking the place of the king), the *sangha*, and eventually, lay Buddhists as guardians of society's moral conduct.

The Maintenance of Hierarchy

Order was not simply a lack of conflict and violence within society. It was also necessary that the king produce social harmony by maintaining the proper hierarchies and rituals that guided and constrained social interaction. The presence of the king in the highest position of authority reflected the natural order of the universe. For Burmese kings, the goal of political rule was not the creation of some new political entity, but the restoration of past perfection, specifically, the recreation of Jambudipa, the legendary island paradise in Theravādin cosmology (Aung-Thwin 1981 and Heine-Geldern 1942). For Burmese Buddhists, Jambudipa represented a perfect moral community, governed by a king who ruled according to the *dhamma*, and a land of plenty where people flourished both spiritually and materially.

Kings could be (and were) questioned and challenged, with their rise and fall attributed to the unavoidable law of impermanence, but as Michael Aung-Thwin explains, people “did not expect the relationships between top and bottom, the principles of that relationship itself, nor the traditional forms of articulating that relationship to change” (1985a, 254). He goes on to note how this idea of a proper hierarchy conditioned the ways in which Burmese kings incorporated conquered groups into their realm: “Indigenous pacification, then, implied a process that involved more than merely breaking the back of resistance and establishing security for the movement of one's military forces and the collection of revenue. It implied the integration of defeated forces into an already familiar cultural scheme that preserved tradition and affirmed a whole set of other norms” (ibid.).

The enforcement of regular and acknowledged tributary relationships with peripheral authorities reinforced the central ruler's position atop the hierarchy while also providing tangible evidence that the ruler was an

example of the pinnacle of political power, a universal monarch or king of kings (*Setkya Min*, Pāli *cakkavatti*). Aung-Thwin asserts that these tributary relationships were also an indicator that the king was maintaining a proper cosmological balance: “Symbols of status as much as submission of tribute on the one hand and the recognition of position on the other, established an unequivocal relationship between the central power and the peripheral ones. The use and preservation of these rituals and practices implied order, while their lapse, disorder” (1985a, 249).

Burmese legal practice also reflected an understanding of order as the maintenance of hierarchy. The hierarchy was explained and justified with reference to *kan* as the factor that determined one’s status in the present. Because *kan* resulted from good deeds and proper moral conduct in the past, the present effects of those actions—one’s social status—also indicated a higher moral standing. Burmese legal practice recognized this principle, creating a system in which justice meant judging individuals unequally, according to the belief that they *were* (morally) unequal (Aung-Thwin 1981, 47). The precolonial Burmese village structure was a “legalistic and highly status-conscious patron-client system” (Huxley 1997, 4). The presumption of inequality based on *kan* resulted in a particular social order, one that the king was expected to maintain and one that was presumed to be in accordance with natural law.

Order as the Basis for Religious Practice

The maintenance of order also required royal attention to institutions in society that supported both lay and monastic religious practice and preserved and propagated Buddhist teachings as the basis of the entire moral system. The third-century Indian king Aśoka was the model for this type of behavior, leaving a detailed record of his religious activities (Reynolds 1972, 26). For Burmese kings, required Buddhist religious activities included “the construction of religious edifices, mainly pagodas, the feeding of monks, and the cycle of state ceremonies and festivals” (Koenig 1990, 81). Aung-Thwin explains that “in the context of a living, ordered, harmonious community, salvation was the business of the elite,” suggesting that Buddhists in Burma expected that not only would the king create conditions amenable to religious practice and regular donations among his subjects, he himself would be the largest and most consistent donor, reflecting and amplifying his merit and authority (1981, 49).

This aspect of maintaining order, supporting religious practice, is closely connected to the first, preventing anarchy and violence. Not only do people need a certain level of material prosperity in order to be

able to give *dana* (donations) to the monks, there is a traditional belief among Burmese Buddhists that when one's basic needs are not met, one is more susceptible to craving and more likely to commit moral infractions. The most common expression of this belief is the frequently cited proverb "Only when your stomach is full can you keep the precepts," which reflects the *Cakkavatti Sutta*'s message of how immorality and disorder in society arose from need among the population and the king's negligence in not giving to those in need.

When the Burman king Bodawhpaya conquered Arakan in 1785, he said that his intention was to "put an end to the country's anarchy and to re-establish the purity of the *sāsana*, the Buddhist religion" (Leider 2008, 413). The resolution of an anarchic situation was a primary justification but was directly connected to the king's desire to spread and support Buddhism. The latter would not be possible without the former. While Leider acknowledges that this justification could be viewed cynically as the manipulation of religious beliefs for the purpose of political legitimization, he rightly insists that we see Bodawhpaya himself as holding a Burmese Buddhist worldview (*ibid.*, 414). That is, these are precisely the terms in which he himself understood political authority and his military triumph in Arakan merely reinforced the legitimacy of his rule.

Freedom and Liberation through Order

Burmese conceptions of order are thus inextricably tied to the complementary goals of freedom from moral defilements and desire and (ultimately) liberation from existence itself. Furthermore, each of these goals acquires meaning through a particular view of the world as a place governed by moral laws. As Aung-Thwin explains, "It is the dhammaraja's [righteous king's] duty to ensure the morality, and ultimately, the salvation of his subjects. But [the ideal political state] was not an end in itself, it was a means to another end, namely nibbana. Order was found in a centralized polity, hierarchical society, a stable, self-sufficient economy, and a thriving religion" (1985a, 256).

From this perspective (idealized, to be sure), the maintenance of social order is a necessary condition that facilitates a series of related freedoms. It provides freedom from need, which allows for the moral practice that frees one from chains that include the three defilements of greed (Pāli *lobha*, Bur. *lawba*), anger (Pāli *dosa*, Bur. *dawtha*), and ignorance (Pāli *moha*, Bur. *mawha*) as well as additional *kilesa* (moral defilements).³ That freedom makes possible progress toward the ultimate liberation of

³ The ten defilements are greed, anger, ignorance, pride, wrong belief, doubt, sloth, restlessness of mind, not being ashamed of doing wrong, and not being afraid of doing wrong.

nibbāna. A central purpose of politics, then, is the arrangement of the social world in such a way as to encourage correct moral practice and, in so doing, help liberate individuals from an existence defined by ignorance and suffering. The justification for the rule of a Buddhist king thus went beyond the need for order; retaining the possibility of liberation (even though it was a distant, almost nonexistent goal for most) required the creation of a certain type of society. All of this was necessary for the growth of the *sāsana*, the religion as a whole. At the far end of this spectrum, practically out of reach for most Buddhists, but important as an indicator of the health of the *sāsana*, was the prospect of enlightenment. The common view in Myanmar is that the truths that the Buddha taught are so sublime and difficult to grasp that, without the guidance of his words, along with the explanatory commentary developed over many years by learned monks, most ordinary humans would have no chance of making progress on the path to enlightenment. Thus, a thriving *sāsana* was a necessary element in the mere possibility of enlightenment, although for most it would simply facilitate gradual freedom from moral defilements. Since just Buddhist rule was necessary for the continuation of the *sāsana*, it was also a necessary component in the prospect for enlightenment.

King Kyansittha, who ruled from 1084 to 1112, left inscriptions that attest to his self-stylization as a ruler whose benevolent actions toward his people were necessary for their progress on the spiritual path. He boasted of his “pious” gifts, such as monasteries, water tanks, and peaceful groves, which he gave to support moral practice among the population, “only that all beings might escape out of *samsāra* [the cycle of continued rebirth],” thus reaching *nibbāna* (Sarkisyanz 1965, 61). However, Kyansittha’s magnanimity extended well beyond the fulfillment of his subjects’ material needs. He also saw himself as a “King of the Law” (*dharmarāja*). In this capacity, he preached *dhamma* to the people, advising them to keep the precepts and carry out their own meritorious deeds. In this way “all might obtain happiness in this world and the worlds beyond” (*ibid.*, 60). Kyansittha certainly did not neglect the order side of the equation; he was a military general under his father Anawrahta, and his name means “strong soldier.” However, his inscriptions present his actions as carried out for the greater goal of liberation for both himself and his subjects. Similarly, King Alaungsitthu, Kyansittha’s successor, appeared to reject the material delights of kingship in one of his inscriptions. Instead of the “splendors of a monarch” he hoped that his merit would help him to become a *bodhisattva* (future Buddha) (*ibid.*, 62).

Ideally then, mundane political authority exists as a means to facilitate freedom from *kilesa* through correct moral practice and preserve the

possibility of the ultimate soteriological end of liberation. In practice, however, the maintenance of order frequently became an end unto itself. The chronicles contain more examples of poorly behaved, oppressive rulers than they do paragons of saintliness and justice, supporting the thesis that, while kings and their advisors often used Buddhist imagery and doctrine to strategically enhance their standing and legitimacy in the eyes of their population, Buddhist ethical teachings did not usually constrain their actions.

Connecting Political and Spiritual Freedom/Liberation: Responses to Colonialism

In a monarchical context the related notions of spiritual freedom and liberation were devoid of any mundane political content related to independence or nationhood. There was an indirect economic element, however, as conditions of acute need would inhibit moral conduct as well as the ability to make merit through donations. After the British deposed Thibaw, the last Burmese king, in 1885 and imposed colonial rule over the entire country, some Burmese Buddhists advocated for an understanding of freedom that explicitly viewed political independence as a necessary condition for moral development and ultimate spiritual liberation. Before he was deposed, King Thibaw issued a proclamation to his subjects: “Those heretics, the English . . . have most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the injury of our Religion . . . To uphold the Religion, to uphold the national honor, to uphold the country’s interest . . . will gain for us the notable result of placing us on the path to the celestial regions and to Nibban [*nibbāna*]” (Scott and Hardiman 1983[1900], 110). Thibaw was arguing that political resistance to the non-Buddhist British on behalf of the nation and the religion (*lawki* activities) would bring rewards on the moral path to enlightenment (*lawkountara* benefits).

Variants of modern Theravāda Buddhist reinterpretations of liberation emerged across the Theravāda world during the nineteenth century, rooted in Buddhist reform movements in several countries. The Thai King Mongkut, who had spent twenty-seven years as a monk before ascending to the throne, instituted reforms in the mid-nineteenth century that sought to emphasize what he saw as the core teachings of Buddhism, even establishing a new order of monks, the Dhammayut (Keyes 2007, 150). Another variant found its genesis in nineteenth-century Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the work of Anagarika Dharmapala and other members of the Maha-Bodhi Society. The ethos of what some scholars have called the “Buddhist Protestant Revival” challenged the *lawki-lawkountara* divide

“by projecting the traditional quest for deliverance from *cosmic* suffering through impermanence into the direction of a quest for deliverance from *social* suffering through injustice” (Sarkisyanz 1965, 116).⁴ In Burma, King Mindon initiated a number of monastic reforms in the later nineteenth century designed to strengthen the *sangha* against the threat of Western dominance (Mendelson 1975, Chapter 2).

Ideas about politics continued to change through the beginning of the twentieth century along with what Juliane Schober has called the “laicization” of Burmese Buddhism (2011). Not only were monks like Ledi Sayadaw teaching laypeople advanced practices that had formerly been restricted to senior monks (Braun 2013), people were also starting to conceive of a society in which they could participate in political decisions that would shape the circumstances of their lives. According to Josef Silverstein, this reflected a new conception of freedom: “Set in a legal and constitutional framework, it theoretically applied to all: individual and group; ruler and ruled; indigenous and alien” (1996, 216).

The politically active Burmese monk U Ottama, who was educated in India and strongly influenced by the independence struggle in that country, saw political freedom as a prerequisite to enlightenment. In a 1921 speech (for which he was arrested and imprisoned), he contrasted the conditions of colonialism in Burma with the conditions during the Buddha’s life, saying that the Buddha could preach about *nibbāna* to his audiences because they were free people, but Burmese Buddhists could not even hope for *nibbāna* because they were still bound in earthly slavery to the British (*Rangoon Gazette Weekly Budget* July 11, 1921, 9).⁵ According to accounts of his sermons given at his trial, U Ottama claimed that living under the yoke of non-Buddhist colonial rule had actually eroded the ability of Burmese Buddhists to reach enlightenment: “When Lord Buddha was alive, man had a predilection for Nirvana. There is nothing left now. The reason why it is so is because the government is English” (*Rangoon Gazette Weekly Budget* July 25, 1921, 11). He

⁴ Gananath Obeyesekere (1970) was the first to label late nineteenth-century changes in Sinhalese Buddhism as “Protestant Buddhism.” Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988, esp. Chapter 6) described the phenomenon in more detail, referring to an extended process of rationalization and laicization. Some scholars have been critical of this characterization, arguing that it is based on a limited understanding of the diversity of Protestantism (see, for example, Prothero 1995 and Swearer 1996).

⁵ This was a rhetorical stretch on U Ottama’s part. The Buddha preached to people from a wide array of social, economic and political classes and his audiences would have had to include people in positions of servitude. In fact, one of the most radical elements of the Buddha’s teachings was its egalitarianism and his claim that enlightenment was open to all people, regardless of social status.

also explained how his political engagement was not in conflict with his monastic vocation, saying “hpoongyis [monks] pray for Nirvana but slaves can never obtain it, therefore they must pray for release from slavery in this life” (ibid., 12).

In this sermon (one of a series that he had delivered in different towns that aroused the ire of the colonial authorities) U Ottama claimed a direct connection between political freedom and the ultimate end of liberation from the recurring cycle of existence, suggesting that adverse political circumstances could negatively affect one’s ability to practice on the spiritual path, even temporarily taking away the possibility of enlightenment. His statement was a rhetorical appeal that demonized colonial rule in the strongest possible terms and also implied that, in these dire circumstances, Buddhists might have to temporarily subsume their religious goals of freedom from *kilesa* or ultimate liberation to the more pressing task of gaining political freedom.

For at least some of the factions struggling against British rule, “freedom” had a very specific meaning, one that was connected to a more limited understanding of “self-rule.” Participants in the anticolonial rebellion led by Saya San from 1930 to 1931 took an oath that included the words: “grant to us liberty and to the Galon King [Saya San] dominion over this land” (cited in Cady 1958, 312). For these rebels, freedom from British rule was a necessity, but they apparently did not see obedience to a new (Burmese Buddhist) king as an imposition on their liberty. In fact, from what we know about the expectations of an ideal Buddhist ruler, many of them may have believed that installing Saya San as king would have restored order (both politically and cosmologically), creating peace and prosperity and generating the ideal conditions that would allow Buddhists to continue to strive for varying degrees of spiritual freedom or liberation. All of this would have been impossible under the heathen rule of the British, yet reinstituting the dominion of a Burmese Buddhist king would have paradoxically restored their liberty.

Despite his calls for popular political participation, U Ottama seemed to share this more limited view of “freedom” under previous Burmese monarchs. His denunciations of the British contrasted present conditions in Burma with idealized pictures of life under previous Buddhist monarchs. In one sermon he was reported to have said, “Burma will never be prosperous as long as she has no *min* [king]. Burmans must rule their own country” (*Rangoon Gazette Weekly Budget*, July 11, 1921, 9). This may have merely been a rhetorical device, designed to focus the blame for current hardships on the foreign, non-Buddhist colonial invaders. However, it also points to an ambiguity in the concept of freedom that has allowed subsequent political figures to interpret and apply it in

different ways according to the circumstances. For many of the leaders of the independence struggle, freedom *from foreign domination* was the primary concern. They assumed that self-government was synonymous with freedom and that an independent Burmese state would support individual moral practice, whether for proximate spiritual freedom from *kilesa* or the ultimate liberation of enlightenment.⁶ As demonstrated later in this chapter, U Nu and other government leaders would use this framing to delegitimize the post-independence political liberation struggles of other groups, whether Communist, religious, or non-Burman ethnic groups.

Another monk of the time, U Thilasara, saw colonial rule as negatively affecting the mental state of colonial subjects, contrasting it with the spiritual and moral benefits that would come from self-government. “Without being free from bondage,” he wrote in a 1923 article, “which stems from the fact that one nation is subject to the rule of another, one can hardly find peace in one’s heart or in one’s environment, the environment in which the Buddhist way of life may be practiced or the compassionate love of a true Buddhist disseminated to humanity at large” (cited in Sarkisyanz 1965, 125). In his formulation, British colonial rule actively inhibited the ability of its subjects to engage in the ideal moral practices of Buddhism, most importantly, non-discriminating loving-kindness (Pāli *mettā*, Bur. *myitta*).

U Thilasara was equally explicit in his expectations of Buddhists in Burma: “The realization must be driven into the minds of the people that while they strive for the ultimate deliverance in the form of Nirvana [*nibbāna*], it is the duty of everyone to see that . . . Nirvana is attainable in reasonable good measure here in one’s present existence” (Sarkisyanz 1965, 126). The idea of *nibbāna* being attainable in the present life rather than at the end of countless future existences had begun to be popularized by some monks near the end of the nineteenth century and would anchor the post-independence Socialist visions of the perfect society explored below. Here, U Thilasara presented political freedom as complementary to and even necessary not only for Buddhist moral practice but for the ultimate liberation of *nibbāna*, using terms that clearly reflected the view of human nature that celebrates the potential for enlightenment rather

⁶ Like many groups that challenged colonial narratives of their unfitness to rule, most English-speaking Burmese used the term “self-government” to mean independence and national sovereignty. However, there is an additional aspect of their usage of the term that distinguishes it from the way it has more commonly been deployed in the Western political tradition to mean self-government of an autonomous individual. For the Burmese fighting for independence, their ability to govern themselves collectively was connected to each individual’s ability to control his or her own actions according to the moral precepts, a notion revisited in more detail in Chapter 5.

than the predilection for egocentrism. This is clear in his endorsement of self-government for Burmese so that “through the attainment of political and personal freedom, they may be more favorably and firmly placed on the road to Nirvana” (*ibid.*, 125). Burmese thinkers in the early decades of the twentieth century were thus linking the struggle for political independence, or self-rule, to moral and spiritual understandings that for some encompassed more mundane moral practice, but for others was intimately tied to the ultimate goal of complete liberation from suffering and existence.

Economic Freedom: Buddhism Engages Marxism

As Robert Taylor points out, there was significant ideological and strategic divergence among leftists in Burma from the 1930s to the 1950s (1984, 7–8). The [following section](#) represents an initial attempt to briefly assess leftist political thought in Burma particularly as it intersected with Buddhism, but the broader subject of leftist thought in the country remains a topic for future research. The section begins with an overview of the introduction of Marxist thought to Burma. This is followed by an explanation of the ways in which Burmese leftists incorporated the goal of economic emancipation into the already-existing projects of achieving political and spiritual freedoms. Their stated goal was the creation of *lawka neikban*, a “worldly nirvana” which they understood as a perfect Socialist state and which they envisioned as a welfare state, drawing on inspiration and examples from both Buddhist texts and the contemporary Socialist and Communist world.

One of the most persistent questions within Burmese leftist thought was the proper relationship between Buddhism and Marxism. These discussions reveal the ways in which the Socialist leaders of the 1940s and 1950s increasingly marked off boundaries between different types of leftists, based in many cases on the compatibility of their Marxist-inspired ideologies with Buddhist doctrine. Throughout the 1950s, this led to an often confusing combination of the simultaneous appropriation and rejection of various elements of Marxism, embodied most prominently in the speeches and writings of U Nu. At the same time, criticism of Communism was growing, both from Socialists in the government—still fighting Communist insurgencies—and from Buddhists threatened by Communist atheism. By 1958, most mainstream political leaders had rejected Marxism, although Socialist principles still served in part as inspiration for the ideology of subsequent military governments for decades to follow.

*From Political Freedom from Colonialism to Economic
Freedom from Capitalism*

Even before the introduction of Marxism, left-leaning thought among Buddhists in Myanmar focused on the negative moral impact of persistent economic need. In a 1923 article, the monk U Thilasara wrote about the need for certain ideal conditions of Buddhist practice. In criticizing what he saw as an increase in Burmese poverty under British colonial rule, he suggested that Burmese people should be taught “not only the Precepts but also how to achieve . . . a favorable milieu for the practices of Dana [generosity/donation], Sila [morality] and Bhavana [meditation] . . . To be able to give alms one must first make provisions for one’s well-being before parting with what one has to give to another” (cited in Sarkisyanz 1965, 125). According to this view, economic need not only generated suffering in the present, it adversely affected one’s ability to carry out the basic expectations of Buddhist moral practice, potentially imperiling one’s future rebirths.

As described in [Chapter 1](#), Marxist literature gradually became available in Burma in the late 1930s and 1940s, influencing the thinking of many who would become prominent actors in Burmese nationalism and the struggle for independence. As Burmese Buddhists turned their attention to economic freedom beginning in the 1930s, one aspect of capitalism that particularly troubled many of them was that it required Buddhists to concern themselves with acquiring property and increasing their material wealth. Aung San recounted the *Aggañña Sutta*’s story of the first Buddhist king *Mahasammata* in an article written in the 1930s entitled “Different Types of Politics” (Mya Han 1998). He drew the same lesson from this *sutta* as previous Burmese commentators: politics and political authority came about because of conflict between people and the increasing complexity of society. However, he also incorporated a critique of private property into his retelling of the story. Building on the claim that people found themselves unable to control their baser desires because of greed, he reflected on the cause of this greed. Stealing, lying, and punishment came into being because of private property, something Aung San classified as “wrong belief.” According to Aung San, this wrong belief was rooted in ignorance of the characteristic of *anattā* (no self/no control) and the mistaken view that there is such a thing as “my” home or “my” garden. Wrong belief was also encouraged by greed, which blinds people to the harmful effects of private property on others.

Through this critical lens, Aung San looked back to the original agreement with *Mahasammata* in a way that recalls Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s critique of private property in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

(Rousseau 1992).⁷ The people who had property and would benefit from devising a system of protection agreed that they should “invent/create politics” and “set up a government” to preside over them and prevent them from killing and harming each other (Mya Han 1998, 94). Aung San claimed that in creating this system, they were manipulating and deceiving those without property, since the system would disproportionately benefit property owners and institutionalize unequal economic relations. While those with property may not have intentionally or knowingly deceived those without (something that Aung San, in contrast to Rousseau, allows for), the result was the transfer of what had originally been commonly held property to that which was privately held, without any understanding of its negative effects. Furthermore, capitalist dominance meant that “the nature of government as representative of the people and as an institution that would act according to the people’s desires disappeared gradually over time” (*ibid.*, 95).

Aung San also inserted a powerful critique of the fatalistic interpretation of *kan* into this piece. “The people who were benefitting [from the government-supported system of private property], began to say ‘It is because of our *kutho* [Pāli *kusala*, merit].’ Those who were not getting any benefit did not know that the correct response would be, ‘It is not because of your *kutho*. It is because you have organized this immoral [*a-dhamma*] system.’ Instead, they started to think, ‘[We are poor] because of our *kan*’ (Mya Han 1998, 96). Thus, while private property came about because of greed, a state that protects private property and reinforces inequality is perpetuated both by those who are benefitting from it and by its victims, who mistakenly believe that the state is necessary and good because of ignorance. Aung San was not repudiating the Buddhist doctrine of *kan*; he was merely challenging the ease with which many Burmese (both rich and poor) justified conditions of inequality with reference to overly-simplified beliefs about cause and effect. His alternative vision was for Buddhists to see those conditions as the result of greed and ignorance and respond accordingly, adjusting both their perspective on the situation and their response to it in line with Buddhist moral teachings. In this way they would not only be freed from conditions of material suffering, they would also be freed from “wrong view.”

The Socialist-oriented *Dobama Asiayone* (“We, the Burmans/Burmese Association”) was one of the leading organizations fighting for Burmese

⁷ It is unclear whether Aung San actually read Rousseau’s *Discourse*. In another essay he wrote of the French Revolution and claimed that the idea of rights originated with someone named “*Ru-su*” (Mya Han 1998, 80). Although he may not have actually read the *Discourse*, it is likely that he would have at least been familiar with Rousseau’s ideas through the works of other writers.

independence. Their 1940 manifesto explicitly asserted their intention to fight for a variety of interconnected types of freedom. Their goal was the “emancipation of all toiling masses in Burma and the world at large from all kinds of political, economic, and social bondage” ([*The Guardian* VI: I, January 1959, 21ff). Members of the *Dobama Asiayone* formed the core of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) which led the final stage of the independence struggle after World War II had ended and took control of the government after independence in 1948. Having achieved the political freedom they sought, the leaders of the AFPFL government began to shift their focus to the alleviation of economic dependence and suffering.

As the leader of the AFPFL government, U Nu defended the Socialist economic system that his party was attempting to create by continuing the attack on private property that Aung San and others had begun in the 1930s. He and others in his party worried that the worldly pursuit of material wealth prevented Buddhists from spending time in spiritual pursuits such as meditation that would lead to a more lasting achievement of enlightenment (Becka 1991). The accumulation of capital by individuals was directly implicated in the three defilements: *lobha* (Bur. *lawba*, greed), *dosa* (Bur. *dawtha*, hatred), and *moha* (Bur. *mawha*, ignorance). A Socialist economic system would reduce attachment to material possessions and free citizens from a false sense of self, leading individuals to a more moral state of coexistence (Nu 1967). U Nu also claimed, in a speech supporting the Land Nationalization Act of 1948, that a Socialist economic system would impart the “right view” of property as impermanent and the accumulation of property as a lesser activity than striving for ultimate spiritual liberation (Burma 1948, 27).⁸ Furthermore, a Socialist economic system would provide sufficient material prosperity to allow people to support the *sangha*, ensuring the perpetuation of the *sāsana* (Nu 1967). The only correct use of property, U Nu argued, was for the purposes of ultimate salvation; one could arrive there gradually, either by making donations or by creating a more just society (Burma 1948, 27–8).

U Nu frequently used Buddhist ideas and texts to argue on behalf of his policy initiatives. He explicitly invoked the *Cakkavatti Sutta* in his speech to Parliament in 1948 in support of the Land Nationalization Act (Burma

⁸ Interestingly, whereas Aung San based his critique of private property on the way in which it reinforced a view of control or ownership contrary to *anattā* (no self/control), U Nu’s concerns rested on the tendency to see property ownership as permanent and lasting, which ran contrary to the characteristic of *anicca* (impermanence). Both rooted their thinking in different Buddhist characteristics of existence, at least implicitly grounding their economic critiques in *lawkouttara* (ultimate reality) terms.

1948). In the *sutta* (recounted and analyzed in [Chapter 3](#)), the deterioration of public morality originated with one king's failure to provide land to those who had none, and a series of increasingly destructive moral vices proliferated from there. U Nu saw the Land Nationalization Act as fulfilling one of the duties of an ideal king (or, in his reinterpretation, government). He drew directly from the *sutta* to paint a stark picture of the inevitable consequences of unrestrained capitalism and offered the legislation as the only way to avoid a catastrophic decline. This part of his speech is noteworthy both because of its urgency and because of the creative use of the *Cakkavatti Sutta*'s dramatic depiction of moral degeneracy to justify a government policy:

I have been obliged to speak at such length because I am very anxious lest the world should deteriorate to such a condition as when men . . . would commit widespread murder and bloodshed through failure to secure a right view and perspective of the intrinsic value of property. (*Burma 1948, 30–1*)

Here U Nu also used Buddhist rhetoric to paint opponents of the bill as not only greedy, acquisitive individuals with the “wrong view” of property, but also bent on a course of action that would lead human society into a downward moral spiral of almost unimaginable depravity. His rhetoric demonstrated the disciplining and deligitimating powers of a moral frame for political actions (Walton 2015a).

