THE BURMESE WIPATHANA MEDITATION TRADITION SELF

CONSCIOUS, A HISTORY OF SLEEPING TEXTS AND SILENT BUDDHAS

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Wipathana (P. vipassana) is a type of meditation which has become increasingly popular with Burmese Theravada Buddhists — first gradually during the later part of the British colonial period (1823-1948), but more radically after National Independence in 1948. Wipathana, literally 'see in various ways' or 'insight', comprises a variety of techniques by which the meditator develops an intuitive knowledge of the causes of suffering (duhkha), namely: the impermanent nature of existence (aneiksa) and the illusion of the self (anatta). While historically considered mainly the prerogative of monks, it is now popularly practised also by laymen. Increasing demand for meditation facilities has given rise to a relatively new institution in Burmese society, namely, the wipathana meditation centre. Wipathana meditation centres are somewhere in between a monastery and a lay association in nature, being devoted to enabling laymen and/or monks and/or nuns to practice meditation for limited periods of time. These Burmese meditation centres have spread to many other countries, including India and Sri Lanka, elsewhere in Asia, and many countries in the West.

It is difficult to give a scholarly definition of Wipathana, as the issues involved are complex and in any case provoke considerable debate amongst Buddhists and Pali scholars. Suffice to indicate at this stage that, if world religions, in their various stages of historical development can be seen in terms of an interplay between 'the word' and 'practice/the experience', the present day Wipathana tradition represents the type of Buddhism which, as I hope to show in this thesis, emphasizes 'practice/experience' to an extreme, in which exponents define themselves and their history as one of 'practice' (patipatti), as opposed to 'scriptural learning' (pariyatti).

Increasing demand for information about Wipathana in Burma has led to a distinct genre of literature written in Burmese on Buddhism which take the lives and experiences of Wipathana teachers and students central, and in which is expressed a distinct sense of Buddhist history. This paper deals with certain aspects of this sizeable body of Burmese literature known as patipatti thahana win, translated in English as the 'history' or 'tradition of religious prac-
tice', and defined by Htay Hlaing as dealing with those who achieved zan (Pali jhāna) and extraordinarily wisdom, yahandas, (Pali anahant) and other special yogi people who practised hard to become ariyas. This type of literature, together with 'history of scriptural learning' (pariyatti thathana-win) makes up the category of written materials known as 'history of the thathana' (thathana win), which is itself one subspecies of nine categories of the genus of materials known as 'histories' (win). It comprises several detailed accounts of 'history of practice' as a national tradition, several dozens of biographies, many thousands of books on methodology, and an uncountable number of pamphlets. This sizeable Burmese version of WM history has hitherto received little attention in Western observations on the Burmese WM tradition. The aim of this paper to provide a modest start in the study of this type of history by elucidating some of the categories employed by exponents 'within' this WM tradition. Summarily, this Burmese 'history of practice' posits a discontinuity in the historical development of Burmese Buddhism at the end of the last century, where the early part was one predominated by 'scriptural learning', where Buddhism is characterized as 'sleepy' and 'silent', while the latter period is one predominated by 'practice', and characterized by 'roaring' and 'flowing' of practice.

Two recent statements made by exponents of the WM tradition capture some recurrent themes in the literature on 'practice', and are therefore central to this essay. The first was made by a (lay) religious historian, and the second (a monk) a biographer of the Mahasi Sayadaw, the renowned Burmese WM teacher: a. From the British to the Independence Period 'practice' (patipatti) has overtaken 'scriptural learning' (pariyatti) in prominence and popularity.... these sleeping nikaya books have – from their place on a shelf at a library, or from a position where they were encased in a pagoda while subject to worship – moved to be read and studied even by little girls, and the Dhammasetkyā, Anattalekhana and Sattipatthana sutta have all become works which are now actually put into practice. b. It is not that in the previous history of the thathana there were no noble ones who practised patipatti before us. Limiting ourselves to those venerable ones closest to us in time, there are: the Kintoya Sayadaw, the Thillon Sayadaw (1786-1860), U Thila Sayadaw (1833-1907) and the Mingun Zeiduwan Sayadaw (1868-1955). It has been recorded in the thathana historical accounts that previous Venerable Sayadaws have practised patipatti successfully and prodigiously. However, these Venerable ones were like silent Buddhas, practising mainly for themselves, and amongst them cannot be found one who became as famous across the globe as the Mahosi Sayadaw (1904-1982).

I shall begin by briefly sketching in the background necessary for discussion. Second, I shall elaborate on some of the more distinctive categories of self-definition by exponents within the WM tradition, some of which, such as 'scriptural learning' and 'practice', are employed in WM perspectives of the past. Finally this paper will conclude with an analysis of perspectives of WM historical development, and a brief exploration of the relationship between 'scriptural learning' and 'practice' in Burma today.
Growth in popularity of WM has been spectacular over the last few decades, as reflected in the establishment of increasing numbers of meditation centres nationally and internationally, the increasing numbers of practitioners of WM, and the development of a sense of connoisseurship of the variety of WM methods established by twenty or so nationally renowned WM teachers in the course of this century.

The earliest WM centre I was able to locate in Burma concerns the Mingun Sayadaw's, founded in Myo Hla in 1911, which was possibly the first and earliest of its kind in Burma. There is no doubt that the number of meditation centres has increased since. For example, the town of Taungyi, with a population of about 80,000, has 28 monasteries, of which 7 have in the course of this century begun to function as meditation centres. Some meditation centres are newly built, some are converted monasteries, and I even know one which is a converted factory floor. There is no reason to believe that the growth in meditation centres has been any less elsewhere in Burma. Much of this growth occurred since 1948 National Independence, when under government patronage, particularly of the Mahasi Sayadaw, the number of meditation centres increased at least threefold: statistics for 1956 show only 216 centres nationally, but my conservative estimate is that today the three most popular traditions amongst them alone – namely the Mahasi, the Sunlun and the Mogok Sayadaw’s methods – share between them certainly no less than 600-700 centres nationally, of which the Mahasi takes about half. As these statistics bear out only three of the approximately 20 nationally renowned teachers of WM, the total figures of meditation centres must be estimated as considerably higher. These centres may vary in status from ‘part-time’, only open at certain times for the teaching of meditation, while functioning as ordinary monasteries for the rest, to ‘full-time’, open all the year round. The first is the case particularly in small towns and villages, where the agricultural cycle does not allow peasants to meditate throughout the year, while the latter centres, usually the bigger ones, are located in the larger towns and cities. However, WM, even today, does not take place exclusively in meditation centres, but also informally before the establishment of the Mingun Centre in 1911, but no record remains of this, and considering the evidence from contemporary Burmese literature on WM practice before World War II and of the last century, this is highly unlikely.

