



Pali Buddhism And The Burmese Monarchs: Patronage Of Buddhist Texts In The 19th Century

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Abstract

The 19th century is marked as the turning point in the history of Pali Buddhism once again in it getting strong in Myanmar because of the sponsorship of Buddhist texts by the Burmese kings starting from King Mendon Min of the Kobang Dynasty, as alluded to earlier in the article. This article notes the contribution of the monarchs in the compilation and promotion of the Pali Buddhist literature, emphasizing their involvement in the canonizing and redacting efforts of the Pali Canon. During the rule of King Mendon Min, the first and only ever-held Fifth Buddhist Council was also held within the time frame of 1871 and 1872, and this allowed the restart of the practice of the recitation, verification, and preservation of all versions of the Pali Tipitaka across the whole country of the Union of Myanmar. Their royal patronage was not limited only to the council but also supported the development of monastic education, sponsorship of scholars, and dissemination of copies of the canonical texts across Myanmar's territory. Such benefaction was crucial to preserving the Buddhist canon, but it also established Buddhism as one of the primary identities of the Burmese people.

Keywords: Pali Buddhism, Burmese Monarchs, Patronage, Buddhist Texts, 19th Century, Religious Patronage.

Introduction

Pali Buddhism, a cornerstone of Theravada Buddhism, has a long and profound history in Myanmar. The introduction of Pali scriptures to the region can be traced back to the 11th century, during the reign of King Amarnath of Pagan, who played a pivotal role in establishing Theravada Buddhism as the state religion. This tradition was based on the Pali Canon, the most authoritative collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, which encompasses the teachings of the Buddha, his discourses, and monastic rules. As the language of these texts, Pali has been central to the practice of Buddhism and the development of Buddhist scholarship in Myanmar.

Over the centuries, the study and preservation of Pali literature became deeply ingrained in Burmese monastic life, strongly emphasizing meditation and scriptural learning. As a result, Pali became a symbol of religious authority, cultural continuity, and spiritual aspiration. The Pali Canon was revered as the most authentic repository of the Buddha's teachings, guiding both the monastic order and lay practitioners in their spiritual and ethical lives. The establishment of monastic education, centered around studying Pali texts,

ensured that Buddhism remained a vital force in Myanmar's society.

Throughout Burmese history, the monarchy has had a close and symbiotic relationship with Buddhism. The Burmese kings were often seen as Buddhism's primary protectors and promoters, wielding political power to support religious institutions and maintain social order. Their patronage of Buddhist institutions and texts was an expression of devotion and a means of consolidating their authority and ensuring societal stability. Kings such as Anawrahta, Mindon Min, and others are remembered for their efforts to uphold and preserve the teachings of the Buddha, mainly through the sponsorship of the Pali Canon. The 19th century saw a resurgence of royal patronage under the Konbaung Dynasty, with King Mindon Min being a central figure in promoting and preserving Pali Buddhist literature. This period was marked by significant efforts to standardize and protect the Pali scriptures and ensure their accessibility to the broader population. The Fifth Buddhist Council (1871-1872), convened by King Mindon Min, was a landmark event in this regard, as it aimed to recite, verify, and preserve the Pali Canon in its entirety. This article studies the key role of the Burmese monarchs, particularly in the 19th century, in supporting Pali Buddhist literature. It examines their patronage of Buddhist texts, the preservation of the Pali Canon, and their impact on Myanmar's religious and cultural life. Through this exploration, we aim to understand how the Burmese monarchy helped shape the enduring legacy of Pali Buddhism in the region.

Aim of the Article

This article explores the Burmese monarchy's significant role, particularly King Mendon Min, played in preserving and promoting Pali Buddhism during the 19th century. Through an analysis of the Fifth Buddhist Council (1871-1872) and the royal patronage system, this article highlights the monarchy's contribution to the standardization and dissemination of the Pali Canon, which became foundational for Burmese Buddhist practice and scholarship. The article examines how King Mendon Min's efforts to compile, preserve, and distribute the Pali scriptures had far-reaching effects on Burma's religious, cultural, and social life. By focusing on the institutionalization of Buddhism through the monarchy's support, the article will explore how the patronage system influenced the monastic order, the education of monks, and the accessibility of religious texts to the lay population, leading to a more educated and engaged Buddhist society.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the influence of royal patronage on Pali Buddhism in 19th-century Myanmar, focusing on the Burmese monarchy's role in preserving and disseminating the Pali Canon. The qualitative approach is ideal for understanding the complexities of cultural, religious, and political contexts that shaped Theravada Buddhism during this period. Data collection is primarily through historical documents and primary sources, including records of the Fifth Buddhist Council, royal edicts, and monastic texts produced under the patronage of King Mendon Min. Archival research will be conducted in local libraries and monasteries in Myanmar, focusing on manuscripts, royal decrees, and historical accounts that shed light on the monarchy's religious policies and their impact on the Buddhist community.