The AFPFL minister U Ba Swe justified the government's economic policies as a response to the suffering and anxiety that humans experienced with regard to their daily needs. In a style reminiscent of monastic preaching, he asked one audience in a 1951 speech: “Currently, as human beings, what are the daily worldly concerns that make us anxious? There is anxiety about food. There is anxiety about clothing. There is anxiety about a home. There is anxiety about health. And there is anxiety about education” (Ba Swe 1952, 28). He lamented that, overwhelmed by these five material anxieties, people were not even able to keep the Buddhist precepts or contemplate the Buddha's teachings (29).

His concerns were similar to those expressed by kings in precolonial times and even the Buddha himself: if people's material needs are not filled, they will not be able to focus their time, energy, or resources on pursuing spiritual freedom. U Ba Swe expressed this pithily with the common Burmese saying: “One can keep the precepts because one is well fed” (1952, 29). His logic mirrored that of a 1952 speech by U Nu that “moral character decays only in the presence of grinding poverty” and “if a nation cannot have a decent standard of living, it cannot uphold moral principles” (1953, 67). At the time, both men presented Marxism (and, by extension, the Socialist policies of the AFPFL government) as

the antidote to conditions of material suffering, declaring that it would bring freedom from material anxieties. After the government had fulfilled the material desires of Burmese citizens, U Ba Swe affirmed that they would be able to practice to achieve freedom from moral defilements. The country would have arrived at *lawka neikban*, the Burmese Socialist notion of a perfect society or “worldly nirvana” (Ba Swe 1952, 29).

Lawka Neikban: The Ideal Society and its Buddhist Antecedents

Lawka neikban originated as a purely religious term, meant to challenge the idea that enlightenment was only possibly for a select few by asserting the possibility of reaching a state of enlightenment here and now, in one’s present life. Burmese leftists of the 1930s and 1940s reinterpreted the concept through a Marxist lens to refer to the egalitarian perfect society that they would build through socialism. In doing so, they drew on a number of scriptural and traditional references. Burmese royal chronicles tell of a utopian island called Uttarakuru, described in some accounts as the realm of a future Buddha. The residents of this island do not have to work because everything they need or desire is provided by a magical *padetha* tree, sometimes translated as “wishing tree.” The tree gives the people food, clothing, furniture, ornaments, and many other things. As a result, no one goes hungry, homeless, or unclothed and there is no theft since the tree provides anything anyone desires. Eventually, after the establishment of *lawka neikban*, the Buddha’s teachings would lead human society back to the perfect state where every need was filled, either by the *padetha* tree or, in the AFPFL’s interpretations in the 1950s, by a society organized for the equal and just distribution of labor and resources. One AFPFL minister invoked the *padetha* tree in a 1953 speech, acknowledging that it was merely a legend but maintaining that the principle of sufficient production to meet everyone’s needs was sound and would be the conditions of the new Burma, accomplished through Socialist economic policies (Thein Han 1958, 63–5).

U Nu commonly invoked the *padetha* tree in his speeches describing the *lawka neikban* he planned to establish, emphasizing that in the past, with freedom from want, the people who benefited from the *padetha* tree were not controlled by desire. However, eventually, as in the *Aggañña Sutta*, some human beings began to experience craving and took more than they needed, initiating a descent into theft and violence, and culminating in the disappearance of the tree (Becka 1991). The loss of the *padetha* tree required human beings to labor in order to create materials for their own consumption (Sarkisyanz 1965, 211–12). U Nu framed the story as a direct criticism of capitalism in a 1948 speech: “The classes

which practiced exploitation and caused the disappearance of the magic tree have been leading the world astray from the time that they arose” (Nu 1949, 78).

The poet Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, whose writings inspired the early nationalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s, also looked back in history for examples of *lawka neikban*. In his famous *Thakin Tika* he referred to an earlier age in which each person was his or her own master, asserting that the *Dobama Asiayone*’s usage of the title *thakin* (“master”) to challenge British colonial dominance was simply the restoration of a natural and original condition (Kodaw Hmaing 1965[1938], 163). He recounted the story of decline from the *Aggañña Sutta* in which greed caused people to quarrel amongst themselves, necessitating the appointment of the first king, *Mahasammata*. In his presentation of the story, even under the leadership of *Mahasammata*, the people remained masters of themselves and their own community. For Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, the people’s voluntary election of *Mahasammata* proved that government was meant to be the servant of the people (*ibid.*, 164–5). As evidence of this claim in the modern age, he pointed to the fact that the British referred to government workers as “public servants.” Thakin Kodaw Hmaing’s understanding of *lawka neikban* thus had less to do with particular economic arrangements and more to do with the reinstatement of self-rule, which he claimed was the natural condition of human beings.

In addition to scriptural and traditional references, Burmese leftists commonly referred to Soviet Russia as the embodiment of *lawka neikban*, at least through the early 1950s. U Ba Swe wrote an article entitled “Stalin, the Man who is Building *Lawka Neikban*” in which he extolled the many virtues of economic and social life in Soviet Russia and the ways in which they accorded with the Burmese vision of plenty in a Socialist paradise (Ba Swe 1967, 113–122). Some of the works that the *Nagani* Book Club translated also celebrated the virtues of the Communist system in the Soviet Union (Zöllner 2006c). However, as the Socialists of the ruling AFPFL party gradually sought to distance themselves ideologically from the Communists who remained in rebellion throughout the 1950s and as Burma and the rest of the world gained a clearer picture of the abuses, terror, and mismanagement that characterized Stalin’s rule, references to the Soviet Union gradually became much more critical.

The AFPFL government channeled its efforts to create *lawka neikban* through a set of policies collectively called the *Pyidawtha* Plan (alternately translated as “pleasant country” or “happy land”). In August 1952, U Nu convened a *Pyidawtha* conference to reveal a series of planned reforms. Ironically, given his concern that the drive for material acquisition was counter to Buddhist ideals and would lead to the downfall of society,

U Nu had promised in a speech earlier that year that government policies would create a prosperous country in which “every family in Burma would possess a house, an automobile, and an income of \$175 to \$200 a month” (Butwell 1969, 112).

Apart from the components designed to speed overall economic development, one of the central elements of the plan was agrarian reform, including the nationalization of any land not owned by cultivators themselves. Many groups criticized U Nu and his government after the passage of the first Land Nationalization Act in 1948 and a subsequent Land Nationalization Act in 1952 as part of the *Pyidawtha* plan. Some Buddhists challenged U Nu’s doctrinal defense of the nationalization, suggesting that the policy amounted to theft, a violation of one of the five precepts. U Nu responded to this accusation in a 1952 speech, explaining that, as it had been in the times of Burmese kings, the land ultimately belonged to the political authority (in this case, the elected government) (Nu 1953, 112). He also countered criticism of land nationalization policies with explicitly Buddhist reasoning that built on his previous critiques of public property, claiming that “property has only a functional place, as means for the attainment of Nirvana . . . and that the class struggle has arisen out of the illusion about the inherent value of property, so that the overcoming of this illusion would open the road to Nirvana through a perfect society” (cited in Sarkisyanz 1965, 213). According to U Nu’s logic, the government was actually helping its citizens along the spiritual path by appropriating their land, not simply assisting them in their moral practice, but in coming to perceive clearly that property was characterized by both *anicca* (impermanence) and *anattā* (no self/control).

Even as they struggled to create the policies that would create *lawka neikban*, AFPFL leaders held different views on the proper methods that would bring about this perfect state. They also had different visions of the ultimate levels of moral/spiritual freedom or liberation that it could help to facilitate. Ba Swe, for example, saw Socialist economic reforms and the creation of *lawka neikban* as the solution to economic suffering and inequality. These policies would provide the material prerequisites that would allow individuals to focus on developing their spiritual practice. Although he positioned the *lawki* elements of political and economic reform as a means to the end of moral practice, there is no clear indication in any of his speeches or writings that Ba Swe saw a connection between the Socialist policies that would create *lawka neikban* and the ultimate liberation of *neikban* itself.

U Nu, on the other hand, came to espouse a more complicated causal pattern but also painted a more grandiose picture of the effects of Socialist

reform. His conception of politics saw individual moral practice as a prerequisite to successful political and economic changes in society. That is, the government's Socialist policies could only be successful if implemented in a society characterized by good moral conduct. U Nu also endorsed a version of Ba Swe's thinking, that policy could play a role in enabling enhanced moral practice. But he took the implications of this much further, arguing that the framework of the ideal *lawka neikban* society would not simply help people to keep the precepts but could actually advance them on the path to *neikban* (*nibbāna*) and total liberation. This discrepancy in views between the two men was partially the result of their different stances on the proper relationship between Buddhism and Marxism, and partially an effect of their changing opinions on Marxism and Communism throughout the 1950s.

The Relationship between Marxism and Buddhism

One of the most pressing ideological questions for many Buddhists in Burma during the 1940s and 1950s was whether or not Buddhism and Marxism were compatible and if so, in what ways. Gradually throughout the early 1950s, the mainstream Socialists of the AFPFL government shifted from claiming that Marxism helped to promote Buddhism, to putting Marxism in a subservient position to Buddhism, and finally to declaring that many elements of Marx's teachings were incompatible with the Buddha's teachings. In part, this shift was an attempt to differentiate their ideology from the Communists who had been in rebellion since 1948 but government leaders were also forced to respond to criticisms from prominent Buddhist monks and the Buddhist public as to the incompatibility of the two sets of teachings.

When AFPFL minister U Ba Swe used the term *abhidhamma* (Buddhist philosophy, Bur. *abidama*) to refer to Marxist philosophy in a 1951 speech, it was undoubtedly provocative, but was also meant to emphasize the compatibility of Marxism with Buddhism and the fact that these two philosophical systems "share the same nature" (1952, 17). On the surface his position in the speech seems to mirror the common *lawki-lawkountara* distinction, as he claimed that Marxist *abhidhamma* applied to the *lawki* realm of fulfilling material desires, whereas the Buddha's *abhidhamma* was used to deal with spiritual matters, specifically liberation from the world of *samsāra* (Bur. *thanthara*, the never-ending cycle of rebirth) and attainment of *nibbāna* (1952, 17). At the same time, he asserted a closer connection between the two, claiming that his study of Marxism and the truths it revealed about the material world had reinforced his belief in Buddhism, deepening his understanding of the

Buddha's teachings.⁹ By claiming this, he assuaged Buddhists' concerns by acknowledging that the truths and methods of Marxism apply only to a lower (*lawki*) plane and that Marxists did not seek to supersede the place of Buddhism in Burma. However, his assertion that Marxism operates similarly to Buddhism in a conceptual way also sought to raise its standing in the eyes of Burmese Buddhists. If, for example, Marxist dialectical method functioned according to the same logic as the Buddha's teachings, then it would be an appropriate political ideology for dealing with *lawki* issues in a way consistent with the Buddha's teachings about *lawkountara* matters. In this way, U Ba Swe made his previous separation of *lawki* and *lawkountara* slightly more nuanced, alluding to an underlying consistency in the logics that governed the two perspectives.

Similarly, U Nu frequently emphasized that Socialism was not in competition with or contradiction to Buddhism. As a worldly activity, it was merely the proper political and economic implementation of a lay Buddhist ethic (Nu 1967, 55–6). However, even before he began to distance himself from Marxism, he responded strongly to criticism of Buddhism that came from the left. In a speech to Parliament on October 3, 1950, in which he supported the “Buddha Sāsana Council Act” which was to create a central organization for Buddhist activities in the country, he spoke forcefully against “doubts regarding the true wisdom of Lord Buddha and assertions that Marx was a wiser man than Lord Buddha” (*The Light of the Dhamma*, I:I, 1952, 47). He went on to assert that, “It will be our duty to retort in no uncertain terms that the wisdom or knowledge that might be attributed to Karl Marx is less than one tenth of a particle of dust that lies at the feet of our great Lord Buddha. The contrast is so marked” (*ibid.*, 47).

Other Socialists such as U Ba Yin, Minister of Education during the early 1950s, also put Marx and his philosophy in a secondary position to the Buddha and his teachings. U Ba Yin saw Buddhism as providing a necessary moral context for Marx's critique of the socioeconomic structure of capitalism. He positioned the Buddha as engaged in a struggle against dictatorship on multiple levels: against the oppression of a ruling class, against the spiritual oppression of an all-powerful God, and against the tendency of desire and craving to control human action. By challenging hierarchy and providing humans with the tools to free

⁹ U Ba Swe contrasted his new, deeper understanding of the Buddha's teachings with his previous position as a *miyopala* (traditional) Buddhist (1952, 17). This term often has negative connotations and modern Buddhists have frequently used it to distance their own, presumably more scientific and rational perspective on Buddhism with what is portrayed as the unquestioning, ritual-based Buddhism of the masses, “tainted” by belief in spirits and magic.

themselves from “the bondage of all forms of dictatorship” as well as fear and desire, the Buddha “laid foundations for the establishment of a real world-wide democracy” (Ba Yin 1954, 5). Marx, Lenin, and other Communists were misguided in their belief that a revolution would be able to eliminate oppression and suffering completely; only the Buddha’s teachings could help humans to overcome greed and ignorance, the root causes of oppression and suffering.

The move away from Marxism seemed complete when, on January 29, 1958 U Nu gave a marathon, four-hour speech in which he reinforced his rejection of certain aspects of Marxism, focusing primarily on the incompatibility of Marxist dialectical materialism with Buddhist principles of *anicca* and *anattā* (*New Times of Burma* January 31, 1958, 3). He also expressed remorse for his previous claims that Buddhism and Marxism were compatible, explaining that he and others who held similar views didn’t really understand either system fully at the time (*New Times of Burma* February 1, 1958, 4).

In a subsequent speech he reaffirmed that the AFPFL would continue to accept some parts of the economic doctrine of Marxism (*New Times of Burma* February 1, 1958, 6). However, in an indication of the extent to which he was reprioritizing Buddhism, he emphasized Buddhist morality as the necessary ethical foundation for a society with a Socialist economy. He admitted that immorality was “a consequence of economic insufficiency” but at the same time insisted that the failures of socialism were the result of moral laxity and the AFPFL needed to refocus its efforts in this area (*New Times of Burma* January 30, 1958, 2). In this reformulation, U Nu reaffirmed the primary place of Buddhist reasoning in his political philosophy, interpreting change in the world as fundamentally driven by moral action.

U Nu also took a more decisive stand on the *lawki-lawkountara* separation in a work he wrote during a hiatus from politics in late 1959 (*New Times of Burma* November 17, 1959).¹⁰ Having rejected Marxist materialism, a belief in the need for violent revolution, and Marx’s view of history as progressive, he was still attempting to prove that other forms of Socialist governance were compatible with Buddhism. Here he argued that religion and politics were inseparable. Religion was a necessary civilizing force in providing the moral grounding for human beings to live in society. Furthermore, although he argued that “in a Socialist economy, the motives that urged men to greedy acquisition of wealth would be

¹⁰ Citing concerns over disunity within the government and the ruling party, U Nu had asked General Ne Win to take over the state as the leader of a temporary, military-led caretaker government in October 1958. U Nu returned to power in the April 1960 elections.

totally absent,” he also stressed the primacy of individual moral conduct in bringing this state into existence (*ibid.*, 1). “If we aspire to lead in the building of this Socialist State,” he claimed, “we must first of all try to become good men ourselves” (*ibid.*, 4).

Despite its ideological dominance among the leaders of the independence struggle, leftist unity remained elusive in the country, dogged by political and interpersonal rivalries as well as ideological differences. The civil conflict that had begun even before independence hampered U Nu’s attempts to create a thriving Socialist state in Burma in the 1950s as ethnic and religious groups rebelled in addition to the Communists. However, dedication among the leaders of the government and the military to building a Socialist country remained strong. When the military seized control permanently in 1962 under General Ne Win, it created a one-party state guided by an ideology that combined Buddhism and Marxism. This esoteric and confusing doctrine was delineated in a handbook called “The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment” and elaborated in the book *Lawka Amyin* (*Man’s Worldview*), both written by U Chit Hlaing, who became the chief ideologist of the party.¹¹

Lawka Amyin is a dense work that seeks to equate Marx’s dialectical method with the Buddha’s “middle path,” quoting judiciously from both Marx and Lenin. It adopts the same view on *kan* as many of the other figures examined here, that, while one’s present circumstances are the unavoidable consequence of past actions, the focus ought to be on performing one’s present work well and changing the conditions of the future (Badgley and Aye Kyaw 2009, 13). This perspective reinforces one of U Chit Hlaing’s primary points, to emphasize the foundation of “practical work” as both “the beginning of human knowledge, its foundation” and “work . . . that changes nature and human society” (*ibid.* 26). Somewhat paradoxically, for a work of philosophy, he also viewed the search for truth through a Marxist-inspired Buddhist lens, again insisting that “practice is the only criterion to test the truth” (*ibid.*, 34). These conclusions also supported the military government’s portrayal of the peasantry and workers as the simple yet foundational element of Burma’s Socialist state.

U Chit Hlaing explicitly endorsed the view that moral practice could have material effects in the world. He argued that “Political ideology is the moral foundation of society, controlling and directing both economic and social relations. It helps the economy and society progress, so it is obvious

¹¹ The following paragraphs rely on John Badgley and Aye Kyaw’s (2009) partial translation of U Chit Hlaing’s text. For more on Chit Hlaing’s emergence as the chief ideologist of the Tatmadaw after 1962, see Nakanishi (2013, Chapter 3).

that our moral choices influence the material conditions of our society” (Badgley and Aye Kyaw 2009, 47). However, we should note the way in which he understands morality to be either equivalent to or dependent on political ideology. Although throughout the text, U Chit Hlaing argues that “socialism is not dogmatic, and should be guided by pragmatic experience” (*ibid.* 48), in practice, as the military government gradually succeeded in bringing most of the country under its control through the 1960s, it severely limited freedoms of speech and the press in the name of national unity. As a result, the boisterous and freewheeling ideological debates among leftists gave way to the ideological uniformity of the “Burmese Road to Socialism.”

After Independence, a Renewed Emphasis on Order

From the imposition of colonial rule in 1886, Burmese political thought developed overlapping conceptions of political and economic freedom, usually grounded in or connected to various levels of moral freedom or spiritual liberation. Yet, in a telling switch, after independence in 1948, while they continued to emphasize the need for further economic independence, the leaders of the ruling AFPFL government adopted a renewed focus on order in their rhetoric and policies. Presumably, the renewal of Burmese leadership meant that citizens of the country no longer had to be concerned about political authorities acting in their interests, making any expressions of dissent suspect. This focus on order also had the effect of delegitimizing continued struggles based on competing and persistent interpretations of political or national liberation.

U Nu seemed not to appreciate Burma’s tradition of student activism when he issued a critical rebuke to students in a speech on National Day on November 23, 1951 (Nu 1953). He painted a derisive picture of the student political activist, with unkempt hair and clothes, manipulated by politicians, claiming that across the country, people had lost respect for students because of their continued political activities. “I do not want to see student jacks-of-all-trades meddling in politics, attending political classes, and submitting themselves as pawns on the political chess-boards” (1953, 21). Many saw U Nu’s attempt to suppress student voices as hypocritical since he himself had been a part of the student movement in the 1930s that took up the fight for independence but—in a lesson that rings true during the current transition as well—even this former champion of democracy in Burma renewed his focus on order when presented with the challenges of governing.

The shift of emphasis from freedom to order is also evident in another one of U Nu's speeches from 1952. Here he explicitly declared political freedom to have been a matter of self-rule (meaning sovereignty), and thus accomplished; now that "there is no difference between the Government and the masses," people should cease their protests and criticism of the government (Nu 1953, 107). He gave a nod to the goal of further economic emancipation, but insisted that since the government was implementing policy on behalf of the people in order to eliminate economic exploitation, this was also not an area for concern. We can hear echoes of the rhetoric of the monk U Ottama in the 1930s, who also assumed that the end of colonial rule would automatically bring both freedom and justice. Similarly, U Nu told his listeners in 1952 that they should refrain from false differentiation between "the government" and "the people" since the implementation of democracy meant that the two were one and the same.

Despite insistence from the AFPFL that they were continuing toward the goal of economic freedom, their former allies were not convinced. Communist leaders were strongly critical of AFPFL economic policies, which they perceived as being opportunistic in negotiating independence from the British and too accommodating to capitalist interests. H.N. Goshal, a leading Burmese Communist, issued a harshly worded denunciation of U Nu and the AFPFL in December 1947, claiming that they had "crossed over to the imperialist camp" and that the agreements with the British resigned the Burmese to a state of "permanent slavery" (cited in Thompson 1959, 38). Clearly there were some leftists who believed that without economic independence, political freedom remained hollow.

Over a decade later, in 1959, the Burmese government (ruled at the time by General Ne Win's caretaker regime) published a pamphlet entitled *Dhammantaraya (Buddhism in Danger)* that sought to use these leftist arguments championing greater economic freedom against the Communists, who had been in rebellion throughout the 1950s. The pamphlet claimed to include a collection of teaching materials and notes used by Communist cadres in their trainings denouncing Buddhism, which the government said it was sharing so that Burmese Buddhists would realize the threat that Communism posed to their religion. For example, one of the Communist lessons allegedly discussed how, during the Buddha's time, feudalism and slave labor were still common. Rather than advocate for true (presumably Marxist economic) freedom, the Buddha presented people with a fanciful idea of liberation beyond the material world designed to distract them from their material circumstances of oppression; because of this, Buddhist liberation was

really just another impediment to ultimate human emancipation in a Marxist sense (Burma 1959, 3–4). The government used publications like this to present Communism as a threat to the *sāsana* (Bur. *thathana*, Buddhist religion) and to delegitimize alternate interpretations of the struggle to expand freedom beyond mere political independence.

The military regime from 1962 took a slightly different approach to these concepts: it also promoted order, while conceding that further political freedom was necessary; it just deferred that freedom to an unspecified future. Regarding General Ne Win, the instigator of the 1962 coup and leader of the military junta for several decades, Gustaaf Houtman has said: “democracy was . . . a vital element in his political path with a meaning that shifted in the course of his career” (1999, 21). This is a provocative statement, since, in the common opposition narrative of military rule in Burma, Ne Win was nothing more than a power-hungry autocrat. Here, Houtman acknowledges that Ne Win may have envisioned a future democracy, but one that was perpetually and indefinitely postponed because of the concerns of order and stability. In his speeches Ne Win continued to speak of the democracy that would come, promises that sounded increasingly hollow as military rule continued, but statements that are consistent with the concern for order as a prerequisite not only for democratic practice, but for the presumed moral benefits of political rule as well. This post-independence notion of order may not have had the same cosmological underpinnings as that which anchored the precolonial monarchy, but it did follow a similar logic: it was the responsibility of a political authority to curb the moral excesses of its subjects and in doing so, create the conditions conducive to practice for freedom from moral defilements and eventually, ultimate liberation.

Reenvisioning Freedom in the Democratic Opposition

Order was thus the priority during decades of military rule, with complete political freedom deferred indefinitely. However, the democratic opposition movement that emerged in 1988 to challenge the military junta reinvigorated the demand for political freedom through democracy. Although their goal of political freedom was not realized at the time, for some, their democratic protest movement (and resulting imprisonment) generated additional understandings of the connections between material and spiritual freedoms.

Gustaaf Houtman’s seminal study of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 1990s focused on one such understanding (1999, 307–343). In his analysis, *vipassanā* (insight) meditation functioned as a psychological coping mechanism for democratic activists

who were imprisoned or confined to house arrest.¹² The practice of *vipassanā* allowed individuals to refocus on concerns related to ultimate liberation, that is, freedom from moral defilements and eventually, liberation from existence itself. The “insight” of *vipassanā* meditation is the realization of Buddhist truths of *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and *anattā* (no-self/no control). Stated another way, insight entails bringing a *lawkouttara* perspective to bear on *lawki* existence. Attention to *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* helped some democratic activists realize that not only were the conditions of their imprisonment inherently impermanent, their physical confinement did not limit their ability to practice for ultimate liberation. If anything, it enhanced the possibilities of *vipassanā* practice by taking away many of the daily activities and responsibilities that can inhibit meditation practice and providing examples of severe *dukkha* on which to meditate.

While the premise underlying this relational conception of political and spiritual liberation remains valid, it is likely that it was limited to a distinct period among a particular group of people. No one among the former political prisoners I interviewed had a regular meditation practice, nor did they interpret imprisonment from this perspective. Additionally, very few of the prisoners who were released in the sweeping amnesty in January 2012 have mentioned elements of Buddhist meditation practice as an aspect of their prison experience. However, although they did not practice *vipassanā*, many of the former political prisoners I interviewed did discuss the ways in which they used Buddhist teachings more generally to better understand and cope with their imprisonment. Students jailed after the 1988 protests often found themselves imprisoned alongside disrobed Buddhist monks who would share *dhmma* wisdom related to conditions of suffering. Other former political prisoners found that the Buddha’s teaching of *mettā* (non-discriminating loving-kindness) was invaluable in helping them manage their relationships with abusive soldiers and prison guards and eased feelings of hatred and bitterness after their release. This may not have been liberation on the scale of that

¹² Houtman acknowledges that this understanding and usage of *vipassanā* meditation was limited to the older generation of NLD leaders and that younger generations of activists, particularly those who had fled to Thailand after the 1988 uprising, did not appear to practice *vipassanā* nor approach it from the same perspective (1999, 307). Today, remaining members of that older generation rarely speak about their own Buddhist practice or the ways in which it informs their political thought, so it is difficult to know if they still adhere to a similar idea of liberation. Of course, since the government released the majority of political prisoners in January 2012 and has been gradually opening up political space with its reforms since March 2011, it is possible that the older generation of activists no longer finds this relational conception of liberation to be compelling or even relevant.

promised by *vipassanā* meditation practice, but it demonstrates the persistence of a view that links conditions and practices of worldly freedom to spiritual freedom from moral defilements.

An additional contemporary Burmese Buddhist understanding of freedom can be found in Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's call for a "revolution of the spirit" (1991, 183). In a famous essay entitled "Freedom From Fear," she discussed the need for the population of Myanmar to combine democratic change with personal, internal transformation. Beginning from the four *agatis* (which she translated as the four "corruptions"), she acknowledged the detrimental effects of desire, anger, and ignorance, but asserted that fear was the worst because it destroyed a sense of right and wrong while also hindering efforts to reform the other three areas (*ibid.*, 181). Fear had not only kept the majority of the population of the country from its potential, it had also driven the military to continue to repress its own citizens. Freedom from fear, according to her, would liberate citizens to strive for the heights of moral perfection and to create a more just society.

Reflecting on the human quality of self-improvement, Aung San Suu Kyi wrote that, "At the root of human responsibility is the concept of perfection, the urge to achieve it, the intelligence to find a path toward it, and the will to follow that path if not to the end at least the distance needed to rise above individual limitations and environmental impediments" (1991, 185). Here she eloquently expressed the delicate yet unavoidable intertwining of the realms of *lawki* and *lawkouttara*; only by freeing oneself from the *agatis* (by following a *lawkouttara* path) could meaningful and lasting political emancipation occur in the *lawki* world. For Myanmar's democracy icon, this represented both the challenge and the possibility of envisioning a role for Buddhist moral practice within politics.

Conclusion

Across the last two centuries of Burmese history and beyond, the ideas of order and freedom/liberation have changed in meaning and prominence in Burmese politics. Precolonial polities focused on the maintenance of order, influenced by a view of human nature that saw people as fundamentally flawed in their enslavement to desire and in need of proper management to prevent them from indulging their baser instincts. The rhetoric of political legitimation, however, suggested that order was necessary to support the proximate end of freedom from moral defilements, which would enable the ultimate end of spiritual liberation. That is, people needed a certain set of optimal life conditions to engage in correct moral practice.