Increasing popularity of WM practice is reflected in increasing numbers of people taking it up in meditation centres. These centres take in – depending on their size – anywhere from four or five or six thousand yogis a year. The Mahasi tradition, calculated on the basis of their own yearly statistics, claims to have received well over 660,000 entries of meditators since the foundation of its first centre in 1938 and its two hundred and ninety second centre in 1981. When I did a survey in my residential area of Rangoon (East Rangoon), I found that approximately one in three adults (over 16 years old)
responded that they had practised WM at one time or another in one of the many centres available, and that practically every single non-meditating respondent had some idea, however vague, what WM referred to, while many were conversant with more than one method.

The numbers claiming to have actually practised WM is likely to be less than admitted in the survey I did, because WM is an activity today proclaimed even desirable by those who do not practise it, is publically known and, above all, open to the public irrespective of socio-economic background.

The following features may be noted as characteristic of the WM centre. First, these centres operate on the basis of egalitarian access: centres are open to all and everyone, irrespective of ethnicity, sex, age, occupation, or even religious affiliation. Second, their location is not limited by geographical boundaries, and WM centres are evenly distributed across Burma, with numerous Burmese centres located abroad. For example, the Mahasi centres are spread over all 13 states of Burma. Sunlu, Mogok and Mohnyin Centres are also to be found all over the country. Burmese centres founded abroad, on the other hand, are mainly those associated with the teachings of the Mahasi Sayadaw, Ba Hkin and U Myat Kyaw. Third, these centres operate in the context of a well-organized and professional set-up: most have rotas for the provision of alms for the meditators and for the free contribution of labour (wiyawizza) by the pious. Fourth, the centres operate on the basis of donations and voluntary labour: i.e. through the concept of religious merit (kuthou), rather than charging meditators the full cost for meditation sessions. Fifth, most of these centres have their own literature printed, some even having their own presses to do so. Finally, most centres are always in some sense related in respect of methods taught to an earlier meditation teacher, and sometimes (if this teacher is still alive) submit themselves to the authority of this teacher. In practice the sanction of teaching is more important than actual conformity in respect of the methodology of meditation taught, and there is considerable scope for modification by individual successors to methods.

WM TEACHERS

Let me note some striking features here of WM teachers. I do not here wish to go into specific ethnographic details concerning the lives and lineages of the subsequent WM teachers. First, most of the nationally renowned teachers are monks, but there are some laymen, notably: Saya Thet Kyi, U Myat Kyaw, Myat Thein Htun, U Ba Khin, and Saya Thein. Second, most of the monastic teachers are of the Thudhamma sect, though there is an early association of the Shwegyin monastic sect in respect of the category of 'practice' (patipatti), under the rubric of which are included other types of meditation as well. But this predominant association with Thudhamma is not highly significant, as it reflects merely the predominance of the Thudhamma sect nationally. Third, for most early teachers two lineages are described, a lineage of 'scriptural learning' (pariyatti), usually starting with the preceptor involved in first ordination as a novice or as a monk and expanded to include many
others subsequent to ordination, and one of ‘practice’, starting from those
who inspired the WM teachers to commence the practice of meditation, and
to commence its teaching. Fourth, a few of the earliest first and second gene-
ratio teachers are still alive, and it may be said that present teachers are mostly
third generation and beyond. Not long after I left Burma in 1982 one of the
last of the great second generation teachers, the Mahasi Sayadaw, died. The
funeral, I have subsequently been informed, was one of the largest in Burma
in terms of numbers of people attending, and Rangoon was closed off for the
occasion. And yet despite all the crowds it was a simple affair, characteristic
of the WM tradition, without the usual music and fancy fair of monk funerals
(hpon-gyi-byans).

As for the earliest exponents of the WM movement as a practical tradition
are the Ledi (1840–1923) and the Mingun (1868–1955) Sayadaws, two eminent
monks. The Ledi Sayadaw established himself in Monywa, Upper Burma,
while the Mingun Sayadaw established himself mainly in Thahton, Lower Bur-
ma, though the latter is known to have set up centres and taught elsewhere.
From references in Burmese literature to WM practitioners before the Ledi and
the Mingun Sayadaws, such as the Thilon Sayadaw (1786–1860) and the Htut-
hkaung Sayadaw (1799–1881), we may conclude that, though they are usually
included in the teacher-pupil lineage of the early WM teachers because of their
emphasis on WM as a practical method of meditation, they did not develop an
exact method of meditation, did not set up meditation centres, and did not
teach the laity at large but most monks and nuns. The Htut-hkaung Sayadaw
is furthermore renowned for his wipathana than-bauks, a kind of rhyme on
WM. As evident from the material on the lives of the Ledi and Mingun Sayadaws,
it is striking that they should have developed their methods independently from
one another, and this provides an indication of the spontaneous phenomenon
that WM is. On the other hand, both (as do practically all monks) moved around
the country a great deal, first to learn and then to teach here and there, and
though their biographies express little connection between the two, it is theo-
retically possible that some relationships have gone undescribed in the Burmese
literature I looked at. Their WM methods are generally referred to in short-
hand as tha-di-pa-htan and ana-pa-na respectively. Many present day WM
teachers, though by no means all, claim links with one of these two monks,
either through pupillary succession, through reading the books these monks
wrote, and/or geographical proximity in terms of their ordination. As noted,
the Mingun Sayadaw set up the earliest centre known to me. The Ledi Sayadaw,
while renowned for his famous anapana method, did not set up WM centres
of his own, but taught meditation to a generation of teachers renowned for
their methods as dispensed from WM centres.