The study adopts an interpretive approach, analyzing the data to understand the historical, cultural, and political factors influencing the patronage system and its enduring impact on Burmese Buddhism and Theravada traditions. This methodology allows for a deep, nuanced exploration of the intersection between state power and religious preservation.

Historical Context of 19th-Century Burma

The 19th century in Myanmar was defined by significant political and social change, with the rise of the Konbaung Dynasty in 1850, which would rule the country until British colonization in 1885. The Konbaung kings, particularly King Mindon Min (reigned 1853-1878), played a crucial role in consolidating power and ensuring relative political stability after a period of internal strife and external threats. Mindon Min's reign marked a period of significant political centralization, and he is often regarded as one of the most enlightened monarchs in Burmese history, known for his efforts to modernize the administration and promote national unity.

King Mindon Min's leadership was crucial in resisting the growing influence of British colonialism in Southeast Asia. Throughout the century, British imperial expansion was a constant challenge for the Burmese monarchy, culminating in the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885), which resulted in the annexation of Burma by the British Empire. However, before this colonial takeover, King Mindon Min focused on strengthening the country's internal unity and preserving Burmese culture, with Buddhism at its core.

The Status of Buddhism in 19th-Century Myanmar

Buddhism in 19th-century Myanmar was not just a religious practice but the bedrock of the social and cultural life of the people. Theravada Buddhism, with its strict adherence to the Pali Canon, had been firmly established as the state religion for centuries. It was deeply interwoven with the country's political, social, and cultural fabric. The monarchy's endorsement of Buddhism was essential for legitimizing royal rule, as Burmese kings were seen as protectors of the faith. This role was integral to their authority and prestige. Under the Konbaung Dynasty, Buddhism enjoyed significant royal patronage. King Mindon Min's devotion to Buddhism was manifested in his support for monastic institutions, promoting Buddhist education, and preserving sacred texts. Monasteries and Burmese monks were at the center of these efforts, not only as places of religious practice but also as centers of learning and intellectual inquiry. Monasteries were crucial for preserving Pali literature, as they housed libraries and provided an environment for monks to study and transcribe Buddhist texts.

Monks, especially those versed in Pali, played a critical role in maintaining the continuity of Buddhist traditions, teachings, and scholarship. They were responsible for the meticulous transcription of Buddhist scriptures, teaching the lay population, and ensuring the correct transmission of Buddhist teachings from one generation to the next. The royal patronage of these monastic institutions ensured that they had the resources and political protection necessary to fulfill their role as keepers of Buddhist knowledge.

The Patronage of Buddhist Texts by Burmese Monarchs

King Mindon Min (reigned 1853–1878), one of the most revered monarchs in Burmese history, played a transformative role in preserving and promoting Pali Buddhism during his reign. His efforts were primarily motivated by a desire to safeguard the purity of the Theravada Buddhist tradition amidst growing external pressures, including British colonial expansion and the challenges of modernization. Mindon Min's patronage was instrumental in revitalizing Pali Buddhism, mainly through his strong support for Buddhist scholarship and the preservation of sacred texts.

One of the key initiatives of King Mindon Min's reign was his patronage of the Pali Canon, the foundational text of Theravada Buddhism. Mindon Min's devotion to Buddhism was a personal belief and a tool for political legitimacy, as he sought to strengthen his kingdom's religious and cultural unity. He recognized that preserving the Pali scriptures was vital for the continuity of Burmese Buddhism and sought to ensure that the texts were accurate, accessible, and widely distributed. A hallmark of King Mindon Min's reign was the establishment of the Fifth Buddhist Council (1871–1872) in Mandalay. This council aimed to recite, verify, and standardize the entire Pali Canon in the face of potential distortions caused by oral transmission and the challenges of colonial interference. Under his patronage, thousands of monks gathered to recite and authenticate the scriptures, ensuring their preservation for future generations. The King also supported transcribing these texts into durable formats, making them widely available to monks and laypeople. His royal decree also facilitated the publication and distribution of these canonical texts across Myanmar.