Burmese Buddhist responses to colonialism engendered a creative and productive discourse that expanded the meanings of “freedom” and “liberation.” Anticolonial activists from the early decades of the twentieth century linked the prospect of spiritual development (and ultimately, enlightenment) to political emancipation, or national independence. Beginning in the late 1930s, leftists added an emphasis on economic emancipation from capitalist exploitation, one that became more prominent after independence in 1948. The new ruling elite of the ensuing parliamentary period also recovered a focus on order; this purpose of politics assumed a central place in the ideology of subsequent military governments. Yet concern with freedom—both political and spiritual—persisted, epitomized by the post-1988 democratic opposition.

Political figures have also explicitly linked the ultimate “goal” of liberation with more mundane aspirations. Many writers in the 1930s to 1960s used the paradoxical term “*lawka neikban*” or “worldly nirvana” to describe the ideal Buddhist political community. In most cases, they conceived of the path to this perfect state using Socialist methods, but many justified these methods through Buddhist teachings. Different views on the connection of *lawki* and *lawkountara* matters shaped Burmese perspectives on the varying types of freedom and liberation and the connections between them. Some, while advocating for a distinct separation between religion and the state, still accepted that the higher “truths” of the *lawkountara* realm, as universal truths, could inform and direct worldly action and that ideal political and economic conditions could facilitate even the ultimate goal of enlightenment. On the other side, the gradual rejection of Marxism by most of the Burmese political elite through the 1950s resulted in a resurgence of hardened boundaries between *lawki* and *lawkountara*, in an effort to assert the primacy of Buddhist doctrine and combat continuing Communist rebellions. These differing viewpoints helped to establish the poles between which Burmese Buddhists in the post-colonial era have debated the purpose of politics.

5 What is “Politics” and What Constitutes “Participation”?

There is no word or phrase in Burmese that approximates the meanings and implications of the English phrase “political participation.” The English term can include activities such as voting, running for office, contributing time or money to a campaign, organizing or attending a rally, signing a petition, or attending a public forum. It can also refer to actions that make the political aspects of everyday life recognizable as such, including debating a political issue with a neighbor, challenging racially biased hiring practices at a company, or insisting on more gender equity in housework. [Chapter 3](#) included discussion of the multiple interpretations of the Burmese word *nain ngan ye*, which is almost universally used for “politics.” To most Burmese, the words for “politician” (*nain ngan ye thama*) and to “do politics” (*nain ngan ye louk de*) are associated almost completely with electoral or legislative politics and for many they also have strong negative connotations. [Chapter 3](#) also noted the distinction between a more bounded and self-centered “party politics” as opposed to “national politics” (*a-myo-tha nain ngan ye*), which is what the military claims it engages in.

In the 1940s, political figures such as General Aung San attempted to raise the status of *nain ngan ye*, to change people’s perceptions of the practice, and to expand it to include every aspect of human interaction, yet found mixed success. After independence, political leaders failed to construct a system hospitable to broader citizen participation, an atmosphere that military leaders used to their advantage. The political dysfunction of the parliamentary period in the 1950s paved the way for the military to rule for almost fifty years while paradoxically claiming that it was not “doing politics.” During that period the only opportunities for most citizens to “participate” in “politics” were through government-controlled civic organizations or occasional campaigns to oppose the military government.

Since 2011, Myanmar appears to be entering an era of renewed citizen participation in a system that is at least semidemocratic, decades after the failed 1988 uprising and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s claim that “people’s

participation in social and political transformation is the central issue of our time” (1994). The country had its first public ballot in almost twenty years in the 2008 referendum to ratify the Constitution, followed by parliamentary elections in November 2010, by-elections in April 2012, and another national election in November 2015, won in a landslide by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). Yet *Theravāda* Buddhist political thought, both in doctrine and in practice throughout most of Burmese history, has provided limited resources for theorizing or promoting citizen participation in politics. Buddhist activists and political leaders in the early twentieth century and democratic activists and civil society actors since 1988 have attempted to counter this lacunae using Buddhist reasoning and arguments drawn from other traditions, but leading political figures have also expressed reservations regarding the moral and intellectual abilities of citizens to participate effectively and appropriately. The complexity of these conflicting attitudes toward participation becomes even more apparent when we consider how some Burmese Buddhists have also reinterpreted both “politics” and “participation” by presenting individual moral practice as a type of political engagement and by asserting that political engagement ought to be guided by the moral values associated with Buddhist teachings.

This chapter asks the following questions: How have Buddhists in Myanmar theorized participation in politics, particularly since space for popular participation expanded at the beginning of the twentieth century? What kinds of acts do they understand to be political participation and what resources (textual, practice-based, cultural) have they drawn on to make their arguments? How do contemporary Burmese Buddhist notions of participation reflect norms of how the political realm should be perceived and how individuals and groups ought to engage with it? Consistent with the material presented throughout this book, I find in various Buddhist arguments for and against popular participation references to expectations of moral capacity. These arguments are situated within the dual understanding of human nature that influences so much of the thinking in this book, of humans as being inherently limited by attachment and craving yet potentially capable of transformative spiritual development and liberation.

Most Burmese Buddhist texts contain an explicit or implicit view of politics as a necessary evil. While a good king was expected to conform to certain moral guidelines, it was also assumed that in order to be an effective ruler, he would have to commit a number of immoral acts, including killing other beings. The moral ambiguity surrounding political action has persisted in contemporary views of political participation. One source is the distrust of politicians and dirty political practices that have been present

since the beginning of electoral politics in the country at the start of the twentieth century. Thus, the vocabulary used to describe political participation in Myanmar most often carries negative connotations of self-centeredness and refers to explicitly governmental or electoral political activities. However, the rise of social and economic development activity by NGOs over the last few decades as well as the increase in social donations (as opposed to purely religious donations) by Buddhists has expanded the discourse to include positive interpretations, often justified through Buddhist teachings, especially the notion of *parahita* (social work).

My examination of these subjects reveals a wide range of understandings of what constitutes “political” “participation.” With regard to the former term, I uncover a number of different definitions, from electoral politics to civil society activities to proper moral conduct in daily social interactions. The latter term also carries a wide array of meanings. Among most Burmese, participation can mean voting or running for office, although these methods are still relatively recent practices that have been severely restricted throughout most of the last five decades. Other actors identify different methods of participation, some of which are deeply rooted in Buddhist ideas about the efficacy of individual moral action. For example, many of the monks who marched during the so-called “Saffron Revolution” believed that the simple act of chanting the *mettā* (loving-kindness) *sutta* (Bur. *myitta thauk*) could bring tangible political change and monks sometimes envision ways of acting politically that they see as specific to the *sangha* (Bur. *thanga*, monkhood) or more effectively undertaken by monastics. Some members of civil society groups are guided in their activities by the Buddhist concept of *dana* (Pāli *dāna*, donation/generosity) in which purity of intention determines the efficacy of an act. However, beliefs about moral purity can also deter participation because they cast doubt on the ability of regular citizens to either effectively participate in politics or to do so in a way that is consistent with the Buddhist *dhamma* (Bur. *dama*, Buddha’s teachings).

I want to make clear that I do not consider the lack of terminology that exactly aligns with the English language concept of “political participation” to be a problem or a weakness of Burmese political discourse (and fully recognize that the English term is also understood and deployed in a wide range of ways). One unfortunate aspect of the increased Western interest in and engagement with Myanmar is a tendency to dismiss Burmese political thinking for not having indigenous terms for words like “democracy.”¹ Part of the purpose of this book is to insist that there is

¹ See Fuller (2015) for a recent statement of this position and Wells and Walton (2015) for a rebuttal.

such a thing as Burmese political thinking and that often it does not neatly overlap with common Western political concepts. Not only do I argue that it is necessary to understand the Burmese concepts in order to better grasp the dynamics and nuances of Myanmar’s politics, I believe that a deeper comparative engagement with Burmese political thinking could inject creative new perspectives into political thought outside of Myanmar as well.

The chapter begins with a brief account of changing ideas about political participation since the beginning of the colonial period in Burma. The fall of the monarchy in 1885 and the decline of the traditional cosmology, along with the increased influence of Western political thought, generated arguments for citizen participation in politics rooted in a more empowering interpretation of *kan* (Pāli *kamma*). Yet, narratives that are skeptical of political participation have persisted to the present day. These are rooted in doubts about the moral worthiness of inherently flawed human beings to take part in politics in appropriate ways along with concerns regarding personalism and the divisiveness of party politics. Monks, who are presumed to be moral exemplars, have participated in politics both through familiar methods (electioneering, protests, etc.) and through culturally specific methods that harness the power of their moral authority and exalted societal position, as in the example above. Both monastic and lay participation in *parahita* (social work) activities has increased, and I argue that there is a greater propensity among civil society actors to see their community development activities as “political.” Finally, extending an argument introduced in [Chapter 3](#), I explore the implications of Burmese Buddhist understandings of individual moral practice as a type of political participation.

Political Participation in Burmese History

Scholars have referred to the traditional and idealized Theravāda Buddhist model of politics as the “two wheels of *dhamma*” (Reynolds 1972). The wheel of moral authority (embodied by the *sangha*) both legitimated and restrained the wheel of secular authority (personified by the monarch); in return, representing the wheel of political authority, the king provided moral leadership as well as the material necessities for the monkhood to exist and for the flourishing of society in general. Lay people were present in this conception of politics only as political subjects, and, while the Buddhist scriptures do contain a basic code of lay ethics, they say almost nothing about the role of the laity (apart from kings and a select group of elite ministers) as autonomous participants in the political realm.

Burmese kings used this model of Buddhist kingship to justify their rule with reference to their superior *hpoun*, merit accrued through presumed exemplary moral conduct in previous existences. But even below the level of the monarch, the logic of *hpoun* and *kan* created local hierarchies that coalesced around individuals with significant power. Oliver Wolters, a historian of Southeast Asia, noted the persistent pattern across the region of the organization of political and social groupings around what he termed “big men” (1982). According to Wolters’ comparative study, these “men of prowess” ascended to their positions because they possessed an abnormal amount of what he called “soul stuff” (Burmese Buddhists would speak of *kan* and *hpoun*). This explanation not only justified the position of “big men” through reference to their past moral achievement and capacity, it put the majority of the population in an inferior position with regard to their ability to participate in political decision-making.

Whatever evidence may have existed to counter the image of the king as deserving of authority (and even the highly selective and edited chronicles contain a plethora of examples of immoral kings), as *pu htu zin* (creatures ruled by desire and craving, Pāli *puthujjana*), most individuals would not have been expected to be able to act in morally appropriate ways in their own lives. Additionally, to the degree that Buddhists accepted the cosmology and the natural hierarchy that it contained, the absence of a powerful ruler who could maintain order would have been virtually unimaginable, risking total chaos. Of course, in practice, the dictates of the king rarely affected the daily lives of most of his subjects, and villages and other local communities obviously possessed their own forms of political organization. However, as explained in Chapter 3, even into the twentieth century, many people continued to distinguish between their local governance practices and “politics” (Badgley 1965, 68ff). Traditional frameworks still influence popular attitudes, not because Burmese Buddhists are necessarily waiting for an ideal Buddhist king to return², but because many people retain doubts about the moral worthiness of the masses to exercise political rule.

In the mid-nineteenth century, some elite Burmese political figures began to draw from Buddhist doctrine and from other traditions to justify expanded opportunities for political participation, at least for a small privileged and educated group. Wider distribution of newspapers from the 1830s increased the availability of information (Charney 2006, 196). The royal minister *Kimwun Mingyi* U Kaung also circulated information

² Although these beliefs have still been present in the twentieth century (Foxeus 2011, Prager 2003).

about Western political systems, economic developments, and technological advances through publication of his diaries of trips to Europe in the 1870s (Kinwun Mingyi and Bagshawe 2006). U Hpo Hlaing, another minister who advised several monarchs in the second half of the nineteenth century, drew on European political institutions and Buddhist scriptures to recommend creating an assembly that would make political decisions, a suggestion that was never adopted by Thibaw, Burma’s last king (Htin 2002). However, Aureore Candier demonstrates that U Hpo Hlaing’s writing did expand opportunities for participation to some degree. For example, the minister’s explanation of *a-wirawdhana* (“non-opposition,” one of the Ten Duties of the King) broadened the concept to include incorporating the needs and demands of subjects, while still reinforcing a sociopolitical hierarchy that envisioned “high officials” (*hmu-maq*) as “an intermediary group between the king and the *pyi-thu* [the people]” (Candier 2007, 31–32).

Social and religious organizations proliferated at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although the primary orientation of most of these groups was initially toward the strengthening and protection of the *sāsana* (Bur. *thathana*, Buddhist religion), the gradual engagement of many of these groups with political issues marked the first significant expansion of political participation in the country (Turner 2014). Groups like the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA, founded in 1906) entered the political stage in 1916 by organizing demonstrations against Europeans who insisted on wearing their shoes inside Buddhist temples, a stunning display of disrespect from a Buddhist point of view (Smith 1965, 87ff). A new generation of Burmese who had been educated abroad returned to agitate for elections and popular representation, which the British eventually granted in 1922 (Taylor 1996, 165).

However, at various times parties and coalitions also organized boycotts of elections as a form of political participation; these were common from the 1920s to 1950s. The nationalist writer Thakin Kodaw Hmaing gave this tactic grounding in the Buddhist tradition in his 1927 *Boycott Tika* by connecting secular political action to the rare but powerful monastic practice of *thabeik hmauk*, “turning over the alms bowl” (Kodaw Hmaing 1927). In carrying out this spiritual punishment, monks refuse to collect donations from specific lay people and their families, thus depriving them of the opportunity to make merit.

Josef Silverstein has described the transformation in Burmese attitudes toward politics that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century: “Freedom in the mainstream meant many things – personal, social, intellectual and political – and led to greater participation by the people in political organizations, elections and direct action outside the legal

limits. Together, they reflected a fundamental change in the popular outlook toward politics. Man, they were coming to believe, could affect his political condition in this existence and it did not depend upon his kharma [*kan*]" (Silverstein 1996, 217). While Silverstein was absolutely correct in noting this change, it is important to note that the traditional view of humans as constrained by *kan* and morally unworthy of political decision-making (as well as the perception of politics as a "dirty" worldly undertaking) persisted alongside this new understanding of human freedom and its connection to political participation.

Indeed, by the late 1930s members of the educated Burmese class that was leading the independence struggle held complex positions on participation that would remain conflicted even through the first decade of independence after 1948. Some Burmese elites were skeptical of extending the franchise to the entire population; they believed that education and social class still functioned as indicators of the moral and political capacity of individual citizens. Sarkisyanz cynically assessed their usage of Buddhism in their political reasoning, claiming that, "For that Educated Class, the people's Buddhism was largely but a religious means for their political ends of self-government, that is for greater participation in government" (presumably he meant greater participation by the elite, educated class) (1965, 135). The colonial Burmese administrative class had come mostly from elite families, who could use their wealth and connections to acquire the education and bureaucratic skills necessary for success in the colonial government (Sarkisyanz 1965, 229). As a result, despite increasing political organization and agitation in rural areas, the general administrative pattern was the same as under the monarchy: most of the population remained political subjects and objects of policy rather than participants in the political decision-making process.

After 1962, under the military-controlled Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the state deployed an expanded rhetoric of popular participation, establishing Workers' Councils and People's Councils at various levels of the government hierarchy. However, space for participation was still very restricted as citizens could only participate through organizations that were "allowed to exist under the Constitution" (Wiant 1981, 65). In practice this limited participation to government-controlled groups, which took away opportunities for the development of independent civil society organizations. In his 1970 study of local-level politics, Badgley argued that "Burma probably does not have a national political process, if by that term one means the connection of groups and leaders in the many local communities into an ongoing process influencing, or attempting to influence, public policy. It certainly has no

operative state-wide political process” (1970, 3). These mixed traditions and attitudes toward mass participation in politics continue to present a difficulty to the current government as it attempts to enact reforms and create a more inclusive political system, although civil society has certainly become a more active and influential force in politics, especially since the mid-2000s. Another challenge, however, has been the persistence of ideas that question the moral capacity of individuals to participate in collective political decision-making and the efficacy of the system of party politics in Myanmar.

Arguments against Political Participation³

Skeptical Burmese Buddhist perspectives on political participation revolve around two points, both of which have been encountered in previous chapters but are expanded here. First is doubt regarding the moral capacity of individuals to make good political decisions and second is concern about the divisiveness of party politics and the persistence of personalism. The following section explores the ways in which these arguments have been used by political elites in Myanmar to justify limiting opportunities for political expression and participation.

Moral Capacity

Although we can credit U Hpo Hlaing with incrementally increasing the opportunities for political participation with the recommendations of his *Rajadhammasangaha* (“Rules for a Just King”), written in 1878, the logic he employed also reinforced the common belief that, as *pu htu zin*, human beings were fundamentally morally flawed. U Hpo Hlaing presented the practice of meeting in an assembly as having the practical governance benefits of overcoming individual weaknesses and contributing to unity. He recognized that not only would the decisions of individual kings or ministers be inherently partial, but that the resulting divisions would spread to their supporters throughout the country and to those affected by their policies (Bagshawe 2004, 91–2). Being inherently bound by desire and craving, every individual – even the king – was subject to the sway of the four *agatis* (“corruptions,” “biases,” or “partialities”). The four *agatis* of desire, anger, fear, and ignorance influence everyone’s actions and U Hpo Hlaing acknowledged that it was impossible for government officials (as individuals) to avoid these destructive biases. However, “if a number of people get together for any sort of action, there

³ This section draws heavily on Walton (2015a).

can be no question of following the *agati* way. In such assemblies what one man does not know another will; when one man has feelings of hate, another will not; when one is angry, another will be calm. When people have agreed in a meeting and preserve their solidarity, there will be no need for fear” (Bagshawe 2004, 174). Although here U Hpo Hlaing used Buddhist ideas regarding the frailty of human nature to justify expanded ministerial participation in political deliberation, he also reinforced the underlying *pu htu zin* justification, which would still apply to most of the rest of the population.

As demonstrated in Chapter 4, most leaders in the beginning decades of the twentieth century (whether oriented toward the protection of Buddhism or toward national independence) framed Burma’s independence struggle in terms of freedom from foreign control and the freedom to make one’s own destiny, to create one’s own *kan*. They argued that political and economic freedom were necessary conditions in order to facilitate proper moral conduct among Burmese Buddhists. However, the obverse of these arguments was the frequently expressed concern that people might not be equipped (intellectually or morally) to make their own political choices, that they might not be free from the moral defilements that would lead them to make bad decisions. In the 1930s, the politician and scholar U Ba Khaing, one of the founders of the Fabian Party in Burma, bemoaned the “ignorance of the masses” and dismissed the gullibility and lack of morals of the political “followers” among his fellow citizens (Zöllner 2006b, 22). A 1948 editorial in *The Burman* newspaper warned of the dangers of democracy if practiced by an uneducated population. Otherwise, “if not properly handled and if imperfect, Democracy could easily degenerate into confusion and chaos” (July 5, 1948, 2). And, after championing the political participation of students when he himself was one, U Nu, once he became Prime Minister, questioned the ability of the students to be savvy political participants, suggesting that they were simply being manipulated by politicians. “I do not want to see student jacks-of-all trades meddling in politics, attending political classes, and submitting themselves as pawns on the political chess-boards,” he said in a 1951 speech to students (1953, 21).

Others lamented the lack of a moral element in the educational realm. U Thant, who would later become Secretary General of the United Nations, but who was then secretary to the Ministry of Information, said in a 1948 radio broadcast that social and political education required “training in the art of governing – and still more difficult – that of being governed” (Burma 1950, 60). Significantly, he saw this training as having a necessary spiritual or moral element and believed

that the decline in religious education from the colonial period had resulted in the deterioration of morality and, by extension, the skills of citizenship. U Tin Aung, another member of the government, gave a talk in 1949 in which he blamed the political crisis of the time on disunity among leftists, which resulted from the lack of training in morality and self-discipline. Politics had been reduced to slogans, he complained, and “without the constructive building up of the common man as a responsible citizen,” that common man lost all sense of proportion, becoming susceptible to the extreme arguments of the Communists (*ibid.*, 132).

Concern over citizens’ moral capacity as political agents continued throughout the period of military rule and has persisted into the twenty-first century. In a speech on Armed Forces Day on March 27, 2005, Senior General Than Shwe stated that “Under a democratic system, only high education standards can ensure discipline and a clear perception of right from wrong” (Burma 2005, 23–4). Using language that underlined the implication of moral failure in conditions of disunity, he warned of the dangers of a return to the disorder and chaos that characterized the parliamentary period. Than Shwe then drew on the same four *agatis* (biases) that U Hpo Hlaing used to argue for collective decision-making, claiming that “Genuine democracy can flourish only when each and every citizen possesses reasoning power and is able to vote for delegates without [the] four forms of partiality” (*ibid.*, 24). This comment was obviously directed toward the many people who had voted for the opposition NLD in the 1990 elections. But he was also reinforcing the reasoning behind the former military government’s plan for a transition to “discipline-flourishing democracy”: because of inherent human moral weaknesses, democracy is a potentially dangerous political system, allowing people to participate in politics under the influence of moral defilements (Pāli *kilesa*, Bur. *kiletha*).⁴ As is explored further in Chapter 6, the military’s “discipline-flourishing democracy,” a form of moral and political guardianship that would ideally protect people from acting under the sway of *kilesa*, is thus firmly rooted in Burmese Buddhist views of human nature.

⁴ In his study of the ways in which successive regimes in Myanmar have progressively conflated the concepts of “rule of law” and “law and order,” Nick Cheesman also notes the moral underpinnings of the idea of law and order: “In Burmese, law and order is a concept that reinforces existing political relations through exogenously imposed order. It is hierarchical, because it presumes that certain people or groups occupy positions of authority that entitle them to decide when order is lost . . . Law and order always entails an impulse towards unequal political relations, imbued with the moral right of the superior class to impose its conception of order on others” (2015, 31).

Political Parties and Personalism

While some observers expressed skepticism regarding the moral and intellectual capacity of individual citizens to participate in politics, there was similar concern for the collective political action of the party system. U Ba Khaing's profound disappointment in the party system can be seen in his *Political History of Myanmar*, the third volume published by the *Nagani Book Club* in 1937 (Zöllner 2006b). His account focused mostly on nationalist politics and the machinations among parties during the first few decades of the twentieth century. U Ba Khaing was sharply critical of most of the political leaders of his time, seeing them as self-serving. However, he also expressed frustration bordering on disdain toward the general population of the country for their apparent inability to participate in politics in a constructive fashion.

U Ba Khaing directed his criticism at his fellow citizens, referring condescendingly to what he saw as the dominant pattern in Burmese society: "Looking at Burmese history, we notice that there had never had been a national success due to collective effort. We find that we used to reach the peak due to the leadership of an individual" (Zöllner 2006b, 27). He went on to list some examples of good and bad Burmese kings, then continued, "Likewise, the level of politics in Burma depends solely on the leaders of political parties. Wrong leadership took the country on the wrong path and left it in poor condition. The present status testifies this fact" (*ibid.*, 27).

U Ba Khaing was also disappointed with the general state of party politics in the country. Personalism not only led to factions and splits (indications of disunity) but also prevented the institutionalization of the party system. He caustically noted that, "A pathetic state of Burmese politics is that political parties do not have definite ideology. In England there is no such thing as Baldwin's party, or Landsberry's party, or Mac Donald's party, or Lloyd George's party. The parties in England are Conservative, Socialist, Labour, Liberal, which are based on party ideology" (*ibid.*, 113). Without an ideology, people would have nothing to bring them together in unity of thought or purpose, simply the charisma and sway of the leader. As U Ba Khaing saw it, the problem was an overreliance on individuals who, because of their inherent susceptibility to craving and self-aggrandizement, would lead their unthinking followers possibly to fleeting glory but eventually and inevitably to ruin.

U Ba Khaing's expectations of his fellow citizens are at times contradictory. On the one hand, he dismissed citizens' reliance on powerful individuals to create political change. Yet he was equally contemptuous of citizens' ability to work collectively, thereby reinforcing the paradigm that

the success of a political community is dependent on the actions and moral conduct of its leader(s) and minimizing citizens’ agency. His text appears to be a call for a different model of citizen engagement with politics, one that was not dependent on the charisma or power of individual leaders. Yet the work is rife with criticism of actual Burmese attempts at collective political action, from the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) to the rural *wunthanu* (patriotic) associations (calling them “destructive”) and ends with an indictment of nearly every political party in existence at the time.

“Even the brave university students and young men,” U Ba Khaing lamented, “are no longer adventurous; they assume the legislative assembly the last place for politics. And the peasants and workers, the village folk are relying on the legislative assembly. They have mean attitudes; they would ask for government in trivial matters . . . The grandeur of independence is out of sight; the people are tangled in the vicious cycle of thirty-one realms of existence” (*ibid.*, 134). Here he resigned himself to accepting the negative Buddhist conception of human nature. The “vicious cycle” was *samsāra* (Bur. *thanthara*), the unending round of rebirths caused by the inherent human condition of ignorance and enslavement to desire. In his eyes, ignorance prevented people from effectively working together for political development, while the compelling nature of craving ensured that leaders would use politics for their own gain.

Two decades later, in 1958, a split occurred in the AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League), the ruling party throughout the parliamentary period, providing further evidence to many people of disunity and the moral deterioration of the government (Sein Win 1989). And suspicion of political parties as evidence of factionalism also persisted throughout the period of military rule. After taking power permanently in 1962, General Ne Win instituted a one-party system, with the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as the only venue for political participation. Decades later, in 1990, the military government acquiesced to multiparty elections but in the subsequent narrative of that period, government leaders saw the explosion of parties as evidence of the political immaturity of the Burmese people (Kyaw Min Lu 2008a). Similarly, the official view was that political parties should ideally be bound by the moral expectations of unity. A December 3, 1998 article in the government-controlled newspaper the *New Light of Myanmar* stated, “As to freedom of organizational activity and expression, it can be a big danger, as long as there are political parties that still cannot renounce the way of confrontation, defiance of authority and anarchy, so there will be only such freedom within the bounds of rules and regulations” (Burma 1999, 8).

Concern regarding continued personalism in Burmese politics and handwringing over the inability or the unwillingness (depending on the perspective) of the masses to take part in collective political action continues today and is explored in more detail in [Chapter 6](#).

Monks and Political Participation

Other scholars have addressed the subject of monastic political participation in Myanmar in more detail so the general field will not be covered here.⁵ Instead, this section focuses more specifically on some observations about monastic political participation as it relates to my arguments about moral worthiness and expanded notions of both “politics” and “participation.” While most examples are contemporary, some historical examples are provided to note the continuity in actions and justification. Monks have a liminal existence in Burmese society, ideally removed from the concerns of everyday life yet intimately connected to lay people through their teaching duties and through their material dependence on the laity. Dr. Maung Maung, a Burmese legal scholar who also held government positions under various military regimes, wrote that “When a Burmese Buddhist becomes a priest . . . with intention to renounce the world, certain ties with his lay life are severed, and figuratively – though not entirely correctly – he ‘dies a civil death’” (Maung Maung 1963, 125). He was right to qualify his statement, since Burmese history provides numerous examples of monastic involvement in the political realm, both directly and indirectly.