WM'S 'PUBLIC' ROLE

Finally, a brief comment on the role of WM in politics, and the marked
transition in the degree of overt government involvement in its propagation.

While WM was first popularly practised during the later part of the colo-
nial period (1823-1885) in the 30's, WM was not characteristically incorpo-
rated as an important aspect of government policy or local Burmese political leadership. If we are to believe Maung Maung's assessment\textsuperscript{15} of the role of WM in that period, it is rather that the WM popularity in the 30's coincided with a current of disappointment and retreat from the established Burmese system of political leadership of those days. This first wave of popularity in WM occurred: after the major depression brought about by the declining rice prices between 1927-1930 on the peasant population who, in lower Burma especially, had mortgaged their lands to the Indian chettiar and lost much of it as a result; after the Indo-Burman coolie riots of May 1930; and after the unsuccessful Saya San Peasant Rebellion of 1930-1931. Maung Maung notes that in this period the 'disillusionment of the people with their heroes of the 1920's created a deep and lasting distrust of politicians and a distaste for politics. The aspirations and energies of the people became redirected towards the improvement of their individual physical needs and spiritual well-being', so that while in the 1920's almost all national effort was concentrated and directed with single-minded determination in the GCBA\textsuperscript{16} nationalist endeavours, in the 1930's people ignored erstwhile leaders, and devoted their energies and wealth in single-minded pursuit of Buddhist sanctity. Maung Maung notes two outstanding WM teachers of those days, namely U Pandidhamma (who later left the monkhood to become U Myat Kyaw), pupil of the Mingun Sayadaw, 'who in the early 1930's ... was the most widely known and accepted of the meditation centres exclusively organized and run for the lay public'\textsuperscript{17}, and the Mhnyin Sayadaw, pupil of the Ledi Sayadaw, with whom in the later 30's 'a crowd of ten-thousand and 500 pongyis would not be unusual'. If the 30's was the time for a new form of secular nationalism which did not require the inspiration of Buddhism, during the immediate pre- and post-independence period following the 40's, political leaders returned to Buddhism, and here we find a close relationship between political leadership and certain WM teachers. First, this is expressed in the form of patronage. The Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization (BSNO), which today has approximately one-third of the country's meditation centres under its wings, was founded by U Nu (later to become PM) and a number of other politicians and rich businessmen on 13 November 1947, and one of the first things accomplished was the building of its head quarters which at the same time served as a meditation centre where the Mahasi Sayadaw, a pupil of the Mingun Sayadaw, was placed as a teacher. This organization did a great deal more apart from propagating meditation: it promoted activities central to the Revival and the Sangayana; it promoted the Burma Hill Tracts Buddhist Mission, seeking to 'bring about unity and cooperation between the peoples of the Plains and the People of the Hills; and it fathered the Government Buddha Sasana Council set up in 1950, where the leadership was with minor modifications, the same for both organizations.\textsuperscript{18} In the official Burmese history of the BSNO, it is said about the establishment of the Thatha­na Yeiktha that 'With the reconquest and new unification of Burma ... 1) the leaders of the country, excellent in the thathana-daw, accepted willingly the posts of president and prime minister; 2) in accordance with the advice of the PM an association was set up of which the president, the PM and the country's ministers were members together with the rich man Sir
U Thwin; and apparent became this great Thathana Yeiktha (the main Mahasi meditation centre), bastion of international missionary work and thathanna science, such as had never before appeared in Burmese royal history.  

Second, the relationship between government and WM was expressed in the official government subsidies given to meditators in leave from work to meditate. Also in 1957 WM was introduced into Burma’s prisons, when ‘prisoners from 22 jails have expressed their desire to practise “vipassana-bhavana” on their holidays.’ Third, government officials developed a close personal interest in meditation. For example, we learn from U Nu’s biography of his personal interest in several passages of his biography. In 1950, not long after the Burmese government was rescued from the Karen rebellion, and Karens had got as far as Insein in Rangoon (January 1949), and had captured Mandalay (March), U Nu says: ‘the situation eased sufficiently to enable the government to breathe freely. Cabinet members meeting in early June heard the prime minister announce: “My friends, I go to the Meditation Centre tomorrow, I have a vow to keep to attain the ‘thin-khar-ru-pek-kha nyan’. Until then do not send for me, even if the whole country is enveloped with flames. If there are fires, you must put them out yourselves.” Fortunately, however, during the period of Thakin Nu’s meditation no situation that could be called alarming arose in any part of the country. Thakin Nu fulfilled his vow on 20 July.’

Apart from U Nu there were many other civil servants who took to meditation, and senior civil servant U Ba Khin, Accountant-General of Burma, set up the Accountant-General Vipassana Association from which emerged the Rangoon International Meditation Centre, where Ba Khin himself was the main WM teacher. It is mainly these two teachers, out of the 20 or so nationally renowned ones, who were closely associated with government, whose methods have spread to centres abroad.

Public policy of the post-1962 government, unlike the 1948-1962 period, is not to put Buddhism forward as a national religion because of the divisive effect this has on minority groups. Hence, though meditation centres are patronized and frequented by many officials today, they are no longer in the forefront of the quest for political legitimacy.

