

**SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM AND GENDER:
CASE STUDIES OF BUDDHIST NUNS WHO RUN
MONASTIC SCHOOLS IN BURMA/MYANMAR**

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist nuns in Burma have rarely been involved in social activities until recently, except in taking care of orphans. However, nuns have started to be involved in providing monastic school education since 1997 in response to the educational needs of poor children. Having nun-led monastic schools is a recent social trend since monastic school education was traditionally led only by monks. Social engagement of the nuns in this study is underpinned by the situation of the country, specifically related to the problem of access to formal education for many poor children, as well as the nuns' own life experiences and Buddhist world views regarding social engagement.

Nuns face similar challenges to monks who run monastic schools, such as financial constraints, being able to provide quality education for school children, and the risk of being subjected to the state's manipulation, cooptation or control. In addition, the nuns who run monastic schools tend to face other layers of challenges. These layers of challenges are inherent in their gender identity and ambivalent religious position. In spite of gender biased criticisms, they have overcome such challenges with their hard work, dedication, perseverance, and patience. They can capitalize on their selfless motives to help improve the lives of poor children, their educational credentials, and their ascetic practices to earn trust, respect, and support of lay donors

The reputation of the schools and the school head nuns in this study may help improve the public perception of nuns as capable educators and worthy members of the monastic community. However, this recognition does not extend to the possibility of changing the gender stereotypical attitudes towards women due to the inherent traditionally gender biased norms compounded by the country's patriarchal context, coupled with its militarized politics. In spite of the fact that the head nuns in this study have managed to confound criticisms directed at them due to their position as women and nuns, they cannot overcome traditional gender stereotypes. Consequently, gender awareness, a motivating factor to prove their credibility in work, does not necessarily inspire them to seek equality in the religious institutional structure. Instead, within the context of Burma, the issue of gender equality seems irrelevant for nuns who seek to keep a harmonious stance with the fully ordained male monastic members as affiliated members of the *Sasana*

KEY WORDS: BUDDHIST NUNS / SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM**GENDER EQUALITY / BURMA (MYANMAR) / MONASTIC SCHOOLS**

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale of the Research

In Theravada Buddhist countries, nuns' religious position is quite ambiguous since they are not fully ordained members of the monastic order and attitudes towards nuns are quite ambivalent except for those nuns with high socio-economic background and those who have attained achievement in scriptural studies. The Buddha's teaching of egalitarian doctrine is still yet to be implemented in terms of the institutional structure. However, nuns have proved their worth in the religious and social realms by devoting to Buddhist studies and ascetic practices and also by getting involved in social activities in response to the needs of the society around them.

Throughout the history of humankind, forces that relegate women to subordinate positions are primarily concerned with cultural and traditional practices and attitudes. As religion has much influence over culture, the reverse is true and religion is also affected by culture. The Brahmin culture that flourished during the Buddha's time has left its legacy in modern Theravada countries. According to the Brahmin culture, women are believed to be of the inferior sex and are not allowed to be involved in the religious realm on a par with men, but just as servants of their husbands. Nowadays in Theravada countries, gender stereotypical attitudes towards women as weak, submissive and their assigned role as mothers and wives have implication in diminishing their religious significance in the monastic life.

In Burma, nuns' religious and social standing is neither in the lay realm nor in the fully ordained religious realm. Regardless of the fact that the debate on full ordination of women is beyond the scope of this study, it can be argued that it has some implications for the hardships and difficulties in their daily life. However, the legacy of educational excellence in Buddhist scriptures of ancestor nuns earns the nuns' credibility as *dhamma* teachers and practitioners and they are being recognized

by the state and monks as affiliated members of *sasana*.¹ In spite of that, their position as the keeper of the eight or ten precepts situates them at a lower level of the highly respected monastic community.