Because of their vows of renunciation, their detachment from worldly concerns, and their orientation toward *lawkountara* matters, monks possess a high degree of moral authority. Even monks whose conduct does not always accord with this ideal are generally respected because of their association with the institution of the *sangha*. However, it is this ideal of detachment that complicates monastic intervention into areas of lay life, including politics. Numerous rules in the *vinaya* (Bur. *wini*, the monastic code of conduct) prohibit a range of common worldly activities. However, there are some circumstances under which monks might be permitted (and in some circumstances, even required) to involve themselves in lay matters. One particularly compelling situation for monks is when the *sāsana* itself is threatened or perceived as being in danger; in this case, monks can and should act to protect it. Some contemporary monastic

⁵ Mendelson (1975) is the seminal study of monastic involvement in politics, although Sarkisyanz (1965), Smith (1965), Ferguson (1975), Spiro (1982), Houtman (1999), Schober (2011), and Tin Naing Toe (2014) also address the subject in some detail.

reasoning and justifications for political engagement are examined further at the end of this section.

Of course, there is a wide range of interpretations not only of what constitutes a threat to the *sāsana*, but also of the “political” activities permitted to monks.⁶ Unsurprisingly, this remains a contentious and much-debated issue among Buddhists, not only in Myanmar but around the world. There is also variation, country by country, in the degree of monastic participation in politics that is allowed, either by law or by popular approval. Historically the monkhood in Thailand has been much closer to the Thai state, which has curtailed its potential political opposition through both privileges and punishments (Ishii 1986). This contrasts with the Burmese *sangha* which, although it has come under more sweeping state control since the late 1980s (Tin Maung Maung Than 1988), has generally been more independent of the state and has even been a source of political opposition. In another contrast of practice within the Theravāda world, monks have been prohibited from running or voting in elections in Myanmar since independence, yet have served as MPs in Sri Lanka and monastic political parties have exercised significant influence in that country’s politics since the 1940s (Tambiah 1992).

Although direct monastic engagement in electoral and other types of politics has been a feature of Myanmar’s religiopolitical life since at least the early decades of the twentieth century, many senior monks have also insisted that proper monastic comportment demanded detachment from political activities. In a 1949 interview, Sayadaw U Nanda Thami, a member of the *Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee* (the presiding central body of the national monastic hierarchy), sharply criticized monastic involvement in politics. He stated that the council had “clearly laid it down that no Buddhist monks should dabble in politics, and as a Member of that Organisation, I have no interest in either the political situation of the country or in party politics” (*The Burman* April 29, 1949a, 1). The anthropologist Melford Spiro, based on field research in the 1960s, claimed that “political” monks were, and always had been, “a very small minority” of the total *sangha* population (1970, 392). He even interviewed a village Sayadaw who told him that the monks who participated in the independence struggle – viewed as heroes and national icons by many Burmese – were “not true monks” (*ibid.*).

The challenge that monks face in navigating these boundaries even today is apparent in several examples. In an overview of monastic engagement with political authorities, Burmese historian Michael Aung-Thwin

⁶ See Walton (2015b) for a consideration of some of the ways in which contemporary Burmese monks explain or justify their engagement with politics.

highlights the persistent phenomenon of “men in yellow robes,” that is, phony monks, who have joined the order (or even just put on the robes) for ulterior motives. In dismissing the culminating days of the 2007 demonstrations, he cites anecdotal evidence and his own interviews to claim that the monks participating at this time (and receiving the worst of the violent response from state security forces) were in reality mostly lay opposition forces that had donned robes to take advantage of the moment to further incite revolt (Aung Thwin 2009, 20–22). In effect, he shields the mass of the *sangha* from accusations of being “political” by associating the explicitly political or “rogue” activities of the protesting monks with “fringe” monasteries (*ibid.*, 20).

A recent Burmese-language history of monastic political engagement in Myanmar reflects the lengths to which analysts must go to avoid tarnishing the reputation of the monkhood in discussions of monks and politics (Tin Naing Toe 2014). Rather than associate the word *nain ngan ye* (with all of its dirty, worldly, negative connotations) with monks, the author instead uses the title *nain ngan a-ye*, a term with the same meaning (“political matters/affairs”) but slightly different connotation. This change subtly makes room for monks to be connected to political matters as those matters are related to their primary duties as guardians and teachers of Buddhism, yet avoids the label “political monks.”

Juliane Schober has urged scholars and observers to be cautious with their use of the term “political monks” (2011, 138ff). Noting the pejorative nature of the label, she describes its origins in the colonial era as a “discourse intended to diminish the legitimacy of the anti-colonial struggle” of monks (*ibid.*, 140). The Burmese military government perpetuated this discourse, responding to monastic political action in 1988, 2007, and other periods of unrest by denouncing the participants as “bogus monks” and using these claims to forcibly disrobe and imprison them. Ingrid Jordt has also expressed concern regarding the framing and language that journalists used to talk about the events of September 2007 (Jordt 2008). She describes a conversation with a journalist in which she explained to him that by using the phrase “militant monks,” he was not only misrepresenting their actions, he was also endangering them and delegitimizing their struggle. Both of these scholars are right to draw our attention to the ways in which the use of the phrase “political monks” makes “scholars complicit in the hegemonic discourse of the state” (Schober 2011, 139). However, not only has monastic participation in politics been a consistent part of the Burmese political tradition, public discussion of the appropriate boundaries of monastic conduct, with regard to politics or to any other worldly activity, will be an important

element of the emerging democracy in Myanmar. It is in that spirit that I briefly look at some of the complexities of monastic political action here.

Monks Who Engage with Politics

Michael Charney’s insightful study of the group of monastic literati who helped to strengthen the Buddhist legitimization of the Konbaung dynasty in the late eighteenth century provides an illustrative historical example of a type of monastic involvement in politics (2006). He details the ways in which a group of monks from the Lower Chindwin valley used their proximity to the throne not only to promote their own monastic lineage, but to institutionalize a particular set of monastic practices as orthodoxy. Recognizing that their ability to implement their desired *sangha* reforms depended on the support and strength of the monarchy, they produced “new texts that strengthened the theoretical and symbolic foundations of the Kon-baung kingship” (*ibid.*, 71). They also revised and expanded the *Manugye Dhammathat* (the “Laws of Manu,” a legal code that was composed around 1756), creating “an authoritative text [that] supported, outlined, and expanded the legitimate role of the king, enhancing, at least in theory, the king’s place at the apex of society” (*ibid.*, 85). Charney notes that, while monks had always served as advisors to kings, the work of this group of literati monks fundamentally transformed both the political orientation of the monarchy and the religious orientation of the *sangha*, marking a definite monastic political intervention.

In addition to the many historical instances of monastic political engagement, there are a number of monks in contemporary Myanmar who have positioned themselves as political actors. The most famous is Sitagu Sayadaw, who rose to international celebrity because of his leadership in distributing relief aid after Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. Sitagu, who was forced to temporarily leave the country because of a sermon in 1988 that was critical of the government, controls a vast network of social service organizations, including hospitals, schools, universities, monasteries, and meditation centers. In recent years he has acquired prominent donors from both the military government and the democratic opposition (Wall Street Journal 2008). In doing so, he has positioned himself as a mediator; in one instance, at the opening ceremony of his new monastic school in Yangon in early 2010, he preached to attendees from both sides about the need for unity in the political realm (Zaw Naung Lin and Thant Zin Oo 2011).

But even as he enjoys relative freedom to speak about politics, he navigates an environment where he sometimes maintains that freedom by limiting the ability of others to exercise the same voice. During the

2007 protests he locked the doors of his monastery in Sagaing, not allowing resident monks there to join the demonstrations, possibly fearing government reprisals that would negatively impact his many other projects. And in February 2015, he issued a public statement calling on student protesters who were demanding educational reforms to cease their demonstrations and return to their families, after a temporary agreement was reached that the government would subsequently ignore (President's Office 2015; Radio Free Asia 2015). Other monks associated more closely with the opposition have not been so fortunate. U Pyinnya Thiha, also known as Shwe Nya Wa Sayadaw, was forced out of his Yangon monastery in 2011 and officially declared "disobedient" by the *Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee* after he gave a *dhamma* talk (public sermon) at the Mandalay National League for Democracy (NLD) headquarters and allowed the NLD to hold events in his monastery (Ba Kaung 2011).

U Thuzana is a Karen monk who was a disciple of the famous Thamanya Sayadaw, whose monastery in Karen state was revered by many as a peaceful oasis that remained free of the conflict and violence that plagued the rest of the region. Although U Thuzana instituted Thamanya Sayadaw's rules for moral asceticism and abstention from politics in his own monastery at Myaing Gyi Ngu, his actual position regarding political activities and his role in politics in Karen state is much more complex. Mikael Gravers notes U Thuzana's famous prediction that peace would come to the Karen state only when Buddhists there had built fifty pagodas, but also acknowledges the political role the monk has played as the spiritual leader of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) (1999, 96). This splinter group broke away from the Karen National Union (KNU) in 1994 and 1995, accusing the predominantly Christian leaders of the KNU of religious discrimination and although U Thuzana distanced himself from the violence that followed the split, he has continued to occupy a gray area as both spiritual and political advisor to the Buddhist Karen community.

U Pyinnya Thami, better known as the Taungale Sayadaw, is another contemporary Karen monk who appears to occupy more of a *lawki* space. He has overseen many development programs in Karen State and has also organized and supported Karen candidates to run in the 2010 election, earning him a designation as a "democracy monk" (South 2011, 26). Despite widespread support, I interviewed a number of individuals just after that election who expressed concern with his involvement in politics. One complaint in particular reveals the challenge of negotiating the participation of monks in mixed lay-monastic political organizations. Several Karen activists, Buddhists and Christians, were frustrated that

the social conventions that require lay people to be deferential to monks were counterproductive in the context of political organizing since most people found it difficult or impossible to disagree with (let alone criticize) a monk.⁷

Undoubtedly the most internationally recognized monk in Myanmar today is U Wirathu, a prominent figure in both the 969 Movement and MaBaTha (*A-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shauq Ye A-hpwe*, The Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) and the face of Buddhist mobilization against the Muslim community in Myanmar. U Wirathu is based at Ma Soe Yein Monastery in Mandalay and has had a career that recalls the Burmese monks whose political rhetoric marked a shift from a religious to a national framing in the early twentieth century. He spent nine years in jail, having been arrested in 2003 for inciting anti-Muslim riots in Mandalay. He was released in a mass amnesty in early 2012 and promptly returned both to his monastic duties and to political organizing.

This organizing has embraced a number of seemingly diverse causes and reflects the ways in which monastic political inclinations cannot always be easily classified. He has sent monks from his monastery to support the protests at the Letpadaung copper mine, led by local residents demanding that their confiscated land be returned and that extractive activities not damage the environment or local religious sites (Marshall 2012; Lawi Weng 2013a). He also initiated and led the campaign to pass four controversial “religious protection laws”—regulating interfaith marriage, religious conversion, polygamy, and family planning—that many observers have claimed are discriminatory against women and non-Buddhists and that were passed by Myanmar’s Parliament in 2015 (Wa Lone 2015). In justifying the latter actions, he has explained that his work “is about protecting the religion, but also protecting the nation, the race, the country. It’s not just about protecting the *sāsana*, but protecting the country” (Walton and Hayward 2014, 22). With this explanation, he carves out space for direct political engagement on terms that can be seen as consistent with the monastic vocation.

Monastic Political Methods

While at certain times monastic political engagement has appeared to be no different than that of lay people, monks have also utilized methods in which their elevated spiritual position has given moral weight to their political message. Most prominent among these *sangha*-specific political

⁷ Personal interview in Yangon, March 8, 2011; personal interview in Yangon; July 16, 2011.

methods is *thabeik hmauk* (Pāli *pattam nikujjana kamma*), “turning over the alms bowl,” briefly described above.⁸ Monks have, however, intervened in the political realm in other ways that are weighted with spiritual and moral meaning. In 1956, a group of hundreds of monks joined a protest of students and Communists that was staged as a “Funeral of Oppression,” in response to a government edict that forced unions to dissolve (*The Nation* November 16, 1956). They marched with a coffin (meant to symbolize all of the oppressive measures the AFPFL government had enacted) through central Rangoon, eventually stopping so that the monks in attendance could conduct funeral rites. Contemporary protest movements have also enlisted the religious support of monks. A land rights protest outside of Yangon came to a head in December 2013 when dozens of participants received funeral rites from Buddhist monks, as an indication of their willingness to die for the cause (Lawi Weng 2013b).

The best-known recent example of monastic political involvement using methods specific to their vocation was the demonstrations in 2007, the so-called “Saffron Revolution.” The Introduction to this book began with a brief narrative of the monks’ actions and their decision to march and chant the *mettā* (loving-kindness) *sutta*. Hans-Bernd Zöllner explains the monks’ unique contribution: “Whereas the civilians’ walks happened in the mundane sphere and were subject to the very worldly reaction of the authorities, the monks created a sacred space” (2009, 72). While chanting usually takes place in a monastery, the grounds of a pagoda, or a private home, in this case, the monks brought the ritual into public space, and “thus laid claim to the city as a space ruled by the Buddha’s law” (*ibid.*).

Equally important was their choice of chant. The Buddha initially taught his disciples how to chant *mettā* as a protective measure. Some monks had gone into a forest to meditate, but could not concentrate because they were scared of being attacked by wild animals. By focusing their minds and radiating indiscriminating loving-kindness out from their bodies in all directions, they calmed the creatures around them and were able to meditate in peace. In chanting *mettā*, the monks were choosing a method of public action that was acceptably within their purview as members of the religious order. Part of the purpose was to protect them from charges of acting “politically,” in ways that were inappropriate for monks. But, within the classic Saul Alinsky model of political opposition, the monks also chose their tactics to emphasize and amplify an area

⁸ For more detailed descriptions of this act, as well as historical examples of its use, see McCarthy (2008) and Zöllner (2009, 82ff).

of strength: the tangible power of their moral authority.⁹ Key to the logic underlying this choice of protest tactic is the belief that proper moral conduct will have effects on individual and collective circumstances, a central logic of the moral universe that has been described in previous chapters. Unsurprisingly, many monks fervently believed that their chanting would have a tangible effect on the government and the political situation in Myanmar (Wai Moe 2008).

Some, however, saw their spiritual actions as merely the initial step. From this perspective, tangible political and social change would require individuals to use *mettā* to guide their actions in the world. While definitely not representative of the views of all monks in the country, the words of U Pyinnya Zawta, one of the organizers of the demonstrations, reflected the beliefs of many of the monks who participated: “‘We monks must be actively engaged in social issues,’ he said. ‘People in Burma often talk about *mettā* but this is not just a word to chant. It must also be practiced. Everyone in the world needs active *mettā*. Active *mettā* can bring peace to the whole world’” (Wai Moe 2008).

The monks were also making a statement regarding the nature of their opposition to the regime. The *mettā* chant is one of non-discriminating loving-kindness, even to one’s enemies. In fact, we could say that the purpose of cultivating *mettā* is to break down any conceptual distinction between categories such as friend and enemy (in this way, it can also be a *lawkouttara*-oriented practice, designed to reveal the inherent limitations of conceptual thought and the illusory boundaries of self and other). Even though they had criticized the military government for its negligence toward the population and for its violent actions toward monks, the *mettā* chant was an indication of the ultimate, mediating position of the *sangha* as a moral authority oriented toward the health of the *sāsana*. Their opposition was not toward individual members of the government, but for the purpose of ending injustice and suffering; the practice of sending *mettā* was intended as a contrast to more aggressive opposition and reinforced that position of moral authority.

Of course, a balanced analysis must acknowledge that the demonstrations were far from a religious ceremony. Although they discouraged marchers from chanting political slogans, in some places the march began with a gathering in which monks denounced the government over a loudspeaker. While observers disagree whether the monks eventually allowed the laity to join their march or the laity joined without permission, the monks did initially request that lay people

⁹ Alinsky, a famous American community organizer and protest leader, advised dissidents to “never go outside the experience of your own people” (1971, 127).

refrain from joining the demonstrations. On a more superficial note, even a brief perusal of photos and video of the events show a number of angry monks who, one must assume, were probably not meditating on non-discriminating loving-kindness. This is not to criticize the monks or dismiss the spiritual impact of their actions, but merely to acknowledge that, despite their hallowed moral position in society, most monks are themselves *pu htu zin*, bound by the same emotions and weaknesses as all human beings.

The rise of groups like 969 and MaBaTha since 2012 has also seen more direct monastic engagement in electoral politics, more akin to that of the 1950s. These groups began by publicly advocating for their four “religious protection” laws, organizing rallies, protests, and signature campaigns to put pressure on the government and on MPs to pass the laws. After the last of the laws was passed in August 2015, MaBaTha monks became more direct in expressing their views about specific political parties and candidates. The organization compiled an election guide based on parties’ and candidates’ support for the laws and in an interview U Wirathu said, “I am especially grateful to the President, who has enacted the race and religion protection despite international pressure. I heartily welcome President U Thein Sein if he runs for a second term” (Htet Naing Zaw 2015). Over the course of two weeks of nationwide celebrations of the passage of the laws, only months before the election, MaBaTha monks’ rhetoric against the NLD became more strident, with some labeling the NLD an “Islamist” party out to “destroy the race and religion” (Salai Thant Zinn and Zarni Mann 2015).

Indeed, MaBaTha monks presaged their plans to influence Myanmar’s elections in 2013 when the laws were first being developed at a monastic conference in Yangon in June of that year. At the time, a leading monk and member of the *Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee* issued this warning: “I would want to know which representatives turn down the national race protection law when it is proposed [in Parliament] – I will make it so that they get no votes in 2015. A party that doesn’t win votes will end up in the drain” (Hindstrom 2013). What is particularly striking (one might even say brazen) about the actions of these monks is that they not only challenge the general view that monks ought to be disengaged from party politics, they risk running afoul of a constitutional provision and electoral laws that forbid the mixing of religion and politics (Kyaw Phyo Tha 2015). But Burmese monks have developed increasingly sophisticated and nuanced explanations of their engagement with politics, reflecting what I would argue has been a partial redefinition of the monastic vocation.

*Monastic Justifications of Political Engagement*¹⁰

Preservation of the *sāsana* has provided a justification for political engagement by monks, sometimes even including violent or exclusionary actions. The quote from U Wirathu earlier in this chapter demonstrated the way in which he sees the Myanmar nation and national community as inextricably linked with the vitality of the *sāsana*. This reasoning anchored the activism of various Buddhist groups in the first few decades of the twentieth century and has also allowed groups like 969 and MaBaTha to defend a variety of activities that many observers would consider to be explicitly political. A 969 monk made the line of reasoning clear in his response to a September order from the *Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee* that banned the use of the 969 symbol for political purposes: “We don’t take part in political affairs, steal others’ possessions, attack or lie to others. So you cannot say we violate the ethics of a Buddhist monk. We just make our special efforts in order to preserve our race and religion” (May Sitt Paing 2013).

Some monks view monastic political engagement as justified through the particular characteristics of monks, such as their moral and social authority or their training in meditation and controlling desire. Challenging the reasoning that the morally suspect realm of politics would be inappropriate for a monk, some argue that it is their duty, given their greater detachment from worldly affairs, to guide people – especially political leaders – on the right path. Monks are also expected to be less partial and attached to material goods or worldly status (although remember that this is an ideal, one unsurprisingly promoted by monks in these justifications). So one Yangon monk explained that *nain ngan ye* (political) activities could be acceptable for monks if undertaken without attachment¹¹ while another monk leading a monastery outside of Mandalay believed monks could be involved in politics as long as they were not seeking to hold power themselves.¹² These explanations lead us to the question of the intention behind an action, already understood to be an important element in determining its moral quality and effect.

Some monks make allowances for political work if it is motivated by the correct *seī-tat* (spirit or intention), identifying motivations such as working for peace, or working guided by *mettā* (loving-kindness) or *karuna* (compassion). One monk stressed that the ultimate value of any kind of work comes from the *seī-tat* (spirit) with which it is done and the role of a monk is not to carry out political work directly, but to instruct others to

¹⁰ The following section relies heavily on Walton (2015b).

¹¹ Personal interview in Yangon, July 2014.

¹² Personal interview in Mandalay, July 2014.

do so with the correct *seit-tat*.¹³ Other opinions on the proper *seit-tat* consider who is a beneficiary, with one monk arguing that “If you are working for the benefit of all, then as a monk, you are permitted to do *nain ngan ye*.”¹⁴

Others see this spirit as being even more intimately connected to the spiritual mission of monks, to draw people’s attention to mind as the source of all *dukkha* (suffering) in society or to help laypeople in eliminating the defilements of *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha* (greed, anger, and ignorance).¹⁵ But one monk’s interpretation of the role of these three defilements actually circumscribes the monastic role in political engagement. He argued that, unless one had already made progress in reducing one’s own *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*, one could not be effective in helping others to do so, giving a reminder of what he saw as the primary role of a monk in attending to his own spiritual development.¹⁶

Another way that monks have thought through their political engagement is to consider how it accords with proper monastic vocation. One monk from a teaching monastery outside of Yangon opined that, with politics as with any other activity, it could be acceptable as long as it didn’t become a *profession*, since monks already have a profession.¹⁷ According to him, most areas of politics, especially those related to governance, ought to be reserved for the government. But monks could (and should) be involved through education (historically accepted in Myanmar as an appropriate venue for monks) and by teaching people how to do politics morally – that is, how and why they should follow the laws. One of the young monastic organizers of some of the 2007 demonstrations, who now lives in exile outside of Myanmar, argued along similar lines that, if monks were to fulfill their traditional role as both educators and moral guides, they needed to study and understand politics themselves, in order to be able to advise the laity in this area.¹⁸

In considering the question of monastic vocation, it is important to make an additional qualifier about monks who engage with politics, whatever the method. As one monk who is the rector of a teaching monastery just outside of Yangon reminded me, even when a monk engages with politics, it is still likely only a small part of his daily monastic work.¹⁹ So, Sitagu Sayadaw, who we have already considered as a politically engaged monk, spends most of his time reading, teaching,

¹³ Personal interview in Mandalay, July 2014.

¹⁴ Personal interview in Yangon, July 2014.

¹⁵ Personal interviews in Yangon and Mandalay, July 2014.

¹⁶ Personal interview in Yangon, July 2014.

¹⁷ Personal interview in Yangon, July 2014.

¹⁸ Personal interview in Mae Sot, August 2011.

¹⁹ Personal interview in Yangon, July 2014.

writing, meditating, or managing other parts of his network of monastic schools, hospitals, and other sites; this would likely apply to other monks, even those who organized and participated in the 2007 demonstrations. The one potential exception to this might be those 969 and MaBaTha monks who have effectively equated their political activities with the defense of the *sāsana*. We might consider these monks to be creatively expanding the definition of “politics” in a different way than General Aung San or the people considered in the following section who see their social work to be political engagement. From this perspective, *sāsana*-building activities could have political implications, depending on the context, while explicitly political activities such as campaigning for a party or candidate would be effectively rebranded as *sāsana*-protection (and thus made acceptable for monks).

Monastic involvement with political issues, whether supporting government policy in electoral campaigns, challenging government authority through mass ritual action, or advising the laity on the proper moral orientation toward the political realm further blurs the line between *lawki* and *lawkouttara*. The moral authority that monks possess comes from a *lawkouttara* orientation. While individual monks can acquire more of this spiritual charisma through their pious or scholarly conduct, it adheres in some degree to every member of the order as a result of the fundamental change in their state that occurs when they take vows and put on their robes. Despite the theoretical separation of monks from the laity (reinforced by many scholars, but also by monks and lay people who wish to emphasize and preserve the “purity” of the institution), the liminal position of monks and their necessary proximity to the lay community preserves them in a space between *lawki* and *lawkouttara* and thus, often engaged in some fashion in “politics.” In addition to more avowedly political activities such as protests, monks have joined with lay people in conducting social welfare projects, a practice increasingly understood by its adherents to be a form of political participation.

Parahita (Social Work) as Political Participation

Theravāda Buddhism has long been haunted by the criticism that its doctrine of liberation through individual effort promotes an inherently selfish attitude toward society.²⁰ Many colonial scholars and administrators leveled this claim, but it has also come from Mahāyāna Buddhists

²⁰ The previously dominant classification system distinguished between Mahāyāna and Hinayāna (now commonly referred to as “Theravāda”) but betrayed a preference for the “great vehicle” of the Mahāyāna as opposed to the derogatory “lesser vehicle” of the Hinayāna, based on an assessment of Hinayāna as self-oriented.

who emphasize the superiority of their branch in promoting compassion for others. Burmese Buddhist culture, however, has long had a tradition of social welfare engagement, often expressed through the Pāli-derived term *parahita*, which refers to the good or welfare of others. Historically this practice was localized, with communities taking responsibility for the well-being of their own members or of individuals and families that had fallen on hard times. Some Burmese Buddhists began to expand the concept around the turn of the twentieth century, forming larger groups and networks that channeled *parahita* work through Buddhist social organizations.

Buddhist organizations in Burma during the colonial period conducted a wide variety of social activities. Alicia Turner describes the gradual shift in focus from the local to the national and from practices common to the laity to those previously reserved for monks: “[These organizations] transformed from groups who would gather to recite precepts to organizations designed for study and debate, from those responsible for organizing local festivals to those who organized Pāli examinations and schools” across the country (2014, 19). Monks like Ledi Sayadaw established lay Buddhist associations across the country that took direct responsibility for the propagation of the *sāsana* through religious study groups that tackled subjects previously reserved for senior monks, such as the *abhidhamma* (Bur. *abhidama*, Buddhist philosophy of existence) (Braun 2013).

Slowly, some of these groups began to conceptualize their work in explicitly political and nationalist terms. Many local and regional Buddhist groups joined rural *wunthanu* (patriotic association) networks, linked to the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), which was increasingly engaged in political issues by the 1920s. A history of the *wunthanu* revolution written by Thakin Ba Maung (1975) locates its origins in the creation of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), the group that began as a religious and cultural welfare organization before a faction founded the GCBA following an internal debate in 1919 over whether the group should involve itself in political issues (Schober 2007). Activities in support of the *sāsana*, including *parahita* donations, gradually acquired political implications as part of the work necessary to strengthen the nation and achieve independence.

Within the moral universe that anchors this study, *Theravāda* Buddhists tend to think of religious donations (*dana*) as acts that support the *sāsana*, but that bring merit (*kutho*) only for the donating individual in the future.²¹ Since the beginning of the twentieth century, however,

²¹ The significant exception to this general rule is the common practice among Southeast Asian Buddhists of “sharing merit.” Thought to compound the *kutho* that is generated – because it promotes selflessness in the redistribution of that merit – Burmese merit-making activities have the sharing of merit built into their ritual language. Keyes and

a discourse has gradually emerged that values social donations (*parahita dana*) as contributing to national development. As part of the state’s *Pyidawtha* plan, U Nu appealed “to the strong Burmese tradition of charity (*a-hlu*) which, in the past, has been applied largely to religious ends: in particular, it has been the aspiration of every well-disposed and wealthy Burman to be a *paya-taga* (temple builder). Now, it is hoped to persuade the people that merit can be acquired through devoting their resources and their energies to the building of works of social benefit” (quoted in Tinker 1957, 129). Prominent individuals suggested that social donations (those that did not go to materially supporting monks or to the direct propagation of the *sāsana*) could generate similar (or even greater) amounts of merit than religious donations.²² E.M. Mendelson noted in 1975 that “the whole nature of Burmese society might well be changed if Burmese changed their views about what actions constituted meritorious deeds” and connected this transition to the interaction of Buddhism and Socialism in the philosophy of the country’s leaders: “The whole atmosphere of the Buddhist Revival taken together with the Socialist programs instituted by U Nu’s government did perhaps suggest that Buddhism and socialism could be conjugated to the extent of making social service a part of the acquisition of merit” (1975, 310). The restrictions that the military government put on citizens’ activities after the coup in 1962 limited this potential for much of the past fifty years, although monks and lay people have again begun to revalue social donations in contemporary Myanmar (Jacquet and Walton 2013).