WM tradition

I have referred to WM as a ‘tradition’ without substantiating in what manner it can be termed as such. ‘Tradition’ means, according to the dictionary, ‘opinion or belief or custom handed down, handing down of these, from ancestors to posterity especially orally or by practice’. This question may be sub-divided into three sub-questions: what kind of ‘opinion or belief or custom’ is being transmitted; in what ways is this knowledge ‘handed down’; and finally, how is WM history to be understood in relation to these?
WM KNOWLEDGE

WM may be briefly delineated here as 'an opinion or belief or custom' in the form of a number of core Buddhist Pali concepts, important to the understanding of Burmese society as a whole, but having a special meaning to the WM meditator. Their meaning is a clue to the meditators' ethnographic identity, and received great stress in explanations by meditators about themselves and their meditational actions, in opposition and in contrast to exponents of other comparable traditions within the ethnographic environment. First, there is the WM meditator's emphasis on 'meditation' (hbawana) over other forms of conventional Buddhist action, such as 'charity' (dana) and 'morality' (thila). Second is the emphasis on 'practice' (patipatti) as opposed to scriptural learning (pariyatti), and the identification of Buddhism proper with meditation. Third is its emphasis on one specific type of meditative action as the ideal, namely 'insight' (wi-pa-tha-na) as opposed to 'concentration' (thamrnahta) meditation, where the latter is not unique to Buddhism. Fourth is its classification of Buddhism as dealing with the search for 'other-worldly knowledge' (lokoutara pyinya), the kind of knowledge which seeks answers to questions on the basis of 'ultimate truth' (pararnahta thissa), as opposed to any other form of knowledge — for example that of language, culture, science, vocational knowledge, or other non-WM meditational systems such as the Indian system of yoga — which seek 'wordly knowledge' (loki pyinya) and ask questions from the perspective of conventional truths (thamouti thissa).

The most distinctive clue to the WM meditator's sense of identity is the latter ultimate/conventional truth distinction. As the Sunlun put it WM 'is the elimination of concepts to penetrate to the real (paramattha) for the winning of knowledge'. Only WM practice can deal with this 'ultimate truth', and no other types of Buddhist activity — whether it be acts of 'charity', 'morality', non-WM meditational systems such as 'concentration' meditation or the Indian system of yoga, or 'scriptural learning' — can remotely lead to this kind of 'other-worldly' knowledge: they all deal with meanings through sensual and conceptual means, while WM deals with intuitive knowledge through experience. Before examining modes of WM transmission, let me briefly quote a passage from a work by the Ledi Sayadaw, written during the second decade of this century on the meaning of WM knowledge.

'Of the two, conventional truth is the truthfulness of the customary terms used by the great majority of people, such as “Self exists”, “a living soul exists”, “men exist”, “Devas exist”... This conventional truth is the opposite of untruth, and so can overcome it... Ultimate truth is the absolute truthfulness of assertion of negative in full and complete accordance with what is actual, the elementary, fundamental qualities of phenomena. Here stating such truth in affirmative form, one may say: “The element of solidity exists”, “the element of cohesion exists”, “the element of kinetic energy exists”... in a negative form... “No self exists”, “no living soul exists”, “no person exists”... In saying here: “No self exists”,... we mean that there is no such ultimate entity as a self or living soul which persists unchanged during the whole term of life, without momentarily coming to be and passing away... Therefore there is no separate being or persons apart from the elements. The
ultimate truth is the diametrical opposite of the hallucination, and so can confute it. 25

WM is thus an experimental kind of knowledge which leads — through putting into practice certain techniques — to the transcendence of the hallucination of life, which is the posing of questions of ‘conventional truth’. It is through this intuitive knowledge that the meditator becomes aware that what is ‘pleasure’ (thuhka) is also ‘suffering’ (douhka). The same knowledge allows a degree of freedom in the rejection of received assumptions and values of the inherited past, which (in my view) facilitates considerably the reinterpretation of Burmese Buddhist history on its own terms of ‘practice’. Certainly this stress on meditational practice as the real Buddhist teachings, empowers some meditators to speak of themselves as ‘monks of the ultimate truth’ (paramahta hbihku) and to employ monastic vocabulary, and to label those monks ordained through convention with shaven heads and robes as ‘monks of the conventional order’ (thamouti hbihku), both considered shameful by many non-meditators and some WM meditators. This ‘ultimate/conventional truth’ is an age-old theme from the very inception of Burmese Buddhism, sometimes used in proud complement to oneself, sometimes in insult to those too puritanical for one’s liking. 26

WM TRANSMISSION

WM is also a tradition in the sense of the verb ‘to hand over’. First, WM over time is conceptualized as passing through ‘lineages of practice’ (patipatti saya a-sin a-hset/thathana win), and WM knowledge is thereby conceived of as perpetuated vertically, i.e. handed down through a teacher-pupil relationship. However, it is also conceived of as increasing (pwa thi), i.e. it recruits pupils from outside the limited boundaries of the community and geographical area surrounding the meditation centre. These two features of WM transmission are important, because the first is associated with the necessity for sanction if a pupil is to become a teacher, and thus closes the tradition to a potentially infinite number of teachers. The second, on the other hand, is responsible for the WM tradition’s ‘open’ nature, as it draws in people of all kinds as potential pupils.

Second, WM as a practical tradition is intensely dependent for its ‘practical lineage’ (i.e. generational transmission), less so for its ‘spreading’ mode of transmission, upon ‘scripture’. The products of all other forms of Buddhist religious action can to some extent be handed over from person to person, and from generation to generation. Charity is ‘donated’ (hlu thi) and ‘received’ (kat thi), and ‘morality’ can be ‘taken’ (yu thi) or ‘given’ (pei thi) in the form of the precepts. Also, ‘concentration’ meditation in the folk meaning deals with the accumulation of powerful medicines or alchemic stones, where its practitioners fear the illicit appropriation of their products by a quick swallow of their alchemic stone by a rival, possession of which ensures instant knowledge and power. No such thing can happen to WM as a practical tradition, because it can neither be ‘given’ or ‘taken’, it is only possible to ‘achieve the road of knowledge’ (nyan-zin ya thi) by practising it in person. However, though its essence (knowledge of the ultimate truth) may be considered untransmittable, its extra-experiential embodiment such as its techniques, published records, and symbols, which point at it, or, as Carrithers 27 puts
it, its ‘emblematic aspects’, are transmittable. While these latter, in terms of
the meditators’ categories, belong to the realm of ‘conventional truth’, medi­
tators nevertheless recognise that from these emblematic aspects may be
derived the knowledge of ultimate truth, provided these are interpreted and
put into practice.