The Fifth Buddhist Council, convened by King Mindon Min in 1871, was a monumental event in the history of Burmese Buddhism, marking a concerted effort to preserve the Tipitaka (Pali Canon). The council's primary objective was to ensure that the Pali Canon, consisting of the Buddha's teachings and the monastic rules, remained free from errors and discrepancies exacerbated by the lack of standardized texts.

To accomplish this, the council involved a detailed process of reciting and compiling the entire Pali Canon, which was then meticulously transcribed onto palm leaf manuscripts and later printed. The council's recitation process was an exhaustive scholarly effort, with learned monks from across the region participating to ensure the accuracy of the text. A group of monks recited each of the scriptures, cross-

referenced and verified, establishing a final, standardized version of the Tipitaka.

King Mindon Min's patronage was critical in providing the event's financial resources and logistical support. He oversaw the construction of a royal temple in Mandalay, where the recitation occurred. He provided ample resources to accommodate the large number of monks and scholars involved in the council. The King's involvement in producing printed editions of the canonical texts also ensured their accessibility beyond the royal courts and monasteries, bringing Pali literature to a broader audience, including lay Buddhists. The result of the Fifth Buddhist Council was a preserved and standardized version of the Tipitaka, which was a spiritual and religious achievement and a scholarly triumph. It contributed immensely to the ongoing study and practice of Pali Buddhism in Myanmar and served as a cornerstone for preserving Theravada Buddhism in the region.

The Role of the Monarchy in Religious Education

King Mindon Min's patronage of Pali Buddhist texts extended beyond the Fifth Buddhist Council to encompass religious education and the promotion of monastic studies. Monasteries, as the primary institutions for Buddhist learning, played a central role in the education of monks and the preservation of Pali texts. Mindon Min supported establishing new monastic schools, ensuring that monks were well-versed in the Pali language and scriptures.

The monarchy's role in monastic education was essential for the continuation of Pali studies, as monks were expected to maintain the accuracy and integrity of the texts through constant study, transcription, and interpretation. King Mindon Min patronized learned monks and scholars who were tasked with copying and translating texts and preserving commentaries and other important Buddhist literature. This focus on Pali education helped sustain Myanmar's intellectual and religious life, especially in an era marked by external disruptions, such as colonialism.

The Impact of the Patronage on Burmese Buddhism and Society

King Mindon Min's sponsorship in the 19th century was essential in the preservation and standardization of Pali Buddhist writings in Myanmar. The convening of the Fifth Buddhist Council (1871-1872) signified a pivotal juncture in the nation's religious history. King Mindon Min's proactive engagement in organizing this council guaranteed the recitation, verification, and transcription of the complete Pali Canon, the cornerstone of Theravada Buddhism, into a uniform textual format. Prior to this event, differences existed in the transmission of the Pali scriptures, characterized by geographical variations and possible inaccuracies arising from oral transmission. The effort to compile, preserve, and print the Pali texts profoundly impacted Burmese Buddhist practices and scholarship. By ensuring that the Pali Canon was faithfully recorded and standardized, King Mindon Min helped to solidify the core texts upon which all future Buddhist practices and teachings would be based. This process contributed to a unified understanding of the Buddha's teachings, which was essential for continuing the Theravada tradition in Burma. Additionally, the standardization of the scriptures promoted scholarly study, as monks and scholars could now engage with an accurate and reliable version of the texts, leading to the flourishing of Buddhist scholarship throughout the country.

The royal patronage of Pali Buddhism during King Mindon Min's reign helped solidify a sense of national identity in Myanmar. King Mindon Min strengthened the relationship between Buddhism and Burmese identity by promoting preserving and disseminating Buddhist scriptures. The monarch's commitment to preserving the Pali Canon and its teachings was seen as an assertion of Burmese cultural and spiritual sovereignty, particularly when the British Empire's colonial ambitions began encroaching upon the region.