One contemporary monk, a teacher at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon, attributed the shift in popular attitudes toward social donations to the efforts of the Mingun Sayadaw in the decades following independence.²³ Renowned primarily for his awe-inspiring memory (he had allegedly memorized the entire 16,000 pages of the Burmese *tipitaka*, the *Theravāda* scriptures), Mingun Sayadaw was able to build a university and create a number of social service organizations in the area around his monastery as a result of donations. The monk I interviewed defined *parahita* as “social assistance,” and attributed the gradual transformation in donation practices among Burmese Buddhists to monks putting more emphasis on these activities in their sermons and

Daniel (1983) discuss other practices of sharing merit and the explanations that Southeast Asian Buddhists give for the practice.

²² There was, however, a counterargument put forward by some monks. An Australian Buddhist named U Ohn Ghine, who had taken monastic vows in Burma, spoke out strongly against monastic involvement in social service, arguing that the calling of a monk was to a higher type of work (cited in Mendelson 1975, 310). He also disputed the conceptualization of *parahita* as “social work.”

²³ Personal interview in Yangon; July 6, 2011.

writings, after the example of Mingun Sayadaw. Indeed, in public sermons given in 2011 by Sitagu Sayadaw and Myitta Shin U Zawana, I heard both monks dedicate at least the first thirty minutes of their talks to sharing anecdotes from their own *parahita* activities, connecting the lessons to the broader themes of their sermons.²⁴

Sitagu Sayadaw has directly attributed the paucity of social donations to the *Theravāda* form of Buddhism practiced in Myanmar. Accepting the common characterization of the two schools of Buddhism described above, he ascribed a concern for compassion and social work to Mahāyāna Buddhism, whereas *Theravāda* was more focused on making merit through meditation. He said that “Meditating in a room with the doors shut won’t help the [cyclone] victims suffering over there. But most Burmese who traditionally believe in *Theravāda* don’t appreciate the need for compassionate action. That is why I am talking about it to people every day. It is essential to make social merit [*parahita*] stronger” (quoted in Kyaw Zwa Moe 2008). Despite the seemingly disparaging comments about his coreligionists, Sitagu Sayadaw is in fact at the forefront of what appears to be a trend of increasing social donations among Buddhists in Myanmar. Not only that, he seems to be attempting to transform (or at least, reprioritize) certain Burmese Buddhist practices to emphasize the value of merit gained through social, rather than religious, donations.²⁵

Guillaume Rozenberg has noted the important role of monks in Myanmar as conduits of *dana*, whether religious or social (2010, Chapter 4). Because monks continue to exist as “fields of merit” (meaning that lay people can gain merit by donating to monks), their voices have been among the most influential in transforming lay donation practices. One characteristic of *dana* practice in Myanmar is that many people calculate the amount of merit generated according to the moral standing of the recipient. By this reasoning, giving to a monk would generate more merit than giving to an HIV-positive orphan. Some have directly challenged this logic, such as a monk who cofounded a prominent orphanage and school in Mandalay and who explained to me that he taught lay people that the benefit of a donation was proportional to the overall amount of need of the recipient and whether or not the donation addressed a real need.²⁶ Other monks, recognizing the persistence of

²⁴ Sitagu Sayadaw, public sermon given at Dawpone Myoneh Stadium (Yangon) on February 13, 2011; Zawana, public sermon given at the Thirty-fourth Street *Taya Pwe* (Yangon) on February 1, 2011.

²⁵ Sitagu does not, however, discourage religious donations and is also active in creating and supporting organizations that explicitly promote the Buddhist *sāsana*, such as his Association for the Preservation of *Theravāda* Buddhism. He was also a senior founding member of MaBaTha but has often minimized his association with the group.

²⁶ Personal interview in Yangon; July 3, 2011.

the traditional interpretation, see value in positioning themselves as both recipients and distributors of donations. This model accomplishes several things. First, it strengthens the position of monks as moral exemplars in Buddhist society. Second, while acknowledging people’s beliefs regarding donation and merit, it creates a donation system that can address the needs of the most disadvantaged.²⁷ Most importantly, while helping to institutionalize these mediated social donation practices among the public, monks can preach about the moral benefits of *parahita* donations, providing justification for the continuation of these practices, even without direct monastic participation.²⁸

One young Buddhist man in his mid-twenties who lived in a suburb of Yangon and was active in a Buddhist youth organization, told me that his family had been almost exclusively giving *parahita* donations for at least the past five years.²⁹ Influenced by the preaching of monks such as Sitagu Sayadaw and Myitta Shin U Zawana, he and his family joined with their friends and neighbors to go on almost weekly trips to hospitals, clinics, and orphanages in the area to make donations of medicine, money, and other materials. He explained that the merit that came from these *parahita* donations was greater because the recipients were in desperate need and were not receiving assistance from others, as the monks were. He viewed *parahita* donations not only as contributing to the development of the country, but as inherently political because they were tasks the government ought to be fulfilling, but wasn’t. This reasoning is similar to that expressed by members of various NGOs that I interviewed in 2011. Several Buddhist members of an organization that supports people living with HIV/AIDS suggested that *parahita* donations and activities have increased recently because the suffering of the people has increased dramatically under the military government.³⁰ They also believed that, while the actions of prominent monks had undoubtedly helped the transformation, the impetus for a change in donation practices had come from the public and was fostered by a growth in civil society organizations that

²⁷ The monk who teaches at the Buddhist University in Yangon expressed his belief that, without the organizing, distributional role played by prominent monks such as the Sitagu, Mingun, or Thamanya Sayadaws, many Buddhists would not contribute to these important social causes (Personal interview in Yangon; July 6, 2011).

²⁸ Some, however, continue to express concern regarding the institutionalization of *parahita* donation practices. Rozenberg notes that the survival of the material work of prominent monks is always difficult (2010, 155–6). The vast empire of monastic education and social service provision created by the Mingun Sayadaw has virtually disintegrated in the almost two decades since his passing. Others have worried that a similar process will occur with the projects of Thamanya Sayadaw (who died in 2003) and the work of Sitagu Sayadaw after his death (Tosa 2009, 260).

²⁹ Personal interview in Yangon; June 29, 2011.

³⁰ Group interview in Yangon; July 1, 2011.

presented their actions as compensating for the inattention or mismanagement of the government. This suggests a more complex calculus of donations as well as causal factors influencing people's decisions regarding social and religious donation.

The former military government undoubtedly saw the rise of social service organizations led by both monks and lay people as a potential challenge to its political rule. Scholars have documented the ways in which the government has attempted to assert its control over the projects of monks by offering religious titles and material support (Schober 1997, Kawanami 2009, Rozenberg 2010). Government restriction of citizen participation in relief work after Cyclone Nargis in 2008 was also an attempt to channel social services through the state, although their mismanagement of the process may have ironically pushed more citizens toward working through more independent civil society organizations and also may have encouraged them to see their *parahita* activities as having political implications (Center for Peace and Conflict Studies 2009).

A Burmese teacher taking part in community development training in Chiang Mai in 2011 flatly declared that *parahita* social work was undoubtedly political participation, although she knew that many people didn't see it that way.³¹ This type of work, she said, was not the negative type of *nain ngan ye* ("politics") associated with elections and government corruption; it was an intervention into the cycle of cause and effect (Pāli *paṭicca-samuppāda*, Bur. *padeitsa thamoutpa*). She considered that a weak economy came from a bad political system and resulted in low standards of moral practice among the citizens, while improper moral practice ensured a sluggish economy and disempowered people to work to change the government. Understood within the model of the moral universe described throughout this book, social work was an intervention that would produce effects that resonated in both directions of the multi-dimensional framework of cause and effect, raising moral standards in the community which would eventually result in a better government and healthier economy. All of these outcomes also contributed to strengthening the *sāsana*.

While a number of Buddhists in Myanmar certainly frame their social work as being a form of political engagement, it is unclear whether this represents a trend of emerging "socially engaged" Buddhism in the country as Schober (2011) suggests.³² Even with support from prominent monks and societal icons, there is still limited data available to be able to

³¹ Group interview in Chiang Mai; March 1, 2011.

³² See Jaquet and Walton (2013) for a skeptical view.

gauge changes in people’s practices (including whether or not it extends beyond economically better-off urban populations) as well as the motivations for and perceptions of *parahita* work. The editors of a collection of essays on “engaged Buddhism” have described the movement as a shift from a *lokuttara* [Bur. *lawkouttara*] to a *lokiya* [Bur. *lawki*] definition of liberation (Queen and King 1996, ix). I would argue that, instead, the Burmese Buddhist engagement with social concerns reflects a deepening (yet still evolving) consideration of the complex interrelationship between the *lawki* and *lawkouttara* realms.

For some, *parahita* work has been an opportunity to participate in political transformation under restricted circumstances but for others it marks a mode of engagement that has long characterized religious and social action and is also beginning to shape political engagement. In a study of social and political activism in Taungoo (a city located about two thirds of the way between Yangon and Naypyitaw), Gerard McCarthy finds that people’s work is both motivated by and evaluated according to *parahita seit* (here *seit* would imply “attitude” or “mindset,” although McCarthy roughly translates it as “social consciousness”) (2015). He sees these groups as seeking to infuse a Buddhist social morality into their volunteer activities, having already taken over many responsibilities that might be expected of a modern nation-state but which the Burmese government has generally neglected to fulfill. Worryingly, McCarthy also notes in this *parahita seit* discourse a tendency to paint non-Buddhists (and especially, since 2012, Muslims) as not possessing the desired moral orientation and suggests that the practice could not only have the power to motivate compassionate social action but also widen interreligious social cleavages. *Parahita* is thus important as a relevant and influential alternate conception of political participation among Burmese Buddhists and one that is likely to continue to have implications for the country’s evolving politics.

Individual Moral Practice as Political Participation

There is another type of activity undertaken by Buddhists in Myanmar that is not always conceptualized as being related to politics, yet I would argue functions as a form of political participation. In [Chapter 3](#), I explained how Burmese Buddhists have understood the success and development of a political community to depend to some degree on the moral conduct of its leaders and (more recently) its citizens. Some saw the latter as merely passive followers whose behavior was entirely dependent on that of the leadership, but others reasoned (particularly after the fall of the monarchy in 1885) that political independence brought with it

conditions in which each person was not only responsible for the consequences of his or her own actions, but for the effects those actions had on the prosperity of the community as a whole. If individual and collective moral behavior can affect the circumstances of a group, it follows that actions undertaken to strengthen individual moral conduct can also be seen as a type of political engagement, designed to uplift the community as a whole.³³

Gustaaf Houtman attributed to the nineteenth-century minister U Hpo Hlaing “new ideas of law that see the individual as the ultimate self-responsible agent in society, capable of realizing *anattā* and attaining *nibbāna* through *vipassanā*” (Houtman 1999, 89). While in some instances U Hpo Hlaing demarcated the *lawki* from the *lawkouttara*, he also recognized the need for morally conscious action by individuals at every level of society, from peasants all the way to the king. Houtman may have slightly overstated the extent of political inclusiveness of U Hpo Hlaing’s perspective on the individual as a completely self-responsible agent, but as evidenced in the [previous chapter](#), many Burmese nationalists argued that political freedom – which would emancipate the Burmese from colonial domination and allow them to be self-responsible agents – was a necessary condition for progress on the spiritual path. Similarly, effort put toward one’s individual moral improvement would also have tangible effects in the political realm.

For example, at a moment of crisis in Burmese politics, during the Communist and ethnic insurrections of 1949 that almost overwhelmed the fledgling Burmese government, some commentators attempted to keep the focus on the role of moral conduct in the country’s struggles. In an editorial on the deplorable state of affairs in Burma one year after independence, the editors of the English language newspaper *The Burman* suggested that both the source of and solution to the country’s problems could be found not in party politics, but in each individual. “Our country is enmeshed in a vicious ideological struggle and as such the issue must be decided by the finer qualities in every citizen of Burma. The actual battlefields are not only in Insein, Nyaunglebin, Mandalay, or Moulmein, but in our own hearts” (April 29, 1949b, 2). A year earlier, in a 1948 radio broadcast, U Ba Lwin, the superintendent of a high school, had used the same reasoning. He turned peoples’ criticism of government back on themselves, saying, “I feel that our own personal Government needs checking up first. Are we governed by greed, hatred, pride, suspicion, and ill-will? . . . Spiritual mobilization is the need of the hour” (Burma 1950, 76).

³³ This is also a theme that runs throughout Alicia Turner’s analysis of Buddhist organizing in Burma from 1890 to 1920 (2014).

Not only would attention to individual moral conduct contribute to the resolution of the country’s political problems, it would also lead to economic growth because “Moral recovery is essentially the forerunner of economic recovery” (ibid., 77).

Almost a year before Ne Win’s military coup in 1962 ended the brief parliamentary period in Burma, the anthropologist Winston King wrote: “Perhaps most Buddhists do not take literally, or fully believe in, the power of naked, defenseless good will to turn back physical onslaughts – of which so many instances are to be found in their own scriptures – but they do take most seriously the generally great effectiveness of mind over matter, benevolence over malevolence, and love over hatred” (King 1961, 162). He also noted the ways in which some Burmese Buddhists, in the decade after independence, were attempting to replace stagnant, traditional interpretations of Buddhist concepts with what they called “activated” reinterpretations. He gave the example of *upekkhā* (equanimity), which many people have understood as neutrality and which critics of the time contended fostered resignation to existing oppressive conditions and inequalities. According to the reinterpretation of King’s informants, “in exercising equanimity one should give himself to the public good, should fulfill his duties as head of a family, member of a community, or citizen of a nation, but detachedly, i.e. disinterestedly, without dangerous or fanatical emotionalism, without expecting personal reward or greatness, and with the public good supremely in mind” (ibid., 161). This was not only a new way of understanding one of the highest qualities in Theravāda Buddhism;³⁴ it was also an attempt at using Buddhist teachings to think about a different way of engaging in politics.

In more recent years, the monk Ashin Thittila presented individual moral practice not merely as a complement to political participation, but as the only kind of political action that would lead to world peace and harmony. He insisted that, “For all the wheels to revolve in harmony the highest good in each must be developed; this is possible by the performance of daily duties with kindness, courtesy, and truthfulness” (1987, 55). Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has also discussed both the challenge and the importance of individual moral practice for political actors. She remarked, “. . . isn’t there a saying that ‘It is far more difficult to conquer yourself than to conquer the rest of the world?’ So, I think the taming of one’s own passions, in the Buddhist way of thinking, is the chief way to greatness, no matter what the circumstances may be” (1997, 162). All of

³⁴ *Upekkhā* (equanimity), along with *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *mudīta* (sympathetic joy) is one of the four *brahmavihāras* (Bur. *byama-so taya*), the highest states of mental cultivation.

these observers saw proper moral conduct at the level of the individual as the only way to build a foundation for political reconciliation and prosperity.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi reflected on her political philosophy in a similar way after a 1996 trip to visit the prominent monk Thamanya Sayadaw, famous for creating a zone of peace in the midst of conflict in the Eastern Karen State. She remarked that, “Some have questioned the appropriateness of talking about such matters as *mettā* [loving-kindness, Bur. *myitta*] and *thissa* [truth, Bur. *thitsa*] in the political context. But politics is about people and what we had seen in Thamanya proved that love and truth can move people more strongly than any form of coercion” (1997, 16). In the past, she has frequently talked about the role of *mettā* in guiding her resistance against the military government, similar to the monks’ choice to use a mass recitation of the *sutta* in their 2007 demonstrations. In fact, the authorities considered this to be a threatening enough action that, nearly two years after the demonstrations, they prevented a group of monks from a public recitation of the *sutta*, although ironically, the state-run *New Light of Myanmar* contained an article the same day that recounted the benefits of chanting it (Arkar Moe 2009).

Connecting moral practice to politics can emphasize characteristics of political actors or methods of political participation that are not commonly part of political discussions. One prominent Burmese monk whose books are widely read in Myanmar had a unique and creative perspective on the Ten Duties of the King as a list of expectations for a moral ruler. During an interview he mentioned the Ten Duties as a way to evaluate citizen participation in politics.³⁵ I asked how he could make this conceptual jump, since the dominant interpretation of the Ten Duties is as characteristics for an ideal *leader*, not citizens in general. The phrase in Burmese is “*min* (king) *gyint* (conduct/practice) *taya* (laws/rules).” Using a clever play on the Burmese words for “king” and “you” (which are homonyms) he explained that they were not simply rules for a king (*min*). They were also *min gyint taya* (and here he pointed to me, meaning “rules of ideal conduct for you”) which necessarily entails *nga gyint taya* (pointing to himself, meaning “rules of ideal conduct for me”). His insightful play on words is consistent with Burmese Buddhist efforts to expand traditional conceptions of politics to be relevant for a contemporary, participatory democratic system while still retaining continuity with respected ideas deeply rooted in Buddhism wisdom.

Some Burmese Buddhists have responded to perceived pettiness and factionalism in electoral politics by turning to focus on their own moral

³⁵ Personal interview in Baltimore, MD; May 18, 2012.

conduct. One Burmese scholar claimed that the rapid increase in the lay practice of *vipassanā* meditation in the early twentieth century was a response to growing disappointment in the conduct of political leaders at the time (Maung Maung 1980). Others, including some of the political activists from 1988, had limited options for political engagement once they were imprisoned after the protests. Aung San Suu Kyi explained the reasoning that compelled many of them to begin to focus on individual moral practice: “For example, a lot of [political prisoners from the NLD] meditate when they’re in prison, partly because they have the time, and partly because it’s a very sensible thing to do. That is to say that if you have no contact with the outside world, and you can’t do anything for it, then you do what you can with the world inside you in order to bring it under proper control” (1997, 162).

One should not forget that, even as this discourse regarding moral practice has opened up new avenues for political action in the context of repression, it has also continued to function both as a differentiating mechanism and as a disciplinary tool. Burmese Buddhists have used, claimed, or presumed meditational attainment to enhance their social status, comparing their progress on the path to enlightenment with their neighbors’ just as in any other worldly competition (Jordt 2007). I have argued that the trope of “unity” has also functioned as an evaluative moral concept and disciplining tool, constructed on the assumption that those who threaten unity do so because they are enslaved to selfish and individualistic desires and unable to see or work for the benefit of the community (Walton 2015a). Those who control the discourse on unity (whether military generals, elected officials, or leaders of political organizations) position themselves as morally superior; they see themselves as capable of overcoming their desires, even sacrificing individual interests, to realize a goal that will benefit all.

It is also worth noting that this type of moral action, while understood by many to have political effects, can also be seen as a type of antipolitics, of withdrawal from the political sphere. From this perspective, the retreat into a space of private, personal action undermines the essentially public and collective nature of politics. The argument that individual moral action can have collective political results is in this case rooted in a Buddhist understanding of cause and effect, requiring faith in the overall moral framework in lieu of tangible justification, since the workings of cause and effect are beyond human comprehension. Certainly the generals who ruled Myanmar in past decades preferred opposition against them to be in the form of activists meditating in prison rather than demonstrating on the streets, but those who believe in this form of activism would argue that they are working for a deeper and more lasting

societal transformation, that necessarily begins at the level of the individual.

Conclusion

What constitutes political participation in the contemporary Burmese worldview? For most Burmese, politics obviously includes practices such as voting, protesting, signing a petition, or taking part in an advocacy campaign. The space for this type of public participation has expanded significantly since 2011, although the degree of freedom to participate in conventional political ways still varies widely across the country. Changes have been more apparent in urban areas and in the central, ethnic Burman-dominated parts of the country, but even there, activists continue to be jailed and harassed for engaging in more critical public actions. This is likely to decrease under the new NLD-led government, but is unlikely to disappear, as the military continues to control the police and much of the bureaucracy and judiciary.

In addition to the remaining legal and institutional impediments to broader political participation, several persistent and compelling narratives – all connected in some way to underlying Buddhist ideas – discourage participation. Concern regarding the inherent moral weakness of *puhtu zin* leads to skepticism regarding the efficacy of mass political participation. A long tradition critical of party politics is rooted in frustration with overly personalized politics and the belief that the proliferation of parties is an indication of disunity and self-centeredness. And from a *lawkountara* perspective, any engagement with the political realm could be antithetical to one's moral development, reinforcing the common idea that politics is a dirty, worldly undertaking.

Burmese Buddhist political actors have also developed arguments that expand the space for political participation, both by reformulating the *puhtu zin* narrative and by expanding the notion of political participation itself. A number of commentators have extrapolated from Buddhist ideas about human nature, *kan*, selflessness, and moral worthiness to imply that, if political problems emerge from inherent human weaknesses, not only should political decision-making be a collective enterprise, but moral development ought to be a priority for individuals seeking to participate in politics. Monks have also creatively reinterpreted the dictates of their vocation, arguing that in some cases they have particular characteristics suited for certain types of political engagement or that their religious and societal roles require them to enter the political realm. Burmese commonly undertake *parahita* (social work) and increasingly view it as an important *political* intervention. And Buddhist beliefs regarding the

connection between individual and collective action in the moral and political spheres have led some Burmese to view moral practice itself as a form of effective political participation.

Building on this idea, some Burmese Buddhists have also responded to their disappointment with electoral politics or to government-imposed impediments to participation by withdrawing from politics to focus on individual moral practice or meditation. In some cases, this withdrawal has been voluntary, while in others it has been the result of imprisonment. The reasoning in both cases, however, is the same: the logic of *kan* dictates that the proper moral conduct of an individual can have fruitful results at a collective level. That is, even though one might not be free to do electoral politics, one’s moral practice can affect the political situation of the community.

This range of views on political participation is also reflected in different Burmese conceptions of democracy. The idea that human beings ought to be free to create their own destiny and be considered autonomous political agents informs a narrative that generally conforms to a liberal, rights-based democratic theory. Concern regarding the moral deficiencies of the *pu htu zin* anchors the idea of a “discipline-flourishing” democracy, most often attributed to the military and the current government, but also present in the democratic discourse of opposition and monastic actors. And the notion that politics is an inherently moral activity gives rise to a relatively unique set of Burmese perspectives that I term “moral democracy.” These three conceptions of democracy form the basis of the [following chapter](#).

6 Discipline, Rights, and Morality: “Democracy” in Contemporary Myanmar

Chapter 2 began with a quote from a public sermon given by the Burmese monk Ashin Eindaga in 2011: “Democracy means acting in accordance with *taya*.”¹ That chapter laid out the various elements of the moral universe that I argue gives necessary context to the monk’s claim and allows for the navigation of multiple ways of understanding a notion such as *taya*. Here I return to the monk’s idea to interpret it further and to compare it with other conceptions of democracy that circulate in contemporary Myanmar. Since the political transition installed a quasi-civilian government in March 2011, the rhetoric of political figures not only in the opposition but also from the government and military has been suffused with references to democracy, yet what these groups have in mind when they speak of democracy is sometimes less clear. Because these varied (and sometimes overlapping) Burmese conceptions of democracy do not always clearly map onto Western, English language democratic models, an understanding of the logical framework of the moral universe is necessary in order to fully appreciate their nuances and implications.

Political discourse in Burma during the first half of the twentieth century was lively, with people espousing varying conceptions of democracy, drawing from Buddhist teachings, Marxism and liberalism. In contrast, during almost fifty years of military rule, the authorities severely curtailed public discourse and debate; until 2011, Burmese people had limited opportunities and outlets to discuss their ideas about democratic politics. Those who have talked about democracy since the beginning of the twentieth century have drawn from Western models, emphasizing freedom, participation, and the protection of basic human rights. However, they have also crafted their arguments using Buddhist concepts and values, with some attempting to cast democratic practice as an inherent part of Buddhist teachings. Others have developed arguments to *limit* democracy, couched either in skepticism of the ability of people to

¹ Ashin Eindaga, public sermon, Yangon, January 31, 2011.

effectively govern themselves (explored in the [previous chapter](#)) or concerns regarding the negative effects of too much freedom. Even those who have explicitly espoused a more secular democracy have usually done so in ways that I argue are consistent with the logic and reasoning of the [Theravāda](#) moral universe they inhabit.

In this chapter, I delineate three broad conceptions of democracy that circulate among Burmese Buddhists. The first, “Disciplined Democracy,” is rooted in a notion of discipline, most commonly associated with the former military government and the USDP government that ruled from 2011 to 2016, but also present in some form in the democratic rhetoric of opposition parties and of monks. The second is most familiar to Western audiences, an understanding of democracy that draws on some liberal arguments regarding rights and freedoms that I term “Rights-Based Democracy.” Again, this conception of democracy is not simply limited to the opposition, but is also found in monastic and military/USDP positions. Finally, a third category, that I call “Moral Democracy,” reflects reasoning about democratic values and practices that often makes explicit reference to Buddhist principles. This conception has affinities with both of the previous categories but also contains potentially innovative insights into the purposes and possibilities of democracy as well as potential impediments to participation.

These three categories are posited as heuristic devices for outlining certain perspectives on democracy and should not be taken as discrete or solely identified with particular groups.² As the analysis below demonstrates, most of the main political groupings in Myanmar (and here we could include the military, the former ruling party, the NLD and the broader democratic opposition, the ethnic groups, and the monastics) have endorsed aspects of all three categories.³ After considering each of the categories in turn, I look at how one prominent political figure, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has made statements in recent years that accord with all three. One conclusion is that political actors in Myanmar (like those in other places) are likely to hold multiple perspectives on democracy and that the study of political attitudes and positions ought to take this into consideration. Another point that situates the analysis in this chapter in relation to the overall argument of the book is that the three perspectives

² These three categories are certainly not the only ones that might be usefully applied in distinguishing Burmese conceptions of democracy. Another categorization that at least partly overlaps with mine is provided by Tamas Wells and includes “modern,” “moral,” and “reformed” notions of democracy (Wells 2014 and 2016). I consider some of his categories in comparison to mine later in the chapter.

³ Even these groupings are becoming increasingly anachronistic, as each exhibits more and more diversity of perspectives within themselves and as political allegiances and partnerships shift according to changing political opportunity structures in the country.

I identify in this chapter (among new perspectives developing even now among Myanmar’s population) have often been articulated with reference to Buddhist ideas and values or are rooted in Buddhist moral understandings of the world. Before turning to Burmese ideas about democracy, I introduce some theories that inform the analysis in this chapter, drawn from scholarship on democracy in non-Western contexts.

Studying “Democracy” Around the World

During the 1990s, Asian political leaders such as former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew argued that Asian cultural traditions (most prominently Confucianism) generated a set of values specific to Asian countries that were in conflict with some values of the West (Zakaria and Lee Kuan Yew 1994). Since that time, scholars have mostly dismissed these “Asian values” arguments as thinly veiled excuses for continued authoritarian practices.⁴ Often lost in this dismissal, however, has been the valid insight that, while the specific arguments of “Asian values” proponents may have been overly generalized mischaracterizations of “Asian” culture, religious and cultural values do shape people’s conceptions of politics and the resonance that particular models of governance have with their worldviews. Some scholars have tried to identify and categorize Asian values, such as patrimonialism, personalism, and a deference to authority, to show how they combined to form an “Asian-style democracy” (Neher 1994). Others have contested that categorization, arguing that these regimes did not deserve the label of “democracy” since they had simply failed to fully transition to democracy (Hood 1998). There are good reasons to be skeptical of general labels such as “Asian-style democracy” since, even within Myanmar, people have expressed a broad range of interpretations of politics. Democracy is not a unitary or universal concept; instead, it is an idea formulated and put into practice in different places using locally shared cultural or religious values.