This explains why, despite the essentially negative attitudes by WM medi­
tators to ‘scriptural learning’, there is a point beyond which the meditator does
not go in his criticism, because WM as a practical tradition is nevertheless
closely dependent on scriptural learning. The continuity of practical know-how
is vulnerable and cannot be guaranteed beyond the life-span of any individual
teacher unless he finds successors who have been taught by him face to face.
Even if the knowledge transmitted is in its ‘practical’ sense, there is considerable
individual input and modification of this knowledge in accordance with the
personality, experience, and extent of the knowledge of the pupil. Rarely do
pupils commence teaching completely in the tradition of the teacher: the
claim of legitimacy lies in the sanction given, not in the equation of subsequent
 teachings syllable for syllable with that of a previous generation. This means
that the succession of teachers at meditation centres is a great worry to many
meditators, and it has frequently been expressed to me that meditation centres
find it almost impossible to survive over more than two or three generations
of teacher-pupil succession. This explains also the bad state of repair of some
of the early meditation centres, such as Saya Thet Gyi’s. It is this dual nature
of rejection of and yet an element of need-dependence on the scriptural
tradition which is characteristic of WM as a practical tradition today.

Transmission of WM evidently took place in the embodied and conceptualized
form of scholarship prior to its development as a practical tradition. This takes
me to my next point about WM as a tradition of transmission, which is that
it is historically an evolving tradition: a tradition which rarely transmits the
same kind of WM knowledge through time. Between the two extremes it either
transmits through ‘practice’, through face to face WM teacher-pupil relation­
ship, or through its more emblematic aspects, of which its most important
aspects are ‘scripture’ and written histories. In other words, at any one point
in time of WM history, WM is either predominantly conceptualized as
constituted by the activity of ‘scriptural learning’ — the reading of books on
meditation — or by practice, the sitting down and actually doing it. The import­
ance of the WM tradition today may thereby be understood as but one develop­
ment in this dynamic continuous threefold process of translation: from practice
into scripture, from scripture into practice, and from practice into a different
form of practice.

WM history in perspective

History is not a blueprint to be discovered, but it is made — it is a construction
of an author, of a people. While Froude’s view of historical facts as ‘a child’s
box of letters with which we can spell anything we please’ is an extreme point
of view which I do not subscribe to, nevertheless the possibility must be allowed
for different histories to coexist side by side. The relative lack of contempo­
rary records — both Burmese and other sources — of WM practice prior to the 20th century inhibits our understanding of it as a historical phenomenon. What we can do, however, is to understand it through the eyes of those who have practised and cared to comment on it over the last two decades.

WM HISTORY FROM ‘WITHOUT’

Instead of asking the question what WM is, or when and how it came into existence, we are now ready to interpret WM as a dynamic phenomenon. First of all, knowledge about WM cannot be embraced because the knowledge is in the embrace: the meaning ultimately lies in the individual’s experience (history of religious experience in this sense is somewhat like writing a history of sex or madness). All we can do is to make a fuss over its variety. And yet despite the evasiveness of its meaning, there are overall patterns which require recognition, which channel the experience in certain ways, but these are not patterns of regulation or prescription, which can be summed up in a neat order, but patterns of replication in various unexpected guises. How can these be phrased, and how is the popularity of WM today to be explained? We cannot make the generalization that WM practice was non-existent during the 900 years of Burman history previous to this century. And yet no records remain of its practice. More likely, it may have been ‘invisible’ in the past for some reason. Indeed, it may have been non-distinctive in the past, having become distinct in some manner at present. WM would appear to have become a distinct method at the point when it became divorced from ‘concentration’ practice, when proper Buddhist meditational practice was no longer constituted by the act of utterance, recital, chanting, or by any other conceptually orient-ed activities.

Here I wish to take WM as a ‘tradition’ further, making a distinction between WM as a practical, textual, and committed tradition. Withoudimeg, a commentary composed by Buddhaghosa around AD 433 which is held in high regard by WM meditators, has this ‘double nature’: it is on the one hand a ‘compendium of doctrine’ and ‘the standard of all doctrinal orthodoxy for all Theravada Buddhists’, while on the other, it is ‘a detailed manual for meditation masters’, representing ‘how the Theravada community of monks developed the meditat­ional tradition during a thousand-year period’. It is thus possible to speak of WM as a practical tradition, where WM is ‘an operational model, a dynamic embodiment of the Theravada world view ... through which the meditator in his or her awareness and lived quality of life becomes, so to speak, an incarnation of the Theravada world view, which touches and transforms everything experienced’. On the other hand, we may speak of WM as a textual tradition of ‘scholarship of’ — by study of its embodiment in the various Theravada Buddhist literary sources, both canonical texts and commentaries. Central here are the Thadipathan Thouk, the discourses of the Buddha on medit­ation, and Withoudi Meg. However, to speak of WM as a tradition in Burma today solely in terms of either one of these two — the scriptural and the practical WM tradition — does not reflect the richness of its meaning in the lives of individual meditators, and indeed, in the eyes of the critical non-meditators
in Burma today. This induces me to note that the present day WM tradition is not only a practical, but also a committed tradition (my own term): i.e. not only is WM today a practical tradition, but in addition represents considerably more — it actually becomes part of a peoples' (or individual person's) identity through self-definition. Here it becomes a true tradition with its own Weltanschauung, its own sense of history, and with all the trimmings and secondary aspects that go with such a tradition.

The distinction between these three types of WM tradition provides us with a way of comprehending WM as a dynamically evolving tradition, where at different times there have been different preoccupations with it. In the first sense, as a practised technique, it dates back to the time of the Buddha, i.e. as such it is approximately 2,500 years old. There is no historical evidence that WM was seriously practised on a large scale between then and the end of the last century. Indeed, many Sinhalese and Burman historians of Buddhism doubt that it was seriously practised in that period at all. On the other hand, WM was more widely studied during this period in our second 'scholarly' sense than it was practised. WM as a (Pali) textual doctrine would appear to be no more than 2000 years old, after the Pali canon was written down following 500 years of oral transmission since the Buddha's demise. Subsequent commentaries on meditation, such as Buddhaghosa's, served to elucidate and draw together the scattered references founded in the canon. So the present emphasis on WM as a practicable method of meditation for the laity and the Sangha in Burma is not only relatively recent, but also a renewed one, as the method was interpreted from scripture and its accumulated commentary by individual Burman teachers. The fact that the oldest meditation centre known in Burma dates back to the beginning of this century, is some indication that meditation as a practical method in this organized sense cannot be said to have developed in Burma until this time. While these represent the transition of WM tradition from a 'scriptural' to a 'practical' tradition, WM as a 'committed' tradition is an even more recent development, which appears to have taken place in the post-World War II period when considerable competition occurred between separate WM methods for meditators, and there was a dramatic increase in the number of meditation centres throughout Burma. It is during this time that a consciousness of WM tradition appears to have developed which went considerably beyond that of the uncommitted scholar or the occasional practitioner. Scholarly curiosity was exchanged for dedicated practice, and WM was termed into an aspect of identity for many: they were 'WM meditators' (wipathana yogi). To practise WM became closely associated with 'Burmaness', and it was used to represent Burman identity abroad.