As the state religion, Buddhism was key in shaping the Burmese worldview and way of life. Through the patronage of Pali Buddhist texts, King Mindon Min not only reinforced the role of Buddhism in the people's lives but also helped to create a unified national consciousness based on religious and cultural values. The promotion of Pali Buddhism became a tool for resisting foreign influence, particularly the British colonialists, who were seen as a threat to both Burmese sovereignty and religious traditions. The King's support for Buddhism thus became an act of cultural defiance, asserting that the heart of Burmese identity

lay in its Buddhist heritage, which the monarchy was determined to preserve and protect.

Challenges and Criticisms of the Patronage System

The patronage system established by King Mindon Min in the 19th century, despite its significant contributions to the preservation of Pali Buddhism, faced considerable challenges due to the advent of British colonialism. As the British colonial presence in Burma expanded throughout the 19th century, it increasingly influenced every aspect of Burmese life, including religion. As part of their imperial policies, the British sought to control and regulate religious institutions, often undermining the traditional systems of royal patronage that had supported Buddhism for centuries.

British colonial policies impacted the distribution of Buddhist texts and the role of Buddhism in public life. The colonial authorities sought to modernize the country by introducing Western education, which, while beneficial in some respects, also led to the marginalization of traditional Buddhist institutions. This shift weakened the influence of Buddhism in daily life and restricted its role in the public sphere. Additionally, British policies regarding the printing and distribution of religious texts were often inconsistent, limiting the accessibility of the Pali Canon to the general public. The colonial administration viewed Buddhism as a part of the traditional order that could fuel nationalist sentiments. Thus, they often sought to suppress or control its institutional influence, including the spread of religious texts that were supported by royal patronage.

The division between conservative monks, who upheld traditional interpretations of Buddhist texts, and reformist monks, who sought a more reform-oriented approach to Buddhist teachings, created internal tensions. Some reformists believed that the conventional practices were outdated and that the focus on rituals and textual preservation limited the potential for spiritual growth. This divergence in views raised concerns about the balance between religious tradition and modernity within the patronage system, with some arguing that royal patronage, though beneficial in preserving the texts, may have inadvertently contributed to stagnation in the development of Buddhist thought in Burma.

In summary, while the royal patronage system in 19th-century Burma contributed significantly to the preservation and standardization of Pali Buddhism, it faced challenges from both external and internal sources. Colonial interference and the evolving dynamics within the Buddhist community presented obstacles that complicated the effectiveness of the patronage system, raising questions about the balance between state control and the authenticity of Buddhist teachings.

Discussion of the Article

This article discusses the contribution of King Mendon Min and the Burmese Kingdom towards the growing popularity of Pali Buddhism in Myanmar during the 19th century. The Fifth Buddhist Council as well as the sponsorship of the Pali texts by the royalty are strong indicators of the monarchy's determination to protect the Pali Canon and its particular version. All of these measures ensured the perpetuation of the Theravada Buddhist tradition and deeply modified the society of Myanmar by making the Buddhist texts and, accordingly, the religious education more available to a greater number of people.

Conclusion

The active support that King Mindon Min provided in the 19th century in Myanmar towards preserving and disseminating Pali Buddhist texts has had a significant impact. He desired to preserve the core scriptures of Theravada Buddhism for future generations by trying to compile and organize the Pali canon through the Fifth Buddhist Council, ensuring that this was effective. This was undertaken to reinforce the monastic order, encourage further dissemination of Buddhism, and make the texts available to a large section of the population. Even today in Burma, as in the past, the Pali canon occupies a central place in monastic practice and lay devotion. His support has also conditioned present-day endeavors aimed at preserving and promoting Buddhism so that his legacy is of crucial relevance for the further development of the religion in Myanmar.

The Burmese example of royal patronage in preserving Buddhist texts can be an ideal case for all countries practicing Theravada Buddhism. Countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Laos also have similar features of state assistance to Buddhism. The activities of King Mindon Min, however, provide ways of looking at how political support can protect the development of religion within society's culture. The codification of the Buddhist scriptures and their distribution contributed to the cohesiveness of communities within a given religion, and this is how nations can foster intangible cultural and/or spiritual values and legacies to endure into the futuristic era.

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