Democratization rarely occurs in a straightforward, linear fashion, as was once suggested by modernization theorists. As Myanmar is only just emerging from decades of managed, authoritarian control that has also been marked by persistent civil conflict, it is not surprising that demands for increased democratic freedoms are sometimes tempered by concerns regarding stability. Similarly, Ann Frechette has described the gradual process of democratization among Tibetans in exile as a “muddling

⁴ See Sen (1997) for a strong rejection of the Asian values argument, including the problematic specification of “Asian” and “Western” as well as the argument that “Asian values” are also present in Western cultures.

through” rather than a linear trajectory (2007). Younger generations of Tibetans have regularly pushed for a greater voice in the government-in-exile’s political affairs while others have resisted attempts at expanding participation and representation, citing the importance of unity and order, particularly for a weak political entity in a precarious position on the world stage. This ideological debate is not unlike the clash between the disciplined and rights-based conceptions of democracy that I describe in this chapter, reflecting different approaches to democracy, based on different ordering of values.

Although the rights-based democratic perspective of this chapter aligns for the most part with Western liberal ideals, concepts such as democracy are not necessarily imported whole cloth from the West in non-Western places. In her insightful study of the range of interpretations of both civil society and democracy in Arab countries, Michelle Browers focuses on the transformative possibilities of moments of “transculturation,” those times when “distinct cultures reciprocally impact each other – thought not usually from equal positions of power – to produce not a single syncretic culture but rather heterogeneity” (2006, 12–13). As I have done with concepts of liberation and political participation, Browers tracks different conceptions of civil society among liberal, Islamist, and Socialist Arab communities, recognizing that the different interpretations are drawn together through a “common store of concepts” (91). She concludes that these moments of transculturation can lead to new ways of imagining concepts that are understood and deployed within different cultural contexts. I see the same possibilities in the discourse on “democracy” in contemporary Myanmar as differently positioned groups struggle to define the boundaries, content, and implementation of the concept. I also argue that they do so in ways that are consistent with the logic of the moral universe that these actors inhabit.

Interpretations of democracy also depend on one’s position in relation to power. Frederic Schaffer’s study of conceptions of democracy in Senegal shows how members of the ruling party see democracy (or the more commonly used Wolof word *demokaraasi*) as the right of political parties to organize and, after an electoral victory, to control the government (1998). Unsurprisingly, opposition parties’ understanding of the concept focuses more on fair rules of electoral competition and the possibility of electoral turnover. In addition, popular ideas of democracy have been shaped by its association with indigenous concepts including *fal* and *folli* (communality and harmony) and *nguur*, which implies a broad distribution of material benefits. In noting the ways in which *demokaraasi* appears to be a distinct concept from democracy, Schaffer suggests that Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances allows us to acknowledge

the similarity between the terms while recognizing that there may be variations in both conceptualization and implementation, depending on the context.

What is central to all of these analyses of democracy in non-Western contexts is that groups and individuals are struggling to define and implement democracy in ways that are consistent with their own political experiences and their own worldviews (Frechette 2007). However, consistency within a worldview does not imply unity of belief or interpretation. Just as different conceptions of democracy exist within the Western political tradition, different groups in Myanmar are developing their own ideas of what democracy means. They have done this at the confluence of several factors, including encounters with Western conceptions of democracy, exposure to non-Western ideas about democracy, reflections on their own political experiences, and finally, engagement with Buddhist beliefs and practices, which provide a moral context for thinking about politics.

My intention in this chapter is not to evaluate whether any of these conceptions of democracy are truly “democratic.” Instead, I try to examine competing notions of democracy on their own terms and to demonstrate that, while there are important differences, they share a conceptual vocabulary that comes in part from the positioning of these actors within a particular *Theravāda*-influenced moral worldview. They also represent various voices in the discourse of democracy in contemporary Myanmar, making their elucidation an essential element in understanding the debates that will arise *in the country* during its current transitional period. Probably the most controversial of these conceptions is disciplined democracy.

Disciplined Democracy

The notion of discipline in contemporary Burmese politics is most commonly connected to the military, specifically through the “Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy” that the former military government created and the previous quasi-civilian government continued to implement through its five-year term.⁵ The “discipline” usually espoused by military leaders has been that of *si kan*, a Burmese word that implies proper action within given boundaries. However, as Chapter 2 noted, calls for *si kan* often contain implications of a related moral understanding

⁵ The Online Burma Library contains a number of documents related to the government’s roadmap, which can be found here: www.burmalibrary.org/show.php?cat=2378&lo=d&sl=0 [Accessed December 19, 2014].

of discipline, *thila* (Pāli *sīla*), which can connect this democratic discourse to the “moral” democracy examined later in the chapter. Military and ruling party leaders have certainly emphasized the need for discipline in their portrayals of proper democratic practice, yet the notion of disciplined politics (or the related notion of unity) is not foreign to the political platforms of either the democratic opposition or democratically inclined monks. This section considers the sources of the anxiety regarding “undisciplined” politics and the complementary notion of “disciplined democracy” that has been constructed (based in part on Buddhist conceptions of human nature) to accommodate for these fears.

Chapters 1 and 4 related some of the history of post-independence Burma, where political leaders such as U Nu publicly and privately used Buddhist reasoning to justify policy decisions. After the second military coup in 1962, the leaders of the newly created Revolutionary Council stressed the importance of a secular state, at least in part as a response to the potential divisiveness of religion, which had exacerbated ethnic tensions at the end of the 1950s.⁶ However, as decades of failed Socialist economic policies began to erode the legitimacy of the military government, its leaders reembraced certain Buddhist symbolic practices, both as a way to appease and control the population and to attend to their personal religious goals, enhancing their own merit (Schober 1997; McCarthy 2008).

Apart from this return to an explicit use of Buddhist political rhetoric and governing practices, I argue that even during the allegedly “secular” period, Buddhist beliefs about human nature and political authority shaped the political philosophy and values of the military government. The emphasis on discipline and order as prerequisites for political participation, the need for a central power to maintain that order, and the insistence on unity as necessary for political progress and development, are positions of the military government that are consistent with the logic of the moral universe.

“Discipline-flourishing democracy” is the name that Myanmar’s military has given to the end goal of its seven point, step-by-step plan to transition from complete military rule. On August 30, 2003, former General Khin Nyunt (then Prime Minister) laid out the steps that the

⁶ Their insistence on a secular state was more of a rebuttal of U Nu’s use of Buddhist teachings in his political rhetoric than a complete rejection of Buddhist doctrine or reasoning as a guiding force. The ideology of the military regime, expressed in *The Burmese Way to Socialism* (Revolutionary Council 1962), *The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment* (Myanmar Socialist Lanzin Party 1964), and U Chit Hlaing’s *Lawka Amyin (Man’s Worldview)* (Badgley and Aye Kyaw 2009), continued to be based on a Buddhist understanding of the universe as governed by particular moral laws.

government would take in this guided process. These steps included convening the National Convention to write a constitution, ratifying the constitution, holding elections to form a *hluttaw* (parliament), and following the legislation of the *hluttaw* in order to build a modern, developed, disciplined democracy. The rhetoric of the former military government, expressed in editorials and speeches, frequently contrasted the dangerous, divisive elements of Western-style democracy with disciplined democracy. Military leaders argued that disciplined democracy was culturally appropriate for the Burmese context precisely because it would guard against the disruptions and excesses of Western democracy (seen in the parliamentary period) and allow for a stable, gradual transition.

After almost two decades of a stop-and-start constitutional convention (eventually boycotted by most of the opposition), the government announced that a vote to ratify the constitution would be held in 2008, with state-run news media printing daily messages urging citizens to do their patriotic duty and vote “yes” on the constitution. One message that ran daily in newspapers at the time read, “Democracy cannot be achieved through anarchy. Democracy cannot be achieved through unrest/violence. Democracy can only be achieved through the constitution.” It is important to note here the emphasis on a constitution as a necessary vehicle for democratic change; this perspective on its own would seem to accord with a liberal notion of democracy. While this certainly indicates some affinities between disciplined and liberal democracy (although skeptics might argue that the devotion to constitutionalism is merely a veneer), the context is particularly relevant in this case. The constitution is contrasted with anarchy and unrest/agitation, emphasizing its role not as a foundational document that promotes freedom but as one that restricts the boundaries of political action.⁷

Many of the editorials written in the state-controlled media since the announcement of the Roadmap contain references to the disorder and conflicts that plagued the parliamentary government after independence in 1948. The former military government’s narrative tells of the “evil consequences” and “instability” caused by both internal armed conflicts

⁷ Nick Cheesman (2015) has extensively studied previous governments’ attitudes toward law, which he categorizes as being oriented toward “law and order,” directly opposed to the “rule of law.” Elliott Prasse-Freeman has noted the ways in which political authorities in contemporary Myanmar have strategically used a discourse of “rule of law” as related to both the constitution and the country’s legal architecture more generally as a way of further controlling the current political transition and silencing alternative conceptions of justice and acts of dissent (2014).

and disputes between political parties (New Light of Myanmar 2008). According to its own view of history, the military government had to take control to ensure stability and prevent disintegration. Even if most Burmese are skeptical of the military's version of this narrative, it resonates with a critical relationship that anchored the traditional Burmese Buddhist conception of politics: a strong political authority is a necessary component of a thriving *sāsana* (Bur. *thathana*, Buddhist religion). Recall from Chapter 3 that, while Burmese commentators have drawn from the *Cakkavatti Sutta* the lesson that immoral political leadership can adversely affect the moral standing of the entire community, a common interpretation of the *Aggañña Sutta* is that the lack of any political authority can be just as destabilizing, if not more so.

The military conception of disciplined democracy arises from the fear of political disorder, which emerged during the parliamentary era (1948–58 and 1960–62) and provided members of the military with their view of themselves as belonging to the only institution capable of holding the country together (Callahan 2003). While military leaders at least publicly acknowledge the need for a transition to democracy, they continue to insist that this process must be gradual and managed, where the potential divisiveness of democracy must be mediated by a group capable of transcending potential disunity (themselves) that can also impose discipline on the citizenry. Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing reiterated this reasoning in a BBC interview leading up to the 2015 elections, asserting that the military's role in politics would remain necessary as long as civil conflict continued and political parties needed guidance in engaging in politics in a “disciplined” manner (Fisher 2015).

The military's narrative of how to develop a lasting democracy is also consistent with a common Burmese perspective on popular political participation: both are skeptical of the ability of the average person (*pu htu zin*, a word that denotes a human being with all of his moral imperfections, Pāli *puṭhujjana*) to participate in politics and wary of the results of this participation. The rhetoric of the military government drew on the common claim from “Asian values” proponents that citizens of their countries were not yet ready for full democratic rights. That is, citizens did not yet have the moral grounding to move beyond their own self-centered interests and participate in a potentially divisive democratic process in a unified way that would benefit the country as a whole.

In a 2008 editorial in the government-run *New Light of Myanmar* entitled “Let's Nurture the Sapling of Democracy,” a writer named Kyaw Min Lu criticized the opposition National League for Democracy

for their assumption of a mandate from the 1990 elections.⁸ He stated, “In the run-up to the 1990 election, political parties were mushrooming. The number of political parties stood at 235, and that implied that the people were not mature enough in the party politics without any political experiences” (Kyaw Min Lu 2008a). Political commentators in Myanmar since U Hpo Hlaing in the late nineteenth century and U Ba Khaing in the early twentieth have expressed concern about an excess of parties or factions leading to disunity and conflict.⁹ Here, the military government was asserting its claim that, while democracy might be the right of the people, it could lead to division and chaos when misunderstood or practiced incorrectly. Democracy could only be a beneficial system when the people were mature and disciplined enough to work within its boundaries, that is, when the citizens were already unified in purpose and goals.

The editorial reinforced this idea as it went on to warn readers of the dangers of not practicing democracy correctly. Again, the failures of the parliamentary period were “not because of democracy, but because of those who implemented democracy, and those who were desperate to come to power with egotism, attachment to the party concerned, and selfishness, and those who bore jealousy and disturbed others” (Kyaw Min Lu 2008b). Furthermore, the *si kan* (discipline) required to correctly practice democracy could only come via guidance from the allegedly non-political *tatmadaw* (military). Another editorial recalled the “evil consequences” of separating the leadership of the *tatmadaw* from the messy and potentially destructive practice of democracy, reminding readers that, “In the period of the parliamentary democracy in which the Tatmadaw did not participate in the politics, the Union was on the edge of collapse” (New Light of Myanmar 2008). Within a more participatory framework of democracy, the need for disciplined participation implies that most citizens were not and are still not morally equipped to take part in the correct manner without continued guidance. The strongest indicator of this moral immaturity from the military’s perspective has been continued political opposition to the state.¹⁰

⁸ The articles I cite in this section all come from government-controlled media. In many cases the names are pseudonyms, but given the strict level of censorship at the time in Myanmar we can assume that they reflect the government’s position.

⁹ See Chapter 3 for a review of their positions and Walton (2015a) for a more detailed examination.

¹⁰ While the military government labeled any opposition as opposition to “the state,” much of the democratic opposition as well as at least some of the armed ethnic resistance movements would probably clarify that their opposition has mostly been to a *military-controlled* state apparatus, rather than the idea of the Myanmar state.

This analysis of military views suggests a conception of democracy as “rule-following,” similar in some ways to Joseph Schumpeter’s classical definition of democracy as an “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (1942, 269). To the degree that the Burmese military has embraced democratic decision-making, it has acknowledged that the right to participate is “every citizen’s primary right and duty” (A Retired Government Employee 2008, 10). At the same time, it has emphasized the need for the process to be orderly and controlled, reflecting both a set of Buddhist beliefs on the purpose of political authority (explored in Chapter 4) and the military’s own intense fear of the disintegration of the political community. The emphasis on unity reinforces the narrative of skepticism toward the moral ability of individuals to participate in democratic politics in the “correct” manner, their inability to follow the rules of democracy in a disciplined way.

This suggests that military leaders also conceive of democratic participation as a privilege, a claim that is supported by their closely managed transition process. From this perspective, the “rules” are not merely democratic procedures of justice or fair play. Disciplined democratic conduct requires (or maybe permits?) participation, but participation guided by a devotion to unity above all else. If unity is a reflection of correct moral conduct, one’s ability to think and act beyond one’s own selfish interests, democratic “rule-following” establishes standards that are not simply based on compliance with procedures and outcomes, but also on the ideal moral conduct of citizens, which further connects this “disciplined democracy” model with the “moral democracy” described below.

The military’s notion of “disciplined democracy” is thus connected to ideas regarding unity (Bur. *nyi nyut chin*), and both concepts have moral as well as mundane implications. But the concepts have also been explicitly linked (and morally grounded) in the political thought of the opposition. Members of the 88 Generation Students Group (renamed “88 Generation Peace and Open Society” in 2014) were among the leaders of the student protests in 1988 and many were imprisoned on and off for more than a decade. Some, including Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, two of the most prominent members of the group, were released briefly in 2007 only to be swiftly rearrested as a result of their antigovernment activism in the months before the monastic protests in September 2007. Both of them were among the many political prisoners that Thein Sein’s government unexpectedly released on January 13, 2012, and they once again added their voices to those calling for more concrete democratic

reforms. In an interview just after his release, Min Ko Naing returned to themes he first talked about in speeches in 1988: “It is very important to have discipline and unity. We have to show that we deserve democracy” (*[The] Voice* 2012). We might reasonably conclude that the affinity of his language to the military perspective on discipline that sees its citizens as generally unworthy of political participation is mostly instrumental. However, in encouraging people to act in ways that would contest that skeptical viewpoint, he nonetheless reinforces the implication that both discipline and unity are prerequisites for correct democratic practice.

Additionally, the small group of monks that was one of the primary organizing forces behind the 2007 “Saffron Revolution” has also endorsed a type of “disciplined democracy,” one in which the moral implications of disciplined action are even more explicit. During the protests, the All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA) regularly issued public statements and played an important part in rallying monks to participate. Both before and after the protests, Ashin Issariya, one of the founders of the ABMA who now lives in exile in Thailand, led a group of monks and lay people who published and distributed pamphlets and journals that contained poems and articles on topics including human rights, the role of the *sangha* in Burmese society, and democracy. These articles provide another range of perspectives on democracy from a monastic point of view and they contain elements of each of the three discipline-, rights-, and morality-based conceptions of democracy.¹¹

One monastic author emphasizes that democratic practice is fundamentally characterized by *si kan* (discipline), the same word used by the military and Min Ko Naing, and a qualifier that some liberals might strongly oppose (Hti La Aung 2007, 40). He lists a number of qualities and practices that embody democracy where *si kan* is complemented by *thila* (morality), which reinforces the central place of correct moral action in politics, even in a democracy. The rest of the list includes equality, unity, citizenship, protecting traditional religion (another potentially problematic point for liberal democracy), courage, enthusiasm, and cultivating the six qualities of a leader.¹²

Unity (*nyi nyut chin*) is also a recurring theme in many of the articles in these journals, just as it is a quality valued by both the military government and members of the opposition. In another article entitled “Let’s Unite,” the author connects unity to correct moral practice and control of one’s

¹¹ According to Ashin Issariya, the articles in these journals were written by him and several other monks. They used a number of different pseudonyms, so none of the names in the following section refer to real individuals.

¹² These qualities (*nayaka goun*) are patience, alertness, industry, sound judgment, mercy, vision.

actions. “In a united people we will see that the conduct of their body and mind is honest, their moral conduct (*ko gyint thila taya*) is good, and the strength of their mental qualities is great” (Shin Nan Gaung 2007, 16). This is reminiscent of advice that the Buddha gave to political leaders of the Vajjians, in which he connected national strength to unity and proper conduct toward the members of one’s own community. It also recalls Ledi Sayadaw’s open letter to Burmese Buddhists during the colonial period about moral conduct (specifically abstaining from eating beef) and its collective effects (Braun 2013). The author of this article goes on to state that, “unity needs control/restraint (*htein chouk*) through proper moral conduct and an even mind,” reminding readers that, like everything else in the world, unity in politics begins with correct understanding and practice of the Buddha’s teachings (Shin Nan Gaung 2007, 16).

The impulse to see democracy as in some way necessarily bounded or restrained by discipline is thus not only a perspective held by the military or the ruling party; democratic opposition activists and monks have also cited the importance of discipline in their own conceptions of democracy. In the [final section](#) of this chapter I revisit these different articulations of disciplined democracy, suggesting that, while they are characterized by a common moral grounding, there remain significant differences in the ways in which these varied actors imagine discipline might be enforced or institutionalized. But as with the idea of discipline, all of these groups have also made some sort of endorsement of a rights-based, liberal model of democracy.

Rights-Based Democracy

The rights-based conception of democracy in Myanmar is most commonly associated with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose views on the subject are examined in more detail below. But others have championed and developed it as well, including the monks writing in underground journals in 2007 and 2008 who described democracy in terms reminiscent of liberalism, for example, claiming that human rights are an inalienable birthright of all people (Shin Daza 2007, 10). Following what seems to be a dominant interpretation within this iteration of the moral universe, they tend to advocate for an understanding of *kan* (cause and effect, Pāli *kamma*) that emphasizes the possibility of change, rather than the inevitability of experiencing the effects of past actions. The author of one article declares that, “People are creatures who create their own conditions through their own actions (*kan kyama*),¹³ who want to be free, and who

¹³ This phrase, also used by the nationalists in the 1930s and 1940s, can mean “destiny,” but here it more explicitly refers to the general process of cause and effect based on *kan*.

have a strong desire to be free. People have a nature and ability that opposes repression and control. That nature is democratic” (Hti La Aung 2007, 38). This writer interprets freedom within the context of the Buddhist doctrine of cause and effect, emphasizing people’s ability to change their circumstances, challenging the understanding of *anattā* as “no control” that was described in Chapter 2. From this point of view, democracy is valuable as a political system because it enables and supports human efforts to create their world freely, as they desire it.

These writers consider and strongly reject claims that democracy is not compatible with either Buddhism or Burmese culture. They respond to concerns reminiscent of Asian Values arguments that, as a political system that originated in the West, democracy might not conform to the Buddha’s teachings or, even worse, would destroy traditional Burmese culture. One author states that, “Without exception, democracy includes people’s dignity, people’s worth, and purity of mind/spirit, things that are all included under the teachings of the Buddha” (Hti La Aung 2007, 40). Another article discusses the differences between Christian and Buddhist conceptions of human rights. Since Buddhists do not believe in a creator god, the claim that “all men are created equal” is not sufficient to anchor democracy and equality from a Buddhist perspective. Instead, this author uses the *mettā sutta* and its insistence on cultivating feelings of nondiscriminating loving-kindness toward all living beings to derive a practical obligation for valuing and preserving human rights (Laba 2008, 30).

The authors of these journals also argue that the Buddha’s teachings contain the essence of democracy, a common claim among many Burmese writers. “Democracy is not something that only just appeared. The Buddha had already preached about it twenty-five hundred years ago. In the Buddha’s teachings, he thoroughly discussed human rights. . . . The Buddha’s doctrine (*taya*) is in accordance with democracy” (Sanda Shin 2009, 16). This writer situates democratic values within the *Kālāma Sutta*, a teaching that many democratic activists in Myanmar revere. In this *sutta*, the leaders of the Kālāma people were confronted by many different doctrines and were confused as to which was actually correct. The Buddha advised them not to accept something as truth merely because of tradition or because their parents or teachers told them it was true, or even because the Buddha himself preached it. They should examine it and only when they themselves have determined that it is true, should they accept it as truth. The author of the article concludes that the Buddha never forced his disciples to believe or act a certain way; Buddhism is a religion of free choice. Similarly, democracy is a political system of free choice, and the Buddha espoused this basic principle of democracy long ago.

Rights-based rhetoric is also now commonly heard from government leaders and even former members of the military. The former USDP government's "discipline-flourishing democracy" was one in which discipline (*si kan*) is completely fulfilled (*pye wa*). But the official term also includes the phrase *pati-zoun*, which means "multiparty democracy." This is an important clarification, as it distinguishes the contemporary system from the one-party system under the former BSPP government and indicates an acceptance of democracy as including competition for elected office facilitated through multiple parties. However, given the statements in the [previous section](#) that the proliferation of parties indicated an inability to practice democracy correctly, there are likely limits to this acceptance.

At the same time, many elements of the regime's Road Map correspond roughly to widely accepted components of democracy. The constitution is the legal basis of the government and was ratified through a vote in 2008 (albeit one generally considered to have been neither free nor fair). Members of various political parties have contested elections, making up a parliament of people's representatives (that, admittedly, consists of a quarter of military appointees). It is unclear whether the military regime embraced democratic governance for its own sake, or whether they saw it as an inevitable transition that they had to accept. Either way, the result has been a political process with the trappings of democracy, yet strong guidance by the military.

However, in keeping with the pattern set by previous military governments, most of Myanmar's current political leaders have avoided rhetoric that explicitly connects their ideas on rights-based governance with Buddhist ideals.¹⁴ Instead, they have framed rights-based governance in mostly procedural and instrumental ways, particularly highlighting the role of the Constitution in both securing and circumscribing rights. One exception to this is the way in which President Thein Sein spoke about the release of political prisoners in November 2013. After signing a release for 69 political prisoners, the President described his magnanimous gesture in language reminiscent of that used by Burmese kings in similar situations. He hoped, he said, that the released people would "contribute in nation-building after realizing the loving-kindness [*mettā*] and goodwill of

¹⁴ The growing influence of MaBaTha throughout 2015 and its insistence on support for its "religious protection" laws as a sort of political litmus test meant that many candidates in the 2015 election felt compelled to declare their Buddhist identity and their unquestioned support for "race and religion." However, these statements relate more to Buddhist identity and are thus not examples of Buddhist political thought as I examine it here.

the state” (Reuters 2013). In this area at least, Buddhist moral values provided guidance (or at least justification) for political practice.

Moral Democracy

While Buddhist ideas can be interpreted to support both disciplined and rights-based notions of democracy, the conception most closely and directly related to Buddhism is what I categorize as “moral democracy.” Although in the early years of Burma’s independence moral democracy was probably best exemplified by U Nu and other leading government figures, it is rare to hear Myanmar’s current political leaders or members of the military speak in these terms. To be sure, morality undergirds the reasoning behind their practice of disciplined democracy, yet the logic of the latter category looks to restrain and guard against the ill effects of moral deficiency; while democratic activists also occasionally express skepticism regarding people’s moral capacity, they also look to the possibility of moral improvement and its relationship to democratic governance. Aung San Suu Kyi’s ideas relating to moral democracy are examined in the following section, but other than her, it is Myanmar’s monastic community that has done the most to develop this notion.

We have seen how monks have explained both individual and collective success in worldly affairs as the result of correct moral action, as with Ledi Sayadaw at the end of the nineteenth century, who attributed the Burmese defeat at the hands of the British, at least in part, to the failure of Burmese Buddhists to uphold their morality (Braun 2008, 75ff). Contemporary monks have reiterated the connections between moral action and collective circumstances, as evidenced by this quote from a 2011 sermon of the Twante Sayadaw, Ashin Eindaga: “If you know cause and effect then you know that doing something bad creates a bad result and you won’t do it anymore . . . if the cause is not good, the effect won’t be good; the effect will only be good if the cause [action] is good.”¹⁵ Beyond simply acting in morally praiseworthy ways, this monk emphasized the necessity of a particular epistemological perspective, a mind that sees the world as functioning according to cause and effect.

The Venerable Rewata Dhamma was an influential Burmese monk who used his moral authority to act as an international advocate for Buddhist values and to criticize the military government. In November 1989 he gave a speech in New York City in which he cited the Ten Duties of the King as the evaluative criteria for a political regime, whether monarchical or democratic. His interpretation, however, differed from

¹⁵ Public sermon given at the Thirty-fourth Street *Taya Pwe* on January 31, 2011.

those offered by most other members of the democratic opposition in that he wished to minimize the focus on individual rights of citizens and reorient democratic practice toward duties, of a government to its citizens and of citizens to each other. “The ten ‘duties of the king’ quoted at the beginning of this address are an example of the Buddhist approach to rights and responsibilities, which is to emphasize duties or responsibilities rather than codified rights set out in international or domestic law” (Rewata Dhamma 1989, 4). This reinterpretation is consistent with the method utilized by the Buddha in his teachings on the duties of the householder or the *Mingala Sutta*, which Buddhists in Myanmar regard as providing guidance as to the duties one owes to family members or those worthy of respect. While Ven. Rewata Dhamma did not provide details of what an emphasis on duties or responsibilities might entail, we might expect a different set of institutions than are common in rights-based liberal democracy.

Although formal political space began to open in the country from 2011, since that time it is still relatively rare to hear monks preach explicitly about politics.¹⁶ One of the monks in Myanmar who has occasionally connected Buddhist messages explicitly to politics is the Twante Sayadaw, Ashin Eindaga, whose comment on democracy and *taya* opened this chapter. I was initially struck by his remarks about politics (and specifically, about democracy) at a public sermon that I attended in downtown Yangon on January 31, 2011, a sermon he preached over a month before the new government took office and several months before it began easing political restrictions later in 2011.

In the sermon entitled, “Will you continue on or will you retreat?” Ashin Eindaga began by discussing the concept of *taya*, a word that carries several meanings, dependent on context. It can refer to fairness, justice, or equality; to moral principles or moral truth; to a natural law or the nature of things; or to the specific law of the Buddha, *dhamma* (Bur. *dama*).¹⁷ In this case, I understood him to be using the word *taya* to encompass all of these definitions to some degree, an interpretation I confirmed with several people who also listened to the sermon. His use of the word was consistent with monastic usage in sermons and with the way that a layperson would understand it. *Taya* can carry multiple meanings because the last definition, *dhamma*, or the teachings of the Buddha, includes the other elements. In the moral universe, the *dhamma*

¹⁶ One exception to this has been the preaching of monks affiliated with 969 and MaBaTha, who have become increasingly vocal on political matters that they see as related to the protection of race and religion.

