

The Contribution of Mingun Sayadaw To The Sixth Great Buddhist Council

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Abstract

Mingun Sayadaw became Tipiṭakadhara Dhammabhaṇḍāgārika in the Tipiṭaka Examination principally held to seek out an intellectually expert personage, a Tipiṭakadhara, fully qualified to become a Respondent in the expecting Sixth Buddhist Council. The Sixth Council held in Myanmar, but participated and coordinated by all the five Theravāda Buddhist countries, had been the Council of the entire Buddhist World. The Council verified, purified and approved not only Pāli Piṭṭaka Texts, but also its Commentaries and Sub-commentaries which had been recognized and accepted as the most verified original versions of Buddha's teachings. Venerable Mingun Sayadaw contributed extraordinarily, in all verification, redaction, purification and confirmation process of Buddha's Dhamma in the Council. This research paper attempts to present the Sayadaw's magnificent performance and contributions to the success of the Council.

Key Words: Sixth Buddhist Council, Tipiṭakadhara, Pāli Texts

Introduction

Of all Buddhist Councils held in Buddha Sāsana, the most recently held Sixth Buddhist council had great impact for the perpetuation of Sāsana. It had verified, purified and confirmed not only Pāli Piṭṭaka Texts, but also Commentaries and Sub-commentaries, which were approved, printed out and distributed around the world as the Sixth Council versions. The convening and success of the Council's proceedings had been undertaken by 2500 Sanghas from all Theravāda Buddhist countries, but the Ven. Tipiṭakadhara Mingun's Sayadaw's extraordinary contributions to the Council had been magnificent and unrivalled. Without participation of the Mingun Sayadaw, the convening itself could not be materialized. These great accomplishments of the Council and the contributions of the Venerable Sayadaw deserve analytical study.

Research Questions

The research questions are as follow:

- Why did Sixth Council convene?
- What were the contributions of Mingun Sayadaw to the Sixth Great Buddhist Council?
- What were the consequences of the Council?

Aim and objective

This paper is aimed to expose the Mingun Sayadaw's intellectual achievements and extraordinary contributions to the success of the Sixth Buddhist Council as valuable historical records.

Data and Method

The references are used as primary and secondary sources. Descriptive method and analytical method are used.

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Findings

Buddha Sāsanā and Buddhist Councils

The teachings of Lord Buddha which he had preached relentlessly during 45 years of his ministry are known as Dhamma or Buddha Sāsanā. Buddha's teachings had been preserved and maintained by his great disciples Arahats and Sanghas who carried them down to later generations, centuries after centuries up to the present time. During the long history of Buddha Sāsanā, it had passed through an unsteady journey with challenges from within and without. Whenever there arose danger to the original teachings in the form of misinterpretations, encroachments and attacks, the great disciples Arahats and eminent Sanghas of the particular time, tried to preserve the Buddha's original teachings in its pristine purity by convening Buddhist Councils.

The Institutions of Sangāyanā or Buddhist Councils

The Pāli term Sangāyanā or Buddhist Council is known to Theravāda Buddhists in Myanmar as the unanimous recitation of Pitaka Textual Scriptures by the Sanghas Order. Three months after noble demise of Lord Buddha, the great disciple Mahākassapa assembled 500 Arahats and held the first Buddhist Council in India. A hundred years after great demise of Lord Buddha Second Buddhist Council was held in India. And 135 years later, Third Buddhist Council was held in India again and Buddha's teachings had not been recorded in writing up to Third Buddhist Council.¹ However, 450 years after great demise of Lord Buddha, when the Fourth Buddhist Council was held in Srilanka, Buddha's teachings were recorded in writing up on palm leaves for the first time. When the Fifth Buddhist Council was held in Mandalay, Myanmar, all the original Pāli Canon was recorded by inscribing on 729 marble slabs in its entirety for longer durability in 1871 AD.² The Sixth Great Buddhist Council had been held after 83 years of the Fifth Council, held in Mandalay, Myanmar.

The Opening Ceremony of Sixth Great Buddhist Council in Myanmar

A great grand scale Buddhist Ceremony had been held on 17 May 1954 in Mahāpāsana Cave of Yangon, Myanmar. It was attended by two thousand four hundred and seventy three monks from Myanmar, and one hundred and forty four monks from other Theravāda Buddhist countries. Over two thousand lay devotees were also in attendance. Mahānāyaka Sanghas and representative Sanghas of other Theravāda Buddhist countries and Sanghas from other countries such as China, Japan, India, Nepal and Pakistan, Heads of States and Governments, all congregated to attend this Opening Ceremony of Sixth Buddhist Council.³

Buddha Sāsanā and Myanmar

Buddha Sāsanā which had reached Myanmar before 10th Century AD, became established and flourished gradually under Myanmar Kings, who became chief supporters of Buddha Sāsanā. Successive generations of monks, rulers and lay devotees had made concerted efforts for the promotion of Sāsanā. The majority of people embraced Buddhism which played an influential role in the history of Myanmar.