Throughout the history, nuns in Burma have been mostly dedicated to the scriptural studies and meditation practices. Until recent time, they were rarely involved in social activities except a few nunneries that run orphanages or take care of the old aged and poor girls. However, these days, an increasing number of nuns have been involved in social activities specifically in running monastic schools that have been traditionally led only by monks until recently. With the emergence of those socially engaged nuns, the role of the nuns needs to be considered in the structure of the relationship among the state, the *Sangha* and the monastic school. An analysis on the personal and social context in relation with this new social trend will earn more understanding on the emergence of those socially engaged nuns in Burma and how it has impact on their life and work. And it will also give an understanding on how the nuns' life and work has impact on social trends, particularly in the area of gender awareness.

There has been no prior study of nuns' social engagement within the context of Burma in spite of some studies of nuns in Burma in general. This study hopes to give an understanding of the nuns' life and work in this respect. It also aims to examine the social aspect of Buddhism that might correspond to human rights values specifically in relation with the work of the nuns in their effort to meet the right of poor children to have access to education. It is also to discern what implications the activities of the nuns have in the possibility of changes in the societal attitudes towards nuns and women in general.

This study explores the life and work of nuns who run monastic schools in Burma. It argues that the religious, cultural and social contexts of Burma have impact on the nuns' sense of responsibility and their roles in social engagement. While these nuns face limitations within the context of Burmese state and society, they manage to overcome them with their Buddhist ethical values and they become the source of motivation for others to support their courses or to involve in the project together with them.

¹ Monks and novices are given '*sasana* membership record' from 1981 onwards while nuns are given 'affiliated membership records of *sasana*' from 1982 onwards (see Tin Maung Maung Than 1988, 41-44).

1.2 Objectives of the Research

1. To study life profile of the nuns selected for case studies, including their motivation, the Buddhist principles that inform their work, their efforts, achievements, challenges and how they deal with challenges at the personal, societal and governmental levels, all these in relation to the nuns' goal of enabling poor children to get access to education
2. To examine the social context in which the nuns' social work has emerged and how this context affect their life and work
3. To examine the nuns' perspectives on the relationships between Buddhist teachings and practice, social engagement, human rights values and gender issues
4. To analyze what implications the activities of socially engaged Buddhist nuns have on changing societal attitudes towards nuns and women in general

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the social, cultural and religious contexts which enable the emergence of the nuns as socially engaged ascetics in Burma today, specifically those running monastic schools traditionally led only by monks?
2. What are the achievements and challenges of the nuns who run free schools at their nunneries and how do they overcome the challenges?
3. How social engagement of the nuns can be examined from a human rights perspective and what implications do their activities have for change in societal attitudes towards nuns and women?

1.4 Research Methods

The research approach used for this study is qualitative. This includes documentary review on the status of nuns across Theravada countries and in Burma, and case studies of three nunneries that run free schools. These cases were selected based on their accessibility

in terms of location and availability of information. All three schools are situated in Yangon Region and about one and half hour drive from Yangon city.

A series of in-depth interviews was conducted with each head nun regarding her life, work and her world view regarding social engagement and gender issues. The researcher got access to the three schools through a network of friends. With an introduction of a lay donor of the first nunnery school, the researcher visited the school and stayed there for a week. During the stay, the researcher gradually established trust and good relationship with the head nun and the other nuns residing at the school. The researcher did a series of in-depth interviews with the head nun, spending one hour each day during the whole length of the stay. The interviews took about 7 hours altogether. Throughout the stay, the researcher was involved with activities of the nunnery and the school by helping with cleaning or preparing food and also by volunteering at school with teaching activities. This involvement earns the researcher a good understanding on the life and work of the nun, challenges and ways to overcome them.

The researcher also did both formal and informal interviews with the other four nuns who are closely working with the head nun at the school. Three out of four nuns teach at the school and one nun supports the head nun with the administrative matters. The other stakeholders the researcher interviewed include three parents, one male teacher and one female teacher. The researcher also had casual conversations with some school children and young nuns. By having conversations with them, the study ensures internal validity. It enables the researcher to look into the perspectives of the other interviewees regarding their knowledge on the nun's life, work and the school. Inquires are made on how these other interviewees are motivated by the head nun's leadership and their relationship with her in terms of work or social engagement. The researcher also explored aspects of their life impacted by the head nun's life and work and the school and their vision of the school under the nun's leadership. In addition, inquiries are also made about their perspectives on gender issues especially in relation with nuns' social engagement and the role of women in society.