WM HISTORY FROM 'WITHIN'

This relay race between WM transmission as 'scripture' and 'practice' is thus both the cause of its 'silence' in the past of the first quote with which I commenced this paper, and the cause of its 'roaring' in the present, as suggested by the following passage from Htay Hlaing, who saw the historical development of 'practice' in the light of a gradual transformation from the static si-
lence of a puddle into the roaring stream of a wild river. 'Up to the beginning of the Konbaung Period (1752-1885), 'practice' (pattipat) was merely in existence, and was like a few puddles of water here and there, but it did not have any strength to flow. During the later part of the Konbaung Period, there were the Hruhaung Sayadaw (1798-1890) and Hpondaungyi U Thila (1832-1907). During this period the water began to flow little by little into a creek, but due to its small size it did not have the force to cut its way through the dense and high forests and mountains. Then there were the Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923), Theichadaung Sayadaw (1871-1931) and the Mohnyin Sayadaw (1872-1964). In their time 'practice' began to flow and gather strength, and it changed from a little creek into a big river. The strength and the sounds of the flowing water went on to be felt by the whole country... After independence in 1948, the flow became as strong as rivers like the Irrawaddy, and with Sayadaws taking responsibility for the patipatti — Thahton Zeidawun Sayadaw (1870-1955), Sunlun Sayadaw (1877-1952), Kanni Sayadaw (1879-1966), Webu Sayadaw (1895-1977), Mogok Sayadaw (1899-1962), Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982) — the dignity of the thathana was advanced.' (dates changed to Western calendar: some dates added for clarity).

A number of explanations of this increase in WM popularity are current in Burma. One is the view of WM as the best remedy for coping the increased 'suffering' (douhka) caused by World War II. Another concerns the suitability of its practice in relation to 'modern knowledge' (hkit pyinya). Other explanations touch closer upon the theme of WM knowledge as set out above. I have already indicated that in the WM practical tradition the notion of the 'ultimate truth' in some respects facilitates the reinterpretation of Buddhist history in terms of 'practice'. However, the most prevalent and outstanding theme in the WM meditator's perception of Buddhist history is where the increase of interest in WM is explained as the inevitable outcome of a prophecy in which almost all categories important to the WM meditator are incorporated and are given a place. It concerns the identification of the duration of the thathana over two periods of 2,500 years, making a total of 5,000. These two periods, the first starting with the Buddha's demise, and the second starting in 1952, 2,500 years from this event, are each subdivided into five periods of 500 years each during which different types of Buddhist action prevail: in the 'age of purity' or 'age of WM' (wimouyi/wipathana hkit) WM prevails; in the 'concentration' period (thamnahta hkit) 'concentration' meditation and various jhanic oriented methods such as yoga will prevail; the 'morality' period (thila hkit), in which emphasis will be on the perfection of morality; the thouta period in which scriptural learning will prevail; and finally the 'charity' period (dana hkit), in which meritorious donations prevail and many pagodas and monasteries are built. The last 'charity' period gradually tapered off in the course of this century since King Mindon's demise, to make place for the second 500 year WM period in Buddhist history, namely the beginning of the second 2,500 year cycle, in the 1950's. Among other quoting this in the literature, the biographer of U Ba Hkin put it thus: 35 '...In the present purity period, path and fruition of the taya can be achieved. It is a period of meditation, like the time when the Buddha became Enlightened, a period in which, applying oneself to the three disciplines of morality, concentration and wisdom,
the happiness of the path and the attainment of fruition may be had. It is a period of meditation, a WM period. The WM period declined after 500 years, and WM drowned while a storm of darkness appeared. Ignorance overspread and the drowning lasted for 500 years. But though there was no success in meditation, scriptural learning remained. Will meditation suddenly return in the year 2501 (Buddhist Era: 952 AD) after 2,000 years of absence? No, it reverts slowly. But now that it is the purity period, if we work according to the preaching of the Buddha, the morality the Buddha likes, the concentration the Buddha likes, the wisdom the Buddha likes, than there is no reason whatsoever for not being equipped to achieve the happiness of the path and fruition of the taya ...

SCRIPTURE AND PRACTICE TODAY

While these statements of history reflect some of the complex interrelationship between the meditators’ categories of knowledge and their sense of history, there is more to the distinction between WM as a ‘practice’ and ‘scriptural learning’ in Burma today than meets the eye.

WM in Burma today is itself intensely textually oriented in more than one way: it considers the written canon as the source of legitimate Buddhism because of its most enduring transmission, it studies these texts, and the practitioners themselves report on its past in the form of its own literature. It is despite this conscious expression of opposition to ‘scriptural learning’ that we find the striking feature of WM in Burma today is that it is not just a ‘practical’ tradition. We find great variety in the way WM is approached. Some WM meditation teachers, such as the Mahasi Sayadaw and other famous Buddhist WM scholars, practised scholarship upon scholarship in order to fulfill their ambitions in the practice and teaching of WM. Others, like some of the non-meditating monks, practised scholarship upon scholarship solely in order to fulfill their scholarly ambitions.