¹ Ashin Kaylā sa, မဟာစည်ထောင်စုတော်ဝိသုဒ္ဓိ (Biography of Ven. Mahāsi Sayadaw), Yangon, Sarpaypoundkue Press, 1986, pp.156-157

² Ashin Janakabhivamsa, အနာဂတ်ဘာသာရေး (Future Situation of Sāsanā), Yangon, Kalyar Press, 1995, pp. 286-287

³ In Honour of Mingun Sayadaw's 80th Birthday, Yangon, Ti =Ni Publishing Centre, 1991, p-26

Under colonial regime of the British, who occupied and annexed the whole country in 1885, Myanmar lost its independence and it lost everything. Buddha Sāsana, which had been always supported by Myanmar Kings as the top religion of the country had been down graded and Christianity was promoted. Many of Myanmar national races were converted to Christianity. Myanmar general public felt annoyed and disturbed. Hence they endeavoured to safeguard and promote Buddha Sāsana in every possible ways with their own efforts. Pariyatti Buddha Sāsana Associations emerged and they sponsored National Pariyatti examinations since 1903.¹

The British had occupied Myanmar only 14 years after the holding of the Fifth Buddhist Council in Mandalay. Hence the momentum of reverence for Buddha Sāsana was still very strong among public when colonial invasion took place. After occupation, the occupiers insulted Myanmar's feeling by down grading Buddha Sāsana. Thus the struggle for independence based on the rise of strong nationalism and reverence for Buddha Sāsana, grew steadily and people were longing for promotion of Sāsana together with the country's independence.

As the struggle for country's independence got momentum, with the rise of nationalism, the desire to promote the Buddha Sāsana grew stronger. The eagerness to promote Sāsana was rampant among not only Sanghas but also reverential lay devotees. By holding the much revered Sixth Buddhist Council, Sāsana would be highly promoted. And the Sixth Great Buddhist Council would make Myanmar a leading Theravāda Buddhist country in Buddha Sāsana.

In addition, as the most recent version of Tipitāka recorded by the Fifth Council on the marble slabs had been copied and printed out by different printing houses. The printing errors in forms and styles became high liability.² Hence, all the Pāli Canon would be purified and verified in the expecting Buddhist Council.

Contributions of Mingun Sayadaw to the Sixth Buddhist Council

The Ven. Vicittasārabhivaṃsa of Mingun had uniquely contributed to the success of the Sixth Buddhist Council. The Ven. Sayadaw's extraordinary contributions to the Council could be divided into three durations of before, during and after the actual holding of the Council.

Before the Congregation of the Council

When strong nationalists became leaders of the Caretaker government of Myanmar, who were preparing for the country's independence, the drive to promote Buddha Sāsana, together with the country's independence became practicable. Hence leading personalities of the country formed the Sāsana Nuggaha Organization headed by the well-known Philanthropist Sir U Thwin. It included learned scholars and even the Prime Minister on 13 November 1947 with the main intention of seeking out the emergence of a Tipitākadhara who could memorize and recite by heart the whole of Pāli Canon. For the emergence of a Tipitākadhara who would be a qualified personage for the critical role of Respondent in the

¹ *The Samgāyanā Souvenir Monthly Bulletin, Vol.I, No.1*, State Buddha Sāsana Council, 1952, p.8

² မင်းကုန်းတိပိဋကဓမ္မဘဏ္ဍာဂါရိကဆရာတော်ဘုရားကြီး-ရွှေရတနာနှင့်ငွေရတနာစောင် (*Tipitakadhara Dhammabhaṇḍāgārica Venerable Mingun Sayadaw, Bulletin of Golden Jubilee and Silver Jubilee*), Yangon, Ti=Ni Publishing Centre, 2003, pp.19-20

expecting Council, the government decided to institute the Tipitāka Examination and the First Tipitāka Examination was held in 1949.¹

Coincidentally, the well-known intellectual Sayadaw Ven. Vicittasārabhivaṃsa of Mingun who had become Pathamagyaw, Vataṃsakā, and Sāsanādhaja Sripavāra Dhammacariya, passing all existing both government and national examinations with distinctions and credits, sat for the Third Tipitāka Examination in 1950. He passed Vinaya Pitāka with distinctions and credits and went on passing Abhidhamma Pitāka and Sutta Pitāka in three consecutive examinations brilliantly with equal facility. In 1954, Mingun Sayadaw became “Tipitākadhara Dhammabhaṇḍāgārica.”²

Another Contribution before the Actual Convening of the Council (or) Redaction of Pāli Texts