A similar pattern of data collection was adopted at the other two schools. However, the researcher did not stay overnight at these schools mainly because the nunneries rarely have extra space to accommodate a guest. Instead, the researcher

went there during the day time and conducted a series of in-depth interviews with the head nuns and formal and informal interviews with other stakeholders. Interviews with each head nun took about 4 to 5 hours in total. With the other interviewees, duration of the interviews ranged from 15 minutes to one hour depending on whether it was formal or informal. At the second school, the researcher informally talked with one teacher nun who is closely working with the head nun, two parents, one male and one female teachers, a medical doctor who is volunteering at the school with health check-ups, the grand aunty of the head nun and four students consisting of one young nun, two boys and one girl.

The researcher got access to the second school through the network of a monk whom the researcher has known for about 15 years. The monk used to be the student of a teacher monk who is a relative of the head nun of the second school. With the introduction of the head nun of the second school, the researcher came to know the third school. At the third school, the researcher also talked with one teacher nun, two female teachers, one male teacher, and two parents. In addition, the researcher also had an informal conversation with five students including two young nuns, two boys and one girl.

The researcher also talked informally with 13 other nuns from other nunneries who are not directly related with the life and work of the head nuns but have good knowledge about the emerging trend of the monastic schools run by the nuns. The researcher inquired about the impact of social engagement of the nuns especially regarding their perspectives on gender awareness issues and gender equality in the monastic structure. Out of the 13 nuns, 4 are visitor nuns whom the researcher met during the overnight stay at the first school and 3 are from Sagaing, a place renowned for the constellation of nunneries and monasteries and one '*dhammakathika* nun' who gives dharma talks in public. The researcher also had a chance to conduct informal interviews with two monks who are supporting nuns in different ways. One is the head monk of a monastic school and the other is the abbot monk of a monastery. Although the interviews were rather short, they give some insight into the thoughts of these monks regarding nuns' work and gender equality issue in the monastic structure.

Field data collection took about 4 weeks and all the interviews that were held formally was able to be tape recorded with the permission of the interviewees

except for those data that the interviewees and the researcher thought would be sensitive. For informal conversations, the researcher took notes soon after the talk.

1.5 Ethical Issues

The researcher sought oral informed consent of each of the head nuns and other interviewees who participated in the study. Regarding the researcher's interaction with school children, since the interviews were held in the school vicinity during the school time, the researcher requested an informed approval verbally from the head nun and the class teachers from each school. From the beginning, the researcher explained about the usage of pseudonyms of people and specific places and the head nuns were satisfied with the usage and felt more comfortable to talk about their feelings and experiences more openly. The data are kept confidential in a secured location and after finishing the project, they will be destroyed.

1.6 Organization of the thesis

Chapter One has given background and rationale of the research; objectives of the research; research questions, research methods and ethical issues. Chapter Two highlights the societal and political context of this study. It concerns the status of nuns across Buddhist countries and that of nuns in Burma so that it gives an understanding of the current institutional structure and its implications across Theravada Buddhist countries and in Burma. The analysis also includes Burma's political and socio-economic context in relation to the life and work of the nuns. Chapter Three gives an analysis of the nuns' work related motivation and challenges. Before an analysis, a brief sketch on the life profile of each nun and their schools are given so that it can serve as a backdrop for the subsequent analysis on challenging issues and the examination of their work from a human rights perspectives. Chapter Four concerns the implications of their work on changing the people's perception on the nuns' social and religious standing and women in general. World view of the nuns on gender issues is also analyzed and finally the concluding remark on the summary of the findings is given in the last chapter.