Disregarding the WM textual, and limiting myself to WM as a practical tradition here, practice is paramount over scholarship. Statements based on practice are considered more profound than those based on scriptural learning, as is suggested, for example, about Sununu\(^{36}\) : ‘His achievement (in WM) because known among the monks and many came to test him. Though he was a barely literate man his answers satisfied even the most learned monks. Very often they disagreed with his replies but when his answers were checked against the books they found many important passages in the canon to support his statements...’ On the other hand, we find that scholarship is nevertheless an integral part of the tradition, where this anti-text attitude is in the process of rapidly being reembodied in text, with as central concern the newly discovered practical nature of WM in the modern age in relation to modern life. Here we find two varieties: some authors of the various Burmese biographies and treatises of WM teachers, perform direct scholarship of practice, while others, such as Htay Hlaing, mainly perform scholarship of the texts generated by these scholars of the practice of WM. It must be noted however, that here authorship of records of WM history is prior to scholarship: i.e. it is only acceptable to WM practitioners if written from ‘within’, where the author must practise WM while
writing.

This, then, is the historical nature of the dynamic tradition of WM, and it is this latter theme of practical scholarship which Lou Kei praises in his book when he says 37 'When investigating the sprouting and thriving of the thathana from its first arrival in Burma until the present, among the three realms of the thathana, it is only possible easily to know about the scriptural tradition ... prepared by the Sangha in various districts ... but much of the meditation tradition and the realization of Buddhist Truth (padi-weida) remains hidden ... The author holds that the noble ones of olden times were in the habit of practising WM in solitude in the forests ... they clenched the taya they found to their chests and cut all their links with the world. That is why nothing is known about these people... it is very difficult to know about the life histories, events and teacher-pupil successions pertaining to those noble ones who in the past nourished the realization of Buddhist Truth through the practice of meditation.'

Ko Lei then goes on to advocate this textualization of WM. 38 'The people who still remember the teachers' lineages, which are the fountain-heads of the various present day meditation works, are still alive, and they are preparing various writings such as biographies of their teachers, their methods of meditation instructed by their religious teachers and their own experiences of satisfaction of these methods. There is no longer any need to fear that is this material on meditation will be lost in the way it was in olden times. I believe that what is needed is to elaborate and complete these writings now.'

So scholarship, however imperfect, is the only reliable medium of transmission of WM knowledge, and presentation of WM to the outside world is closely bound up with it. Thus, the public test of truth of Mahasi Sayadaw's methods, and those of other meditation teachers, when investigated by the national Sangha committee (Thanga Maha Nayaka Ahpwe), is not on their own terms, on the basis of their efficacy of teaching or inducing 'other worldly knowledge' in pupils, but on external terms, namely to what extent their methods conform with the scriptures and commentaries.

WM, then, historically swung around in full in respect of these three perspectives: first, it was a practical tradition at the time of the Buddha; second, it turned into a scriptural tradition in the form of the canon and early commentaries which translated it from practice into text; third, it was translated in Burma back into a practical tradition from text at the end of the last/beginning of this century; and now, fourthly, it is being once again translated back into a textual tradition. Hence it is understandable that the relationship between WM as 'practice' and 'scriptural learning' should be something of a love-hate relationship, where 'scriptural learning' aids in the perpetuation and spreading of the WM tradition of 'practice', because the latter is too fragile and impermanent in nature. Htay Hlaing puts it thus: 39 'the work of "scriptural learning" is but the work of a young herder of cows, while "practice" is like the owner of the cows, who gets to drink the milk... from "scriptural learning" we get to taste only one-tenth the flavour of the Buddha's teachings.' An opinion and statement of identity characteristic of a layman finding himself within a 'committed' tradition, where 'practice' is paramount over the authority of the 'word', and where new 'words' become relevant, more meaningful than the old, because they are rooted in 'practice'.
1 I am indebted to the Governing Body, School of Oriental and African Studies, and to the Central Research Fund, London University, for financial support in my research. I wish to thank especially Dr. R. Burghart and Prof. A. C. Mayer for their caring supervision.

2 There is no single standard term for 'meditation centre' in Burmese, but a group of compound nouns. Some common references to meditation centres are: 'meditation pleasant shade' (Kammahtan yeiktha), 'meditation monastery (or school)' (kammathan kyaung taik), or 'meditation department' (kammathan htana).

3 See for example the lengthy debates in Mahasi (1979), between the Mahasi Sayadaw and the Syriam Tawya Sayadaw and Lama Govinda, his Burmese critics, and Soma Thera, Kassapa Thera of Vajirama, Colombo, his Sri Lankan critics.

4 H. Htay Hlaing, Yahanda hninn pouku htu mya (Yahandas and special people: a history of Burma's tradition of 'practice') (Rangoon, 1981) i.

5 Win literally means here wuntha (Pali vamsa), i.e. 'race', 'lineage', 'tradition', or 'dynasty'. Though I translate it as 'tradition' it really means 'spiritual lineage', or 'history of persons or places'. Thathana (P. Sasanu) means 'order, message, teaching' (of the Buddha), though I prefer Maung Maung's (1980) translation of it as 'Buddhist religious realm'. Three types of thathana are distinguished: pariyatti t. (scriptural learning), patipatti t. (practice), and patweida t. (penetration). 'Tradition of practice' (patpatti thathana-win) is thus a sub-category of history in the last of the following nine types of win: Bouda-win (tracing the lineage of the Buddha); Mahawin (tracing the lineage of the Buddha's relatives); Yazawin (tracing the lineage of Kings); Anagatawin (tracing the lineage after the Buddha); Hdata-hdatu win (tracing the lineage of the relics of the Buddha, silent Buddhas, and yahandas); Dipa-win (showing the history of Sri Lanka); Htu-pa win (the history of stupas and pagodas); Bohdi-win (history of Bodhi trees) and Thatathana-win (history of the thathana).