In fact, the main aim of the Buddhist Council is confirmation and recitation of Buddha’s teachings on Pāli Texts by Sanghas. Hence the most important and basic necessity of getting purified and verified Texts had to be undertaken long before the Opening Ceremony of the Council in Myanmar. The purification or re-editing process of Pāli Canon had been carried out by learned Sayadaws in three stages of different Visodakas or Redaction Committees.³

The Visodakas had been formed country-wide in primary stage. After that the re-editing had to be done by Higher Redaction Committee composed of representatives of all five Theravāda Buddhist countries. The final redaction had been done by the Final Redaction Committee composed of the most learned Sanghas of the time. The Ven. Mingun Sayadaw had been member in all Redaction Committees: Primary, Higher and Final Visodakas. In all redaction process, especially in Final Redaction Committee, although there were twenty other members in the Committee, the final confirmation and approvals had been mostly done by the Ven. Vicittasārabhivaṃsa. And Ven. Sayadaw expertly tackled all the misfits and led to have right decisions when disputes arose. Due to these painstaking efforts clearly and completely purified and verified Pāli Texts to be recited in the Sessions of the Sixth Council were printed out. Thus, the Ven. Sayadaw had taken the most responsible leading role in all stages of Visodakas or purification of Pāli Canon in advance of the actual congregations of the Sixth Buddhist Council.

During the Congregation of the Council

During the Council proceedings, the verification of the Pāli Texts had been done in the Question and Answer Sessions as the major feature of purification process. Aggamahāpandita Mahāsi Sayadaw was the Catechizer and Tipitākadhara Dhammabhaṇḍāgārica Vicittasārabhivaṃsa was the Respondent.

When assigned as the Respondent of the Council, the Ven. Sayadaw had done magnificently in all Sessions of the Council. In the conduct of Catechism, there was no prior consultation between Catechizer and Respondent. The Catechizer questioned on whatever was required by the situation and the Respondent answered directly precisely and without hesitation. When questioned in Pāli, the Respondent answered in Pāli. When questioned in Myanmar, the answer was in Myanmar. The answers were always organized in correct syntax.

¹ Dr Tin Aung Aye, တိပိဋကဓရသာသနာဝင်္ဂ သမိုင်းမှတ်တမ်းသုတေသနကျမ်း (Tipitakadhara Sāsana Research Book), National Human Resources Department, Ministry of Education, Yangon, 2006, pp.25-26

² The Most Venerable Mingun Sayadaw, Yangon, Ti=Ni Publishing Centre, 1991, p.8

³ Editorial Board of Su Pyaesone Tun, မဟာစည်ဆရာတော်ဘုရားကြီး (Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw), Yangon, Phyoaishan press, 2016, pp.73-74

The Question and Answer Sessions of Catechism were the main part of the verification of Pāli Texts. After that with the agreement of the council, the 500 attending Sanghas confirmed that part of the Pāli Texts and recited the whole altogether. This procedure went on in all the working Sessions of the Council till nearly two years up to the end of the Council in May 1956.¹ The Venerable Sayadaw carried out the most difficult task of the Respondent of the Council with unflagging zeal and intellectual power for the success of the Council.

This Questions and Answers part of the Sessions of the Sixth Council had been broadcast to the whole country by Myanma Athen Radio from 1955 for three years. The deep dignified and mellow voice of the Venerable Sayadaw in measured tones explaining the facts of Buddha in Pāli as well as in Myanmar in Sixth Buddhist Council Sessions broadcast in radio, much impressed all listening devotees, and the prestige of the Council had been greatly promoted.

The Venerable Sayadaw had undertaken as the Respondent not only in Pāli Canon Sessions but also in Commentaries and Sub-commentaries Sessions of the Sixth Council for eight long years.² Hence, the Venerable Sayadaw as the Respondent of the council had done extraordinary accomplishments in all Sessions of the Council. His performance during the course of Sessions had been excellent and magnificent or unrivalled.

After the Council

After the successful completion of the redaction of Pāli Canon in the Sixth Buddhist Council, the Venerable Vicittasārābhivamsa compiled his magnum opus "The Great Chronicles of Buddhas" in commemoration of the Sixth Buddhist Council.³ The great book was in six volumes to commemorate the Sixth Council, in eight books for the Eightfold Path and in 45 chapters for 45 years the Lord Buddha promulgated Dhamma.

As a great book compiled as the exposition on the lives of Buddha, was great contribution to Myanmar Buddhist literature. It had been translated into English and distributed around the world. It had been received acclamation by members of Sanghas, and laity alike. This great accomplishment started on 1960 and finished in 1969 in commemoration of the Sixth Council, had been virtually encyclopedic and great contribution of the Venerable Sayadaw.