¹⁷ See Chapter 2 for a more detailed explanation of this concept.

that the Buddha professed reflects natural law, applies equally to all beings, and provides humans with guidelines of proper moral conduct.

After a brief section in which he told the audience that proper moral conduct was possible for practitioners of any religion, his sermon turned directly to the political: “Democracy is Buddha’s doctrine. It is truly Buddha’s doctrine.” Immediately after making this striking claim, he distanced himself from it, telling listeners that this was something Sitagu Sayadaw had already discussed in his sermon about *min gyint taya seh ba*, the Ten Duties of the King. In this case, merely mentioning Sitagu Sayadaw’s name provided Ashin Eindaga a sort of protection. He asserted that he was not preaching anything new, nor was he broaching a topic outside of the acceptable boundaries for monks. If one of the most prominent monks in the country had discussed this issue there should be no problem with him simply repeating the idea.¹⁸ Ashin Eindaga went on to say, “If you have *taya*, you will have democracy. . . . Democracy means acting in accordance with *taya*, having laws. If society is fully endowed with *thila* (morality), won’t it also be fully endowed with democracy?”

I argue that this statement represents a particularly Buddhist interpretation of democracy that resonates within the logic of the moral universe. *Taya* is a requirement for democracy. *Taya* is also a quintessentially moral concept, something Ashin Eindaga reinforces in the second sentence when he mentions *thila*, which I translate here as “morality.” *Taya* can not only mean truth, it refers to the Buddhist truth of *dhamma*, a particular understanding of cause and effect (*kan*). By asserting that democracy means acting in accordance with *taya*, Ashin Eindaga reinforces the view that Buddhist moral teachings are not only relevant in the political realm, they are an essential element of a Burmese Buddhist understanding of democracy; in the language I used in earlier chapters, he is asserting the relevance of the *lawkouttara* to the *lawki*.¹⁹

Besides the moral dimension of the concepts of *thila* and *taya*, we should also note the explicit reference to a more mundane form of *taya*. Ashin Eindaga follows up his definition of democracy as acting in accordance with *taya*, by clarifying that democracy also means having laws

¹⁸ In my subsequent inquiries, many other Burmese people, both monks and lay people, confirmed that monks occasionally invoked Sitagu Sayadaw’s name almost as a charm to allow them to say controversial things without drawing negative government attention to themselves. As a monk who has cultivated a network of relationships with powerful military and government figures, Sitagu has created space that allows him to speak more freely and other monks have taken advantage of the protection this offers them.

¹⁹ *Taya* can also mean “law” in general, but in the context of a monk’s sermon, I believe that it is safe to interpret it according to its Buddhist meanings. In the following sentence, Ashin Eindaga uses the phrase *taya upade*, which unmistakably refers to law in its worldly, legal sense, and supports my broader interpretation of his previous usage of *taya*.

(*taya upade*). This is a point of overlap with conceptions of democracy as “rule-following,” something implied in the regular invocations of *si kan* (discipline). Democracy is a system of governance structured by laws, with the expectation that citizens will follow those laws. However, Ashin Eindaga adds an additional element, implying that democratic laws must also be rooted in *taya*, Buddhist truth or *dhamma*.

Ashin Eindaga’s commentary on democracy appears to reflect both aspects of the dualistic view of human nature in the Theravāda-influenced moral universe. The emphasis on *thila* and *taya* reinforces the concern that naturally egocentric humans might not act in morally appropriate ways. Yet the very notion of a society fully endowed with *thila* suggests that he does believe in the possibility that all people could reach this defilement-free state (and eventually, enlightenment) and that he would support a political system that would promote the free choice and action of every individual, similar to that which the monks writing the underground journals endorsed. Democratic political participation ideally allows all citizens to create the conditions of their own lives, through their own *kan* (actions). From this point of view, authoritarianism in any form—whether a monarchy, a colonial administration, or a military dictatorship—would be inconsistent with free human action, the doctrine of the Buddha. This “free” action is, however, constrained by its basis in moral practice. That is, democratic freedom also means acting in accordance with the moral truths of Buddhism, as exemplified and distilled for *lawki* practice through teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, the precepts, the *paramis*, and the Ten Duties of the King.

However, free human action is also limited in an additional way. The “truth” of *taya* is that everything that exists is characterized by *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* (impermanence, dissatisfaction, and lack of self/control). Furthermore, acting in accordance with *dhamma* means recognizing that, while *kan* is not deterministic, one’s past actions always condition the possibilities of the present. Ashin Eindaga’s definition of democracy implies an acceptance of the paradox that freedom is, on the one hand, facilitated by institutions that encourage humans to create the conditions of their own future yet, on the other hand, constrained by knowledge of *anattā* as the truth that we do not retain ultimate control over the circumstances of our lives.

The insight of this Burmese Buddhist conception of moral democracy is that, while a democratic political system encourages participation and free human action, it does not necessarily account for the corresponding commitment to acting in accordance with Buddhist *dhamma*. That is a lifelong, holistic process that requires an individual to bring every aspect of her life in line with the truth and it begins, as with most other processes

described in this book, with correct moral practice. A similar notion can be found in the democratic thinking of Aung San Suu Kyi, which draws from all three categories to produce a hybrid form of Buddhist-influenced democratic thought.

The Hybrid Democratic Thought of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

Consistency of thought is an ideal that is probably rarely (if ever) achieved by political thinkers, especially those who are also active political figures. Yet charges of inconsistency or expressing contradictory ideas have often been used to dismiss or delegitimize those thinkers whose ideas do not accord with commonly accepted political notions. The purpose of this section is not to criticize Aung San Suu Kyi for espousing multiple conceptions of democracy. In fact, by recognizing that, while her different statements about democracy accord respectively with all three of my heuristic categories, they remain consistently within the logic of the moral universe, I am actually revealing a coherence that binds together these different strands of thinking. Myanmar's democracy icon has been assailed in recent years by critics who believe that she has abandoned her previous lofty ideals for the ruthless pragmatism of electoral politics. What this analysis tries to reveal is that a political actor might deploy different conceptions of democracy depending on context, but that those different conceptions can be reconciled within an overarching worldview.

Aung San Suu Kyi has spoken and written at length about the Buddhist roots of her commitment to democracy, although this has been a less prominent aspect of her political philosophy since she reentered the political world after her release from house arrest in 2010. While the military government consistently attempted to portray her as either under the influence of foreign elements or as a foreigner herself (a tactic that continues today, albeit less overtly), she proved to be very skilled at situating her ideas about democracy and human rights within a Theravādin-influenced Burmese discourse on politics and communicating them to Burmese audiences. Whether this is still the case is unclear, as in the lead-up to the 2015 election, MaBaTha grew increasingly critical of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, with its monastic leadership repeatedly warning the public during its events that voting the NLD into power would “destroy race and religion” (Salai Thant Zin & Zarni Mann 2015).

Aung San Suu Kyi usually discusses democracy in a way that is consistent with Western liberal democracy and the rights-based account in

this chapter.²⁰ Human rights, free and fair elections, and a number of other freedoms figure prominently in her speeches. Since the beginning of her political involvement she has spoken out strongly against what she calls the “twin myths of [Burmese] unfitness for political responsibility and the unsuitability of democracy for their society” (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 167). Although Burmese people had very little experience of democracy in the past, she asserted that it appealed to their “common-sense notions of what was due to a civilized society” (*ibid.*, 168). Although in this statement she would appear to challenge what I have described as a Buddhist tendency to skepticism regarding the political aptitude of the *pu htu zin*, I would argue that this was more of a targeted response to the former military government’s assertions along these lines. In fact, some of her other statements align more closely with the skeptic’s position, as will be seen below. Regardless of her views on the capability of individuals, she has insisted that democracy is completely compatible with Buddhism since the former is an “integrated social and ideological system based on respect for the individual” and the latter “places the greatest value on man” (*ibid.*, 173–4).

Departing somewhat from the common liberal interpretations normally associated with her, Aung San Suu Kyi has also frequently cited unity (*nyi nyut chin*) and discipline (*si kan*) as two of the most important components of democracy; this orients her more closely to a “disciplined” democratic perspective. She mentioned unity over a dozen times in her first public speech on August 26, 1988, in front of the famous Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon and discipline almost as often, reminding listeners that her father, General Aung San, also stressed the need for the people to be disciplined (1991, 203). She asserted that in order “to achieve democracy the people should be united . . . If the people are disunited, no ideology or form of government can bring much benefit to the country” (*ibid.*, 200). Similarly, “if there is no discipline, no system can succeed” (*ibid.*, 200).

Of course, at the time discipline was necessary for the opposition movement. It faced a well-organized (not to mention well-armed) military government. But her other statements about the relationship between democracy, truth, and righteousness make it clear that discipline (*si kan*) here refers not just to proper conduct but to proper *moral* conduct (*thila*). The discipline necessary for proper democratic participation is

²⁰ For the most part, her speeches in English and in Burmese use similar language and concepts. The primary difference is that when she speaks or writes in English she appears to make more of an effort at linking her ideas to common concepts or thinkers in the Western political tradition. She uses many of the same basic terms (e.g. “rights”) in Burmese but orients her comments to Burmese audiences more specifically in relation to Burmese situations, history, or local conditions.

that which suppresses egoism, desire, ill-will, ignorance, and fear. These are, unsurprisingly, the qualities targeted for eradication through the practice of *thila*.

Thila is the second duty of the king in the classical Ten Duties of the King (*min gyint taya hse ba*), which Aung San Suu Kyi, like others, has transposed from a guide for monarchs to a set of expectations for a modern democratic government. In speaking of *thila*, she has emphasized the causal links between the conduct of the ruler and the prosperity of the nation, claiming that, “The root of a nation’s misfortune has to be sought in the moral failings of the government” (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 171). She insisted that a lack of moral purity in the political authority, whether monarchical or democratic, would set the tone for the conduct of the rest of the people. Additionally, under a political structure characterized by immorality, moral acts would be discouraged, if not actively punished, making the practice of the moral life even more difficult for citizens (*ibid.*, 182).

Even though she has blamed the deterioration of morality on the government’s violations of human rights, she has also suggested that efforts to promote democracy will be inhibited by a lack of moral conduct among citizens. In a speech on March 13, 1989, she explained to listeners that as people gradually lost their rights, their moral conduct correspondingly declined, a creative and democratically oriented reinterpretation of the story of moral decline in the *Cakkavatti Sutta* as well as a pointed criticism of previous military governments. The Burmese people would not be able to achieve their primary goal of democracy if they did not attend to and improve their morality, although this process would also be easier if the government would grant its citizens basic rights (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995, 155–6).

She has not, however, absolved individuals completely from their political responsibilities either. In a speech on the topic of solidarity among ethnic groups, she considered why the BSPP (Burmese Socialist Programme Party, the military-led party that ruled from 1962 to 1988) was able to last so long if it was so inept. “I think that the BSPP gained control of the government because the citizens failed to carry out the duties of citizenship” (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 230). Democracy requires active participation of its citizens, and Aung San Suu Kyi has conceptualized this participation as a moral duty. In describing that duty as working for the national interest, rather than more narrow interests, she makes reference to the Buddhist virtue of selflessness. Buddhists in Burma sometimes explain political greed as being motivated by *atta seit*, a mind focused only on selfish personal gain. Here *atta* is the “self” that is found to be illusory in the Buddhist idea of *anattā*. From this perspective,

correct democratic practice begins with moral cultivation based on *anattā*, the understanding that there is no essential “self.”

Aung San Suu Kyi has also advocated for democracy on the grounds that it supports freedom more than any other political system, a view that would seem to place her squarely back in the liberal, rights-based category. In her 1988 speech at Shwedagon Pagoda, she borrowed her father’s words: “Democracy is the only ideology which is consistent with freedom” (1991, 200). Her conception of democracy is similar to many other activists in Myanmar in its focus on freedom, and Josef Silverstein has suggested that “implicit in her writings and speeches is the idea that freedom is a universal idea” (Silverstein 1996, 225). However, I would argue that the Buddhist roots of her conception of freedom actually qualify the presumed universality of the liberal understanding of freedom. In another essay, she suggested that “rulers must observe the teachings of the Buddha. Central to these teachings are the concepts of truth, righteousness and loving kindness” (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 177). A democratic politics based on Buddhist truth and righteousness would be one that is rooted in the proper moral conduct of its citizens. It is this promotion of moral conduct that might actually limit the universal freedom that Silverstein sees in her arguments. One way in which Aung San Suu Kyi conceptualizes democracy’s relationship to freedom, then, is individualistic and internal rather than structural: freedom is bounded not by arbitrary laws or authoritarian dictates, but by each individual’s commitment to correct moral practice.

This view is reinforced by a speech that she made on May 27, 1999. Talking to a group of supporters and explaining why the NLD insisted that the government recognize the results of the elections in 1990, she strongly denounced disloyalty (Blum et al 2010, 102). She acknowledged that according to democracy, each citizen can exercise particular rights, including voting and the right to free speech. However, she immediately qualified this statement, claiming that if one were to act disloyally in exercising those rights, he should be considered a “traitor,” a “renegade,” and “faithless.” One intention of this speech was undoubtedly to reassure those who had stood alongside the NLD through over a decade of political repression and to cajole and warn those who might be thinking of abandoning the party. But her language also suggests that she sees a moral underpinning to basic democratic practices and a morally “correct” way to engage in activities such as voting, forming and supporting parties, and publicly expressing opinions.

A related understanding of freedom in a democratic context that seems to mix elements of all three categories addresses the question of what individuals are freeing themselves from. One of Aung San Suu Kyi’s most

well-known English language essays was entitled “Freedom From Fear” and in it she wrote optimistically of a future in which the citizens of Myanmar would no longer be in thrall to fear, either the fear of being subjected to abusive power or the fear among those who exercise that power of losing it. Closely connected to this democratic change is her call for a “revolution of the spirit,” something she has reiterated in recent years, saying in an August 2014 speech, “Only if you revolutionise your soul or change your mind-set, will there be real revolution” (Aye Myint San 2014). In “Freedom From Fear” she acknowledged the structural elements opposing this change: “Without a revolution of the spirit, the forces which produced the iniquities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration” (1991, 183). However, behind these structural elements are the qualities that emerge when people ignore their moral practice, namely “desire, ill will, ignorance and fear,” the four *agatis* (biases/hindrances) that we have encountered in previous chapters (*ibid.*, 183).

She underscores this understanding of the moral foundation necessary for democratic practice in the following sentences. “Free men are the oppressed who go on trying and who in the process make themselves fit to bear the responsibilities and to uphold the disciplines which will maintain a free society . . . A people who would build a nation in which strong, democratic institutions are firmly established as a guarantee against state-induced power must first learn to liberate their own minds from apathy and fear” (*ibid.*, 183). First, we should note the way in which she makes a connection between collective political circumstances and proper Buddhist moral practice through her usage of the dual sense of freedom/liberation, from both political oppression and from mental defilements. Also important, however, is her insistence that each one must purify and liberate his or her mind *before* they can be considered ready for participation in “strong, democratic institutions.” Once again, a correct understanding of democratic values and practices rests on a foundation of correct moral understanding and practice. In this way, Aung San Suu Kyi merges the freedom celebrated in the rights-based account of democracy with the moral discipline of the other two accounts using reasoning anchored in the logic of the moral universe.

Discipline and Morality: Fostering or Limiting Democracy?

There are also ways in which Burmese conceptions of moral democracy could be marshaled to limit democratic participation. Moral conceptions of democracy can overlap with disciplined democratic views, coming

together in a form of guardianship, the rule (by consent) of experts (Dahl 1989, Chapter 4). Although the liberal rhetoric of political activists and monks would generally oppose guardianship as limiting free human action, their simultaneous descriptions of political action according to *dhamma* (the Buddha's teachings) and *taya* (Buddhist truth) should push us to evaluate the complexities of this view of democracy in more detail. While many would posit democracy as directly opposed to guardianship, alternative conceptions of democracy (mostly developed in non-Western contexts) have challenged this dichotomy, providing an instructive comparison with Burmese views. There is space between the absolutes of an ideal liberal democracy and the thinly veneered authoritarianism of "Asian-style" democracy for articulations of democratic practice that resonate with particular religious and cultural beliefs and practices; this is political space that is currently being negotiated in Myanmar.

It seems clear that the Burmese military's version of democracy includes a strong guardianship element. For six decades its rhetoric has reinforced the narrative of the *tatmadaw* (Armed Forces) as the saviors of the nation. And, despite ample evidence to the contrary, military leaders have continued to portray themselves as the only ones capable of making impartial decisions for the benefit of the entire nation. While Aung San Suu Kyi and other democratic activists situate proper, moral democratic practice in selflessness (the root of unity and discipline)²¹, military leaders would claim that the *tatmadaw* already embodies these qualities, bestowing upon their institution a particular type of democratic legitimacy that resonates with central Buddhist values in the moral universe. Their claims regarding the legitimacy of their guardian role refer to the purity of their intentions (non-disintegration of the Union, as opposed to personal gain) and draw on the moral implications of the Burmese concept of national unity, described below. Guardianship is also written into Myanmar's 2008 constitution. Twenty-five percent of the seats in the parliament are reserved for active-duty members of the military, presumably because those members will not be influenced by partisan politics, and other provisions provide for the continued role of the military in the governance of the country.²² Most observers would (rightly) contest

²¹ In his interviews with democratic activists and civil society members, Tamas Wells often heard this quality explained as *sedana* (Pāli *cetanā*), a benevolent mindset of goodwill toward others and toward the country more generally that would contrast with the self-centeredness of *atta sei* that I described above (Wells 2016, 13).

²² This is similar to the "guided democracy" of Sukarno's Indonesia (Lev 1966) or to what some scholars have more recently called "managed democracy" (Lipman and McFaul 2001 and Wolin 2008). The specific quota for military members of parliament also recalls Indonesian policy of the Suharto regime.

these self-perceptions, yet the underlying logic is consistent with other Burmese explanations of the moral underpinnings of democracy.

Many monks and members of the opposition would reject guardianship in favor of universal rights to political participation, but I argue that their common *Theravāda* moral conceptual framework also allows for some ambiguity regarding political participation and individuals' worthiness for political rule. The Buddhist ambivalence toward the capacity of *pu htu zin* (ordinary people enslaved to desire) to participate in ruling themselves not only anchors military dismissals of Burmese citizens' democratic abilities, it is also present in the moral rhetoric of those who have opposed the military. The place where the morally disciplining elements of Burmese conceptions of democracy seem to converge most easily (and to potentially threaten democratic participation) is in the discourse on unity.

The concept of unity (*nyi nyut chin*) has been a central theme in Burmese Buddhist political thought, and what sets this conception of unity apart from others (which might focus instead on the strategic or emotional importance of unity and solidarity) is that it also functions as an indicator of correct moral practice. The views I have examined in this chapter take unity as devotion to a common purpose and loyalty to a group or community. As I have written elsewhere:

At its root, this perspective on unity requires subsuming one's own interests for the benefit of the whole, something that encapsulates the Buddhist practice of rejecting *atta* (ego). Correct moral practice on the Buddhist path begins with the recognition that *doukkha* (dissatisfactoriness) [Pāli *dukkha*] originates from ignorance of the fundamental characteristic of *anatta* (no self/control) [Pāli *anattā*] and develops into desire focused on fulfilling one's own misguided cravings. Disunity is the result of a group of individuals committed only to their own benefit; it is a result of moral failure (Walton 2015a, 5).

This helps to explain why all of the perspectives examined here see unity as a prerequisite to democracy. Democracy may be a more just way to manage conflict, but even democracy will be unsuccessful without the foundation of correct moral practice among its citizens.

The focus on group unity rather than the individual seems to conflict with the commitment to liberal democracy and human rights that is apparent in the rhetoric of many activists and monks. Their views of democracy tend to embrace a liberal democratic model inasmuch as the individual is the focus of human rights protections. However, their emphasis on unity and discipline as moral concepts could also be seen as a way of countering the individualistic bent of liberal democracy, more in line with communitarian ideals. As a complement to a state structure

that protects individuals (and, given Myanmar's political history, we can assume that most citizens' primary concern is protection *from* the state), the morally grounded expectation of unity orients a citizen's democratic practice away from individualism and toward a more inclusive, community focus, more akin to Ven. Rewatta Dhamma's emphasis on duties cited above. From a *Theravāda* Buddhist perspective, this could be a way of managing the tendency toward egoistic actions that is a constant possibility in liberal democracy.

That moral practice is seen as the anchor of democracy becomes even clearer when we consider the connection between *si kan* (discipline), *taya* (*dhamma*/truth), *nyi nyut chin* (unity), and political success within the context of the doctrine of *kan*, cause and effect. *Si kan* and *nyi nyut chin* are not merely worldly qualities; they are morally inflected concepts that reflect "right action" within the political sphere. Just as *thila* (moral discipline) produces moral benefits in the future, acting individually and collectively according to *si kan*, *taya*, and *nyi nyut chin* produces good results for the group and reflects moral worthiness. Thinking from within the framework of the moral universe, these are integral components of any political system, although specific interpretations of the concepts vary, especially when placed within a democratic context. For example, we can assume that Ashin Eindaga's idea of acting in accordance with *taya* differs from the former military government's official term for "law and order" which translated directly as "quiet-crouched-crushed-flattened" (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 176).

There is, however, a fundamental and problematic ambiguity in linking democracy with *taya*. Most conceptions of democracy – to the degree that they incorporate attention to "truth" at all – would conceptualize truth as procedural. The truth of Buddhism seems to be more specific and bounded than a procedural idea about what is "right." But even if we do assume some flexibility of interpretation of *taya*, who has the authority to interpret? Who can decide whether or not a government is acting in accordance with *taya*?

Monks might be the obvious first choice, and this is a role that they have regularly played in Buddhist polities. Monks have advised kings as to which course of action is in accordance with the *dhamma* (the Buddha's teachings) and which is contrary. However, the legitimacy of monks' moral authority rests on their general separation from politics, so this might not be an acceptable solution in practice and would obviously not be feasible in a secular state. During the parliamentary period (1948–58 and 1960–62) many Buddhist politicians touted their own religious credentials, implying their suitability to be in positions of political authority by acting in accordance with *taya*. However, the dominant narrative of

that period today (common among all the groups considered here) portrays politicians' actions during that time as a reprehensible manipulation of religion. While candidates in the 2010 and 2012 elections seemed to be extremely wary of invoking Buddhist values in their speeches, this dynamic shifted in the 2015 elections, largely due to the pressure from Buddhist advocacy groups like MaBaTha.

Most importantly for a religiously plural state such as Myanmar, although many Buddhists speak of *dhamma* and *taya* as embodying a universal truth, non-Buddhists would be justifiably concerned that a democracy based on *taya* would be biased toward a Buddhist ethical system and in favor of Buddhists more generally. If *taya* is a yardstick for evaluating the democratic nature of a government, is it possible, from a Buddhist perspective, to have a secular interpretation of the concept or at least one that recognizes that Muslims, Christians, and others adhere to some universalized notion of *taya*? Does believing democracy to be necessarily in accordance with *taya* simply leave us with a form of moral guardianship not that far removed from the military's guiding philosophy?

In fact, this is precisely the charge leveled against the moral account of democracy by democratic and civil society activists that Tamas Wells categorizes as adhering to a "reformed" narrative. From this perspective, a democracy anchored in Buddhist moral ideas is "deeply problematic" and acts as a "pathology" that has fostered authoritarianism within the majority Burman Buddhist culture and has allowed various dictatorial leaders to take control over the country (Wells 2016, 15). Rather than look to a moral account of democracy to provide solutions, this narrative sees the moral approach as something that must be questioned and overcome if the society is to truly democratize.

Although many of the monks and laypeople who advocate for democracy in Myanmar might reject the suggestion that a moral democracy could result in a form of guardianship similar to the military's conception, the qualification of acting in accordance with *taya* presents challenges for Burmese Buddhist democrats. As a Buddhist-influenced moral concept, *taya* might be more challenging to implement than other principles of justice. These challenges could include the aforementioned lack of consensus on what constitutes *taya*, the question of whether or not *taya* could be implemented in a religiously plural manner, or even the dilemma—evidenced throughout Burmese political history—that the demands of pragmatic political leadership might seem to require acting in contradiction to *taya* and the Buddha's *dhamma*. When examined in the context of general human ignorance of the nature of reality (from a Buddhist perspective), we arrive once again at a justified skepticism of the ability of

most people to act in accordance with *taya*. This remains one of the primary tensions within Burmese Buddhist conceptions of democracy. It encapsulates the disciplined, rights-based, and moral views and will likely continue to animate Burmese political thinking as a part of Myanmar's emerging democratic discourse.

Conclusion

Much of the contestation over democracy in contemporary Myanmar concerns measurable indicators of democratization and the level of commitment from military and ex-military leaders to expanded political participation. At a time when continued political reform appears to many to be merely a matter of implementation, not much attention is paid to ideological contestation over different conceptions of democracy. Yet, this chapter has revealed both a great deal of diversity in understandings of democracy as well as surprising similarity in thinking about particular aspects of it. Both the overlap and the divergence in understandings of democracy have roots in Buddhist concepts. While the worldview of the moral universe is not the only influence on Burmese Buddhist conceptions of democracy, it remains a strong one, all the more important because its influences are often unacknowledged. The period after the new government took power in March 2011 was initially marked by a decided absence of religious rhetoric in the political sphere, a striking contrast to the immediate post-independence period. While religious rhetoric has reemerged through the efforts of Buddhist groups like 969 and MaBaTha, discussions of political ideologies related to governance and their various foundations have been limited, most notably by Aung San Suu Kyi, whose contemporary speeches contain virtually none of the Buddhist thinking that characterized her writings from the early 1990s.

Although certain ideas emerge from this analysis that are compatible with the liberal democracy that many activists (not to mention outside actors) seek to implement, still there are critical moments where the moral and disciplined notions of democracy diverge from or even directly challenge a liberal framework. Echoing a common interpretation from Myanmar's independence period, some see democracy as the freedom to act as one wishes, to create one's own *kan*. Yet unity and discipline, as moral concepts, seem to impose limits on that freedom, due to the common view of practices of citizenship as being rooted in correct moral practice. Chapter 4 explored the range of different Burmese interpretations of the concept of "freedom," mostly predicated on the answer to the question: freedom *from what*? Freedom from tyranny, authoritarianism, and oppressive government control are obviously central to the

liberal democratic tradition. However, achieving freedom from moral defilements, either individually or collectively, might actually involve limiting certain types of freedom that appear essential in a liberal democracy.

The Burmese perspective on individual moral practice as a form of political participation certainly contains creative possibilities for orienting citizens toward cooperative collective decision-making processes, facilitated by the “self”-diminishing characteristics of *Theravāda* moral practice. In a similar way, a democratic practice of citizenship rooted in this moral practice could provide a critical corrective to the atomizing individualism that threatens liberalism. But the role of *taya* (*dhamma* or truth) complicates Burmese Buddhist ideas about democracy even further. If democracy consists of acting in accordance with the “truth” of Buddhist *dhamma*, how are we to interpret this practically and in the context of a secular government in a religiously plural country such as Myanmar?