CHAPTER II

SOCIETAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED NUNS

This chapter will highlight the societal and political context of this study. The first two sections concern the status of nuns across Buddhist countries in order to provide an understanding of the current institutional structure. This chapter will focus on implications of the current institutional structure across Theravada Buddhist countries, and describe how culture and religion impacts gender issues within both historical and contemporary contexts. The last section focuses on the state of nuns in Burma given their specific historical and cultural background and Burma's political and socio-economic context in relation to the life and work of the nuns in this study.

2.1 Status of nuns across Buddhist countries

Scholars have noted that the societal attitude towards nuns in Theravada Buddhist countries is quite ambivalent. As they have renounced the lay life, they are not in the lay realm anymore, but their position of not being fully ordained makes them fall in between the lay and religious realms. These ascetic women observe eight or ten precepts unlike fully ordained female monks, '*bhikkhuni*', who observe 311 rules, and *bhikkhu*, male monks who observe 227 rules. From the orthodox Buddhist point of view, they are categorized as 'pious laywomen', or 'Upasika'. This category tends to diminish their religious authority (Kawanami 1997:119). Generally they are not as respectable as the fully ordained monks in the eyes of the lay people, though there are exceptions that some nuns are highly respected either because of their social and economic status or their achievement in education.

Scholars like Kawanami (1997, 2007), Carbonnel (2009), Tsomo (1989, 2000), Falk (2000, 2007), Kabilsingh (1989) and Bartholomeusz (1994) have done research on the life of Buddhist nuns. From their work, the ambiguous position of nuns in the religious realm manifests across Theravada countries, which has implications on their social and religious standing and their endeavour for spiritual and educational advancement. According to the findings, challenges and constraints faced by nuns are inherent in patriarchal societal attitudes and unequal institutional structures.

Scholars like Tsomo and Kabilsingh who promote nuns' full ordination have argued in favor of its benefits. It is regarded as a tremendous opportunity for the advancement of spirituality since the precepts that *bhikkhuni* or *bhikkhu* observe enable their moral life to be ultimately pure and pristine. Kabilsingh (1989:216) notes that "it is so conducive to *Dharma* practice that many realized beings are recorded to have received ordination even after attaining *arhatship*¹" Although the arguments related to the restoration of the *bhikkhuni* ordination are beyond the scope of this study, for the purpose of this study, it is useful to understand the life of the nuns and the role they play in relation to their religious and social standing. It is essential to analyze the institutional and societal context in which they are situated. In doing so, their association with the monastic institution needs to be analyzed in relation to how their lack of status as fully ordained monastic members leads to their daily hardships and difficulties. With that in mind, this section touches on some instances related to this issue.

While the monastic order endows a monk with religious authority and is seen as a reliable field of merit, for a nun, without belonging to the community of the *Sangha*, she has to prove her religious worth through her learned skill in Buddhist scriptures or advanced spirituality. For ordinary nuns, they are generally marginalized and they have to face challenges in fulfilling their basic necessities. A similar situation involving *mae chiis* is relevant, Thai female ascetics in white robes who are deprived of certain rights as laywomen because of their renunciation status but who, at the same time, are not entitled to get the benefits bestowed upon the monastic order by the government. For instance, they cannot vote in political elections, but they are not entitled to a discount or waiver of fares when using public transportation unlike the

¹ The state of attaining enlightenment, an *arhat* is not supposed to have a rebirth into the next life.

fully ordained monks (Kabilsingh 1989:228). They also do not get access to the government run Buddhist universities with the exception of some courses open to both mae chiis and the lay people (See more detail in Falk 2007). According to a mae chii survey conducted in the 1980s, they were found to have very low education standards and elder nuns who beg tarnish the image degrading the status of the nuns (Kabilsingh 1989: 230-1).

In the case of Burma, for the ordinary Thilashins, women keepers of the eight or ten precepts, without high educational or spiritual status, they receive less material support than the monks. For instance, in 1986-87, a nun was donated an average fee of between ten and twenty-five kyat for their attendances at a funeral while the donation to a monk was between 100 to 200 kyats². And, in 1997-98, due to inflation, the donation to these nuns rose to between 100 to 250 kyats while a monk normally received around 1,000 kyats (Kawanami 2007:10).

In Sri Lanka, about 20 