Discussion

Consequences of the Sixth Buddhist Council

The consequences of the Sixth Buddhist Council go far beyond the boundry of Myanmar. Not only standardized purified Texts as the Sixth Council version also the message of peace and tolerance had spread around the world as the consequence of the Council. These Sixth Council's version of Pāli Texts became easy reference books.

First and foremost as a result of the Sixth Buddhist Council two thousand five hundred Sanghas of Theravāda Buddhist World unanimously adopted a purified Pāli Pitaka Text, which went through many expert hands and recitations. These purified and confirmed Texts had been already printed many times and distributed through-out the whole country and to the whole world.

¹ Letyar and Ko Oo, *ကျေးဇူးဆပ်မော်ကွန်း (Record of Indebted Payment)*, Yangon, 2016, p.62 (Hereafter cited as Letyar and Ko Oo, *Record*)

² Letyar and Ko Oo, *Record*, p.232

³ Bhaddanta Vicittasārābhivamsa, *The Great Chronicle of Buddhas, Vol.I, Part. I*, Translated into English by U Ko Lay and U Tin Lwin, Yangon, Ti=Ni Press, 1990.p.ii

Tipitāka Examination Board, under Religious Affairs Department continued the holding of Tipitāka Examinations yearly and successfully.¹ Out of nearly 70 yearly examinations, 14 Tipitākadharas emerged and thousands of attempting candidates had endeavored to pass the onerous examinations.² Those fully passed Tipitākadharas and attempting candidates, became leaders in Pariyatti Sāsana. Moreover Pariyatti Examinations were held yearly and Pariyatti Sāsana had flourished.

Conclusion

The convening of the Sixth Buddhist Council in Myanmar demonstrated the strong desires of the Sanghas, the government and the reverential lay devotees of Myanmar in unison to promote Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar. The most distinguished features of the Sixth Council was although it was held in Myanmar, all five Theravāda Buddhist countries had participated in all stages of convening the Council from advanced preparation for redaction of Pāli Texts up to the end of Council. The unity of Theravāda Buddha Sāsana was highlighted by the attendance of 2500 Sanghas. Not only Pāli Texts but also Commentaries and Sub-commentaries had been verified, purified, confirmed and approved by the Council.

Unlike other previous Councils, the reasons necessitating to convene the Sixth Council had been unique. Nationalism and religious conditions had been more conducive than the plight of the printed Pāli Texts.

The version of Tipitāka, which the Sixth Council undertook to produce, has been recognized as being true to the pristine teachings of Buddha, the most authoritative rendering of them to date. These purified and confirmed Texts had been already printed many times and distributed through-out the world.

The image of Myanmar as a leading Theravāda Buddhist country was greatly appreciated for being able to hold such a great Buddhist Council successfully and excellently. Buddhist values of peace and tolerance were clearly identified with Myanmar after the Sixth Council.

The Venerable Vicittasārābhivamsa of Mingun's becoming a Tipitākadhara Dhammabhandāgārika, before convening of the Council had enabled the government to get the consent and agreement of all Theravāda Buddhist countries to hold the much revered Council in Myanmar. Also the Venerable Sayadaw's excellent participation in all stages of redaction of Pāli Texts, had enhanced the smoothness of redaction work.

While the most amazing and magnificent performance as the Respondent of the Council in the verification process of catechism, answering all questions of Catechizer whether in Pāli or Myanmar fully and excellently, the Ven. Sayadaw had raised the dignity of the Council and its success.

The Venerable Sayadaw's extraordinary performance as Respondent in the Council had added up the noble dignity and success of the Sixth Buddhist Council and contributed greatly for the perpetuation and propagation of Buddha Sāsana for many centuries to come.

Glossary

Abhidamma = Higher Dhamma

¹ မြင်းမူသတင်းစာ (The Mirror Daily), 18 December 2017

² Phone shwesin, တိပိဋကဓရ (သို့မဟုတ်) ပိဋကအာဇာနည်များ (Tipitakadhara or Heroes of Pitaka), 2012, pp. 50-58

Arahat	=	The pure one who has destroyed the defilements
Buddha	=	The Enlightened one
Dhamma	=	The Truth
Dhammācariya	=	Doctrinal Instructor
Nibbāna	=	Liberation from Carving
Pāli Text	=	Scripture, Canon
Pathamagyaw	=	The monk who stands first in higher level Pariyatti Examination
Piṭaka	=	Buddhist Scriptures
Saṅghas	=	Community of monks
Sāsanā	=	Doctrinal Teaching
Sayadaw	=	A senior of the Order
Sāsanādhaja Sripavāra	=	Banner of Sāsanā and Excellent Splendid Teacher of Dhamma
Sutta	=	Division of discourse of Buddha
Tipiṭaka	=	The Three divisions of Buddha's Teachings
Tipiṭakadhara	=	Bearer of Scriptures one who has mastered the three scriptures
Vinaya	=	Disciplinary rules of conduct for Buddhist Monks

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