6 Western authors on WM fall roughly into three categories. The first more or less coincides with the beginnings of disciplined scholarship of Buddhism at the end of the last century, which resolves around the study of meditation from a 'textual' approach, i.e. seeking to describe WM as evident from Pali canon and the commentaries as in E. Conze, Buddhist Meditation (London, 1956). The second and third approach are not really much in evidence before WW II. The second is the approach of the 'embracer' of Buddhism, who seek to explain the personal experience of meditation, see M. Byles, Journey into Burmese silence (London, 1962) and idem, Paths to Inner Calms (London, 1967); Kornfield, Living Buddhist Masters (Santa Cruz, 1976); E. H. Shattuck, An experiment in mindfulness (London, 1958) and A. Dore, Un apres-gout de bonheur: une ethnologie de La Spiritualite laos (Vientiane, 1974). Third is the 'Buddhism in life' variety, which seeks to explain WM in its cultural context and in its variety, which is mainly expounded by anthropologists and comparative religionists. Sources that may be consulted on WM from the latter perspective are: F. Brohm, Burmese Religion and the Burmese religious revival (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1957); W. L. King, Theravada Meditation: The Buddhist transformation of Yoga (Pennsylvania, 1980), idem, A thousand lives away: Buddhism in contemporary Burma (Oxford, 1965) and G. Houtman, 'Novitiation ceremonial in Theravada Buddhist Burma: a "received" and an "interpreted" version'. South Asia Research IV/1 (May 1984) on Burma; M. Carrithers, The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka.

7 The reference to 'within' (win) is here expressly made. The Burmese word win, as referred to in note 3 as a 'tradition', is also the same word as the qualification 'inside' or 'member of', and the verb 'to enter' (win thi). At some points these merge into each other in usage. Thus the same term thathana win can mean both, 'tradition of thathana' or 'he who is inside the thathana' (thathana win poukou abbreviated). In the former it refers to the complete history of the thathana tradition, while in the second it refers to that individual/community/object or scripture located within the tradition. Such are the monks, who are within the lineage of the Buddha, and who are referred to as 'sons of the Buddha'. A common way of speaking of an ordination into monkhood is to say 'entering the thathana' (thathana win thi). Qualifications of these memberships are open to dispute, and a grey area in membership of the thathana lineage are the nuns, the meditators and the hermits, who may consider themselves 'inside the thathana' for their own reasons, but who are strictly speaking in Burmese public opinion, like the 'heretic', 'outside the thathana' (thathana apa, i.e. not part of the thathana tradition). There is yet a third category of person in the Burmese language who is neither 'inside the thathana' nor a 'heretic', but 'inside the language of Buddhism' (bouda batha win). The latter term, 'the language of Buddhism' is currently used to refer to 'Buddhism' in many contexts in preference to the term thathana, and during my fieldwork I encountered a number of Burmese claiming this term to have been introduced in the last century by Judson, a Baptist missionary, who wrote the first comprehensive Burmese-English and English-Burmese dictionaries. Allegedly he could not cope being labelled a 'wrong viewed' (weisha deihti) or a 'heretic' (thathana apa). Finally there is a fourth category, namely 'inheritors of the thathana' (thathana mwei), not 'inside the thathana', but nearer to the thathana than the category of 'inside the language of Buddhism', reserved for sponsors of ordination ceremonies.

8 Sayadaw means 'holy teacher', generally translated as 'abbot', and is used to refer to refer to, either over 10 years in monkhood, or in charge of their own monasteries.

9 Htay Hlaing, Yahanda, 12.


15 Maung Maung, From Sangha to laity: nationalist movements in Burma 1920-1940 (Australian University Monographs on South Asia, 1980) no. 4, xiii, 108-117.
General Council of Buddhist Associations until 1920, later changed its name to General Council of Burmese Associations. M. Mendelson, *Sangha and the state in Burma: a study of monastic leadership.* (Ithaca, 1975) 197.

Maung Maung, *Sangha to laity,* 114.

Mendelson, *Sangha and the state,* 271.

*Bouda Thathana Nuggaha Ahpwe Ahtoupatti Thamaing* (BSNO History) (Rangoon, 1958) ii.

*BSC.* 1956, 9.


The autobiography is written by U Nu about himself, curiously enough, in the third person.

Pali is the language through which Theravada Buddhist scriptures have come to the Burmese. Sometimes referred to as 'the original language' (*Mula batha*) it has had a profound impact on the Burmese language of today, both, in terms of grammar, historical records and loan words. Traditionally taught in monasteries to all men, a degree of familiarity with Pali is highly valued in Burmese society as a sign of learning.

A similar distinction is *wipathana-hdura* and *ganttha hdura,* though this is less common in popular usage.


For a discussion of 'ultimate truth' and 'conventional truth' in other contexts of Burmese Buddhism, see Mendelson, *Sangha and the state,* 73-77, 105-106. Dore, *Après-gout,* 86 equates these with *la nature* and *la culture* respectively. Its earliest usage in Burmese context is in Pe Maung Tin and G. H. Luce, *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* (translation Rangoon, 1960) 59-74.

Carrithers, *Forest Monks,* 59-60.


Harvey, *History of Burma* (London, 1925) 307,309 said about this Burmese 'mistaken' sense of history: 'perhaps as much as half the narrative told historical de... *‘...th century is folk-lore...’* and ‘the surviving traditions of the Burmese are Indian because their Mongolian traditions died out’. For a Burmese version of this history see Hting Aung, *A history of Burma* (New York, 1966). Traditional Burmese history was not informed by as rigid a distinction between secular and religious history, and would appear less concerned with questions about physical than with spiritual origination and continuity.

On *Visuddhimagga* see King, *Theravada Meditation,* ch. 2-6 and Carrithers, *Forest Monks,* ch. 3.

King, *Theravada Meditation,* viii.

Some of these Burmese views are quoted in this paper. As for the Sinhalese view see Rahula, *The heritage of the Bhikkhu* (New York, 1974) 24-33, who argues that 'from the illustrations given in the commentaries it is evident that the vocation of study or scholarship (ganttha-dhura) was deemed more important than the vocation of meditation (vipassana-dhura).'

*Htay Hlaing, Yahanda,* 12.


36 S. V. Sunlun, *The Yogi and Vipassana* Rangoon, s.a.) 7.
37 Ko Lei, *Saya-gyi U Ba Khin*, ix-x.
38 *Ibidem*, xii.
39 Htay Hlaing, *Yahanda*, 12.