The disciplined, rights-based, and moral conceptions of democracy that I have presented here are likely to be evolving categorizations that are challenged and transformed as political discourse in the country develops. They are not mutually exclusive and indeed, contain significant areas of overlap just as much as they seem to be in contention. The discourse within particular communities might also coalesce into different categorizations or, as we have seen with Aung San Suu Kyi, individuals might espouse democratic views that appear to draw from all of the accounts. However, given the continuing influence of Buddhism in the country, the logical framework of the moral universe and the very notion that democratic practice is in some way essentially a moral activity will be recurring themes in Burmese discussions of democracy.

Conclusion

In conducting initial field work in Myanmar between 2007 and 2011 for the dissertation on which this book is based, I was struck by the fact that I encountered very few people who were at all familiar with the textual tradition that has formed the basis for a large part of my analysis. This was true with regard to the Buddhist texts and commentaries that I have analyzed, but also true of more mundane sources such as articles and speeches from political figures in Myanmar's history. While in any culture the formal texts of political philosophy are probably not widely read beyond a small scholarly community, people in Myanmar have been particularly disconnected from most of their recent political and intellectual history.

The disastrous education policies and restrictions on speech and the press that former military regimes enacted are in large part to blame for this lack of connection. Very few of the non-scholars I interviewed for this book had read the work of the thinkers who figure prominently in it, simply because most of the writings that make up the intellectual tradition of Burmese Buddhist political thought have been virtually unavailable in Myanmar since the military coup in 1962. Among younger generations (those who were young children or not yet born in 1988), individuals such as U Hpo Hlaing and Thakin Kodaw Hmaing are little more than vague historical figures. Even the works of General Aung San, the hero of Burmese independence, had been tucked away in used bookshops as the former military regime disassociated from him in an attempt to counter Aung San Suu Kyi's claims to his political heritage.¹ One veteran student activist from the 1988 protests who fled to Thailand related to me the revelatory experience of reading a book of Aung San's political writings given to him by a Western researcher. Most of the Burmese university faculty who participated in a political science curriculum development seminar I conducted in 2014 had read biographies of Aung San but had never read anything he had written. They were shocked when I suggested

¹ This was the process that Houtman (1999) described as "Aung San amnesia."

that his writings and speeches, along with those of U Nu and Aung San Suu Kyi (not to mention lesser-known but still insightful figures), could be read as examples of political thought.

Only recently have these texts become more widely available and since the USDP government took office in 2011, there has been a boom not only in Aung San – related publications but in general political writing as well. Faster and more reliable internet access has meant that Burmese people can more easily find information on any topic, including politics. Gradually, people are translating more works of political thought into Burmese, just as the members of the *Nagani* Book Club did eight decades ago.² Non-formal institutes of tertiary education such as the Yangon School of Political Science, Humanity Institute, and Myanmar Egress are teaching about politics in ways that utilize Western political science and political philosophy alongside readings from varied thinkers and traditions in Myanmar. Initiatives such as the Inya Institute form collaborative research relationships between Burmese and non-Burmese scholars and, alongside other organizations such as Enlightened Myanmar Research and MDRI-CESD (Myanmar Development Resource Institute – Centre for Economic and Social Development) are helping to train the next generation of Myanmar researchers. The newly created Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship (building on the tradition of the *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, which was published from 1911 to 1980) joins the Journal of Burma Studies in publishing and disseminating research inside and outside of the country. This is, of course, in addition to the many other local scholarly publications that have emerged in the last decade, of which those produced by the Myanmar Knowledge Society and Myanmar Ahlin deserve special mention for their quality and breadth of subject matter.

Recovering this tradition will be both intellectually stimulating and politically useful for Burmese as they confront the current slate of political challenges. The concerns of the various leftist groups that led the independence struggle mirror in some important ways those of the growing network of organizations and individuals advocating for democratic reform in Myanmar today. Buddhist critiques of capitalism from the 1930s to 1950s offer arguments that remain relevant for a current generation of activists concerned with economic inequality, environmental degradation, and the suppression of labor and land rights. The question of the interdependence of *lawki* and *lawkountara* and the relevance of

² The Myanmar Literature Project, which has undertaken partial translations and scholarly assessments of the works of the *Nagani* Book Club, is a notable example of making these foundational texts more widely accessible.

moral practice to political change remains as relevant today as it was when Ledi Sayadaw reminded Burmese Buddhists of the political efficacy of abstaining from beef over a century ago. And the violence between Buddhists and Muslims since 2012 suggests that public discussion of the relationship between Buddhism and the state, as well as acceptable and peaceful ways to protect the *sāsana* in a context of religious pluralism will be an essential aspect of Myanmar's public discourse in the present, just as it has been at times in the past.

At the same time, the further development of political thought in Myanmar cannot simply depend on reclaiming a past intellectual heritage. Part of the project of opening space for greater public political engagement in the country will require challenging long-held assumptions that politics is reserved for important people or that thinking about politics requires a lengthy university education; that is, disputing or transforming many of the assumptions associated with the practice of *nain ngan ye* (politics). A responsive, reflexive, and most of all, useful tradition of political thought in contemporary Myanmar must encourage and draw on political reflections from those in all walks of life, from the front lines of rural land protests to the battle fields in Kachin State, from the jungles along the Thai-Myanmar border to the shanty towns on the outskirts of Yangon. Activist groups inside and outside of Myanmar have been conducting dangerous yet essential research on the country for years, documenting sexual abuse in conflict, the adverse impacts of extractive industries and energy projects, and the continued marginalization of women from the political sphere. Those experiences and reflections can and should be marshaled as a resource for *theorizing* about politics as well, not just from Burmese Buddhist perspectives, but in ways that reflect the diversity of Myanmar's population.

Elliott Prasse-Freeman has tried to see contemporary grass-roots activism in this way, articulating what different campaigns reveal about participants' views of politics and of their role in Myanmar's political configuration (2012). He argues that these instances of the "politics of the daily" have been a way for people to put pressure on the government—even under conditions of repression—by acting through civil society channels, similar to the *parahita* activities that I explored in Chapter 5 or the "politics of sincerity" that Ingrid Jordt noted in the contemporary mass lay meditation movement (2007). While political opportunity is still disproportionately distributed across the country, the non-formal education institutes mentioned above and the political education and civic groups that emerged or expanded their activities prior to the 2015 election are contributing to a public discourse of politics that is informed by knowledge and theories drawn from outside of the country but critically

refracted through the lived experience of students, faculty, writers, editors, and activists at these places.

While there are many more political perspectives to be incorporated into Myanmar's public discourse, the Buddhist moral universe that I have described throughout this book, including the related doctrine of cause and effect and the understanding of politics as a fundamentally moral undertaking, will remain influential. This is not only because of Myanmar's large Buddhist majority but also due to the fact that Buddhist monks have been, and will continue to be, the primary conduits of this moral framework in most of its incarnations. As recently as twenty years ago, people's daily interactions with monks mostly consisted of donating food and, while books on Buddhism were available, lay people usually only had the opportunity to listen to monks' sermons a few times a year. Today, inexpensive books and pamphlets written by monks are widely available and street corner vendors hawk videos of monastic sermons that lay people watch repeatedly, discuss and share among their friends. Media that reinforce this Theravāda moral universe are more widely available than ever. Monks have always presented Buddhism as providing a guide for the laity's daily conduct and, as monks speak more publicly about Buddhism and politics, they strengthen the argument that the Buddha's moral teachings can provide a framework for thinking about the proper conduct of both citizens and leaders in politics, whether democratic or not.

The experiences of other Theravāda countries are instructive in thinking about the public role Buddhism might continue to play in politics in Myanmar. After Sri Lanka won its independence in 1948, references to Buddhism among government figures and official attention directed toward Buddhist issues virtually disappeared (Bartholomeusz 1999, 180), similar to the temporary disappearance of this rhetoric among government figures in Myanmar around its recent transition. However, monks and citizen groups continued to discuss Buddhist concerns and to agitate for more concerted government attention. The publication of the 1956 book *The Betrayal of Buddhism* (written by monastic and lay authors) asserted the historical relationship between Buddhism, the state and the Sinhala people and demanded that the government increase its activities to protect the Buddhist religion (All Ceylon Buddhist Congress 1956). What followed was the reemergence of explicitly Buddhist political parties led by monks and laity who have continued to debate and challenge notions of liberalism and "secular constitutionalism" in the strongly Buddhist country (Bartholomeusz 1999). Buddhist rhetoric may emerge and recede among government officials, yet it retains its influence on the political perspectives of most citizens and on the monastic community.

Peter Jackson has claimed that in contemporary Thailand, “Buddhist concepts and arguments no longer constitute the core of Thai discourses on the right to govern” (1997, 85), but political figures still employ Buddhism through ritual and rhetoric to elicit emotional responses and to garner legitimacy for their political positions, including those critical of the government. Somboon Suksamran has also argued that Buddhism continues to provide legitimacy to political leaders and is “an important socio-psychological element contributing to national stability and integration” (Somboon Suksamran 1993, 2). Beginning in the 1980s, leaders of the former military government in Myanmar increased their public displays of merit-making and televisions and newspapers were filled with images of uniformed generals donating materials to prominent monks or dedicating new pagodas (Schober 1997). It is likely that, even if public figures do not employ the Buddhist political rhetoric of U Nu, the image of a “good Buddhist leader” will remain a compelling source of legitimacy. Indeed, although she has been relatively silent on matters of moral conduct in the present period, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi gave a speech in early 2015 in which she invoked her father as an exemplar of a “righteous leader,” with an implied critique of the USDP government (*Eleven News* 2015). It is likely that in the coming years she will see similar rhetoric and critique directed back at the NLD-led government.

Scholars of Thailand have noted a diverse range of Buddhist movements and philosophies that have characterized the Thai political realm since the early 1990s.³ Despite the Burmese regime’s increased support of institutionalized Buddhism since the 1980s, controls on free speech (especially with regard to Buddhist teachings) have inhibited the development of a similarly diverse discourse and array of institutions in Myanmar. Ingrid Jordt’s (2007) study of the mass meditation movement reveals different methods of teaching and practice within the Burmese meditation community, which could generate divergent orientations to politics and development. Previous scholars noted the importance of sects (*gaings*) within the *sangha* as indicators of political orientation (Mendelson 1975), although those differences appear to be muted today. Burmese monks have been increasingly involved in social work (*parahita*) and development projects, and some have been vocal supporters of the democratic opposition. The 969 Movement and MaBaTha are also examples of Buddhist-led organizations promoting a particular ideology and it is reasonable to expect that, if restrictions on freedom of speech and expression continue to ease, more Buddhist political movements will

³ See, for example, Ambuel (2006) and Jackson (1989 & 1997).

begin to emerge and the activities of these groups will continue to diversify.

One area ripe for Buddhist engagement will be environmental politics. The gradual political opening that Myanmar has experienced since mid-2011 has been matched by a marked increase in economic development. While Chinese and Thai companies have been investing in hydropower, natural gas production, and the extraction of other natural resources since the mid-1990s, the easing of US and European sanctions since the beginning of 2012 will likely generate even more rapid economic growth, assuming there is no marked return to authoritarian rule. Along with growth will come increased pollution, environmental degradation and disputes over land ownership and occupation. Activists in the country have organized campaigns to draw attention to these issues and to demand that the government take action to protect local communities and the environment. Buddhists in Myanmar are gradually beginning to express their critical perspectives on development through Buddhist terms and values.⁴ It remains to be seen whether this will develop into a Buddhist oriented movement similar to that led by Phra Pajak Khuttajitto in Thailand, which challenged government development policies, advocated for more sustainable practices, and even ritually “ordained” trees to protect them from loggers (Jackson 1997, 92).

If reforms continue in a democratic direction, scholars, activists, citizens and monks will feel safer expressing their opinions publicly and we can expect to see a more diverse public discourse on democracy emerge in the country. While Burmese will no doubt engage with the political traditions of other cultures (as their predecessors did), they will also likely incorporate Buddhist ideas into their discussions of important but contentious topics such as human rights. They might draw inspiration from Thai scholars and monks who, for the past two decades, have vigorously debated the relevance of the human rights doctrine and its compatibility with Buddhist doctrine (Seeger 2010). Monks, scholars and possibly political figures will also have an opportunity to engage more critically with some of the topics I explored in Chapters 5 and 6 such as the potential *lawkountara* effects of political practice and the relationship between democracy, discipline and *taya*. And of course, the question of Buddhist nationalism, of the relationship between the *sāsana* and the state, and of the appropriate means of protecting and promoting the *sāsana* will continue to be a central concern in Myanmar’s public discourse.

⁴ See, for example, Dominic Nardi’s (2006) review of Buddhist environmentalism in Myanmar.

Monks have been the primary “guardians” of the *Theravāda* moral framework, continuing to teach its tenets and insist on its relevance even when it was absent from the political discourse. But since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, members of the lay community have also taken upon themselves the duty of protecting, maintaining, and propagating the *sāsana*. While we might see the Buddhist moral framework temporarily recede from the political stage, the combined efforts of the monastic and lay communities will preserve the influence of the logic of the moral universe on the broader perspectives of Buddhists in Myanmar. This worldview is a deeply held element of the dominant religious culture in the country. There will be differences of interpretation within it and competing iterations of it and over time the worldview will continue to transform in response to internal and external factors. Yet it will remain relevant as a lens for making sense of the world.

That is the argument of this book: understanding contemporary Burmese politics, along with the political aspirations, ideas, and identities put forward by different Burmese actors, requires understanding a set of Buddhist concepts and their various potential interpretations that together make up a view of the universe as a place that functions according to a particular moral-causal logic. Recognizing the influence of this moral universe reveals a wide array of Burmese Buddhist views on the nature of politics itself, the appropriate ends of politics, what constitutes “political participation,” and how democracy ought to be envisioned and practiced.

Attention to the influence of the logic of the moral universe has revealed a dualistic conception of human nature that injects skepticism about the efficacy of mass political participation, even among democratic advocates. The belief that the moral conduct of groups and individuals can have tangible effects in the world also persists in Myanmar’s contemporary political discourse. At the same time, this moral-causal logic has generated innovative notions of participation more generally and of democratic participation more specifically. Crucially, these are often grounded in Buddhist moral practice and mediated by Burmese concepts (even when expressed through liberal, rights-based language), an important lesson for those seeking to foster further democratic development in Myanmar.

A closer examination of the interplay between Buddhist thinking and leftist thinking from the 1930s through the 1950s reveals a process in which ideas from both sides were considered, challenged, and adapted. Not only does this analysis suggest that Burmese leftist thought deserves closer study, rather than being dismissed as derivative as it has been by so many scholars, it also implies that any political ideologies that circulate in Myanmar are likely to be subjected to a similar process, as people seek to

make sense of a given ideology within their own worldviews. Most prominent among these worldviews has been the moral universe of this book.

The call to defend the *sāsana* (and, by extension, the Myanmar nation) has motivated the activism of contemporary Buddhist groups like 969 and MaBaTha. It is the moral universe that provides the logical framework within which the nation and the religion are seen as inextricably intertwined, with actions on behalf of one affecting the other. Yet it also can provide alternative accounts of the defense or persistence of the Buddhist religious community and of ways to act to strengthen it without encouraging discrimination or violence against others (Walton 2013a; Walton and Hayward 2014). Those seeking to address the apparent increase in Buddhist intolerance toward others during Myanmar's transition will require a more complete understanding of the framework that guides the reasoning of the monks leading these movements and the laypeople that follow them.

Perhaps the most important lesson from a study of the influence of the moral universe on Myanmar's traditions of political thought is that many of these impulses and tensions are inherent in its moral-causal logic. That is, skepticism of the moral ability of individuals to participate in politics will never fully disappear, as it is simply a reflection of one unavoidable aspect of human nature. Anxiety about the existence of the *sāsana* will also never fully cease, and at other times less suffused with fear and uncertainty about the survival of identity and cultural traditions could be directed in positive ways that encourage Buddhist religious practice according to the values of *mettā* (loving-kindness) and *karuna* (compassion). The question of monastic engagement in the political realm will also continue, shaped by social changes that prompt critical reappraisals of the monastic vocation itself, but always bounded by the tension produced by the liminal position of monks themselves. These key political issues and more will continue to be investigated by Buddhists in relation to one of the central constitutive tensions of the moral universe, the relationship between *lawkountara*, the perspective of ultimate truth, and *lawki*, the worldly realm in which politics necessarily takes place.

Those interested in a deeper understanding of Myanmar's political dynamics or in further exploring the creative intellectual resources its traditions of political thinking contain will have to engage with the tenets of the moral universe and their nuanced effects on political thought and practice in the country. This is especially true in the midst of Myanmar's still-fragile political transition, where the Theravāda-influenced moral universe will continue to provide Buddhists with a meaningful framework to navigate an increasingly uncertain political realm.

Appendix: Glossary of Burmese and Buddhist Terms

***Abhidhamma* (Bur. *abidama*)** Along with the *suttas* and the *vinaya*, one of the three groupings of the *Tipitaka*, the Pāli scriptures; philosophical discussion of the characteristics of phenomena.

Abidama See *abhidhamma*.

***Agati* (Bur.)** Bias, partiality, corruption; the four *agatis* are desire, anger, fear, and ignorance.

Aggañña Sutta Buddhist text from the *Digha Nikaya*; tells the story of human moral decline due to unrestrained craving and the subsequent installation of an authority figure to provide adjudication on conflicts; some Burmese Buddhists have interpreted it as providing legitimation for political authority, while others have seen it as evidence of the Buddha's endorsement of democratic elections.

***A-kutho* (Pāli *a-kusala*)** Unwholesome action; demerit; opposite of *kutho/kusala*.

***Anattā* (Bur. *anatta*)** The common English translation is “no self,” although another Burmese understanding is “no control”; refers to the belief that what we commonly call the “self” is merely a collection of physical and mental processes that follow immediately after one another, creating the illusion of coherence; or that we can ultimately have no control over those physical and mental processes; along with *dukkha* and *anicca*, one of the three characteristics of existence according to Buddhist teachings.

Aneitsa See *anicca*.

***Anicca* (Bur. *aneitsa*)** Impermanence; relates to an unavoidable entropic process that will affect all life but can also refer to a more specific understanding where all of existence comes into being and passes back into non-being in every successive moment; along with *dukkha* and *anattā*, one of the three characteristics of existence according to Buddhist teachings.

***Arahant* (Bur. *yahan*)** Fully enlightened individual.

Aw-ga-tha (Bur.) Daily supplication of Burmese Buddhists affirming faith in the Buddha, *dhamma*, and *sangha*, and asking for protection from harm.

Bhāvanā (Bur. bawana) Meditation; can also refer to moral practice more generally.

Bawana See *bhāvanā*.

Bodhisatta See *hpaya-laung*.

Brahmavihāras (Bur. byama-so taya) The four sublime attitudes: *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *mudita*, and *upekkhā*.

Byama-so taya See *brahmavihāras*.

Cakkavatti (Bur. Setkya Min) Universal monarch; common figure in Theravāda tradition who will usher in the golden age of the future Buddha.

Cakkavatti Sutta Buddhist text from the *Digha Nikaya*; tells the story of a righteous king, then a subsequent king who fails to follow the *dhamma*, resulting in a gradual moral and material decline of society. Eventually, humans re-discover the correct moral path, ushering in the age of a king whose rule will coincide with the coming of a future Buddha.

Cetanā See *sedana*.

Citta See *seī*.

Dama See *dhamma*.

Dana (Pāli dāna) Charity, generosity, donation.

Dawtha See *dosa*.

Dhamma (Bur. dama) Buddhist doctrine; the Buddha's teachings.

Dosa (Bur. dawtha) Anger.

Doukkha See *dukkha*.

Dukkha (Bur. doukkha) Literally “suffering”; refers more broadly to the condition of ignorance of the inherent characteristics of impermanence and no-self; unpleasant experiences are *dukkha* but so are pleasant experiences because they will not last yet we cling to them; along with *anicca* and *anattā*, one of the three characteristics of existence according to Buddhist teachings.

Hīnayāna Pejorative term for Theravāda Buddhism, literally “lesser vehicle.”

Hluttaw (Bur.) Parliament.

Hpaya-laung (Pāli bodhisatta) future Buddha; figure often used by Burmese kings in legitimating their rule; in the Theravāda tradition, the next Buddha will be Metteyya (Sanskrit Maitreya).

Hpoun (Bur.) Power, wealth, or social standing earned through great meritorious deeds in the past; generally believed to be a form of merit only men can possess.

Kadaṃ-kan (Bur.) Daily Buddhist ritual to honor the Buddha, *dhamma*, and *sangha*.

Kālāma Sutta Teaching of the Buddha in which he advised the Kālāma people not to rely on tradition or accept any doctrine until they had tested and considered it themselves; often cited to indicate the inquisitive and open nature of Buddhist teachings.

Kamma See *kan*.

Kan (Pāli kamma) Literally “action”; also used to refer to the results of an action.

Karuṇā (Bur. karuna) Compassion; along with *mettā*, *mudita*, and *upekkhā*, one of the four *Brahmavihāras*.

Kilesa (Bur. kiletha) Mental/moral defilements; the common list of ten is greed, anger, ignorance, pride, wrong belief, doubt, sloth, restlessness of mind, not being ashamed of doing wrong, not being scared of doing wrong.

Kiletha See *kilesa*.

Kusala See *kutho*.

Kutho (Pāli kusala) Wholesome action; merit acquired through good acts; opposite of *a-kutho/a-kusala*.

Lawba See *lobha*.

Lawka neikban (Bur.) Worldly nirvana; initially used by meditation teachers to indicate the possibility of enlightenment in the present existence; adopted by Burmese leftists to indicate the perfect Socialist or Communist state that they intended to build.

Lawki or lawka (Pāli lokiya) The material world.

Lawkouttara (Pāli lokuttara) A perspective on existence from the point of view of Buddhist ultimate truth; takes the world and everything in it to be impermanent, unsatisfactory and without self/essence.

Lobha (Bur. lawba) Greed.

Lokiya See *lawki*.

Lokuttara See *lawkouttara*.

Lut lat ye (Bur.) Independence.

Mahasammata (Bur. maha thamada) From the *Aggañña Sutta*; was chosen by people to instill order after a time of moral decline by acting as judge for the community; Burmese royal chronicles treat him as the “first king.”

Mahāyāna School of Buddhism practiced predominantly in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and Vietnam.

Mawha See *moha*.

Mettā (Bur. myitta) Non-discriminating loving-kindness; along with *karuṇā*, *mudita*, and *upekkhā*, one of the four *Brahmavihāras*.

Min gyint taya seh ba (Pāli *dasa raja dhamma*) The Ten Duties of the King (charity, morality, altruism, honesty, gentleness, self-control, non-anger, non-violence, patience, non-opposition).

Miyopala (Bur.) Traditional; used by Burmese to indicate a Buddhist who was born into the religion or who has not studied Buddhist doctrine; often has a pejorative usage.

Moha (Bur. *mawha*) Ignorance.

Mudita (Bur. *mudita*) Sympathetic joy; along with *mettā*, *karuṇā*, and *upekkhā*, one of the four *Brahmavihāras*.

Myitta See *mettā*.

Nain ngan ye (Bur.) Politics; literally, “affairs of the state.”

Nat General category that includes a number of different types of spirits believed to be able to act in and on the material world; often specifically refers to an officially endorsed pantheon of Thirty-Seven Great Nats that are widely worshipped or propitiated in Myanmar.

Neikban See *nibbāna*.

Nibbāna (Bur. *neikban*) Enlightenment; the state in which all desire and suffering are completely extinguished and there is no more rebirth or continued existence.

Nyan (Pāli *ñāṇa*) Intelligence; wisdom.

Nyi nyut chin (Bur.) Unity.

Padeitsa thamoutpa See *paṭicca-samuppāda*.

Paññā (Bur. *pyinya*) Knowledge.

Parahita (Bur.) Welfare of others; social work.

Parami (Pāli *pāramī*) In everyday usage, “aptitude”; in Buddhism, one of ten virtues that the Buddha perfected before his enlightenment (charity, morality, renunciation, knowledge, effort, honesty, forbearance, loving-kindness, equanimity and resolution).

Pattam nikujjana kamma See *thabeik hmauk*.

Paṭicca-samuppāda (Bur. *padeitsa thamoutpa*) Dependent origination; conditioned arising; Buddhist teaching of cause and effect in which continued existence and suffering originate from ignorance.

Pu htu zin (Pāli *puthujjana*) Ordinary human enslaved to desire and craving.

Puthujjana See *pu htu zin*.

Pyinya See *paññā*.

Rajadhammasangaha (Bur. *Yaza-dama-thingaha*) Text written by the Burmese Minister U Hpo Hlaing for King Thibaw in 1878; advice for an ideal king.

Samādhi (Bur. *thamadi*) Concentration.

Samsāra (Bur. *thanthara*) The continuous round of rebirth for those who have not yet liberated themselves from ignorance, suffering, and existence.

Sangha (Bur. *thanga*) The community of monks.

Sāsana (Bur. *thathana*) The Buddhist teachings along with the entire community of practitioners; the entirety of the Buddhist religion.

Sayadaw (Bur.) Honorific for a Burmese monk; usually the head of a monastery.

Sedana (Pāli *cetanā*) Intention; the driving force behind any action that generates a future effect.

Sei (Pāli *citta*) mind; mindset; mental processes.

Setkya Min (Pāli *cakkavatti*) Universal monarch; common figure in Theravāda tradition who will usher in the golden age of the future Buddha.

Si kan (Bur.) Discipline.

Sīla See *thila*.

Sutta (Bur. *thouk*) Along with the *vinaya* and the *abhidhamma*, one of the three groupings of the *Tipitaka*, the Pāli scriptures; discourses of the Buddha.

Taṇhā (Bur. *tanha*) Desire, craving.

Tatmadaw (Bur.) Burmese military.

Taya (Bur.) Truth, law, justice, *dhmma* (the Buddha's teachings).

Thabeik hmauk (Pāli *pattam nikujjana kamma*) Literally “turning over the almsbowl”; form of public punishment in which Buddhist monks refuse to accept donations from select lay people, depriving them of the opportunity to make merit; also the general Burmese term for a strike or boycott.

Thamadi See *samādhi*.

Thanga See *sangha*.

Thanthara See *samsāra*.

Thathana See *sāsana*.

Theravāda (Pāli) School of Buddhism practiced predominantly in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand; literally “Teachings of the Elders.”

Thila (Pāli *sīla*) Morality.

Thila-shin (Bur.) Burmese Buddhist nuns; not afforded full monastic status within Burmese religious society.

Thitsa (Bur.) Truth.

Thouk See *sutta*.

Tipitaka (Pāli) Three baskets; the Pāli scriptures made up of the *suttas*, the *vinaya*, and the *abhidhamma*.

Upekkhā (Bur. *upekkha*) Equanimity; along with *mettā*, *karuṇā*, and *mudita*, one of the four *Brahmavihāras*.

Vinaya (Bur. *wini*) Along with the *suttas* and the *abhidhamma*, one of the three groupings of the *Tipitaka*, the Pāli scriptures; set of rules for monks.

Vipassanā (Bur. *wipathana*) Insight; *vipassanā* meditation focuses the mind on the present moment to provide insight into the nature of things as they really are (the qualities of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*); there has been a growing movement of lay *vipassanā* meditators in Myanmar since the early twentieth century.

Weikza (Bur.) A person who has developed magical or supernatural powers, usually through study and through moral asceticism; wizard; superman.

Wini See *vinaya*.

Wipathana See *vipassanā*.

Wiriya (Pāli *virīya*) Effort; energy; persistence.

Wunthanu (Bur.) Patriotic, nationalist; *wunthanu athins* (patriotic organizations) were rural networks that organized for mutual assistance and to demonstrate against British colonial rule.

Yahan See *arahant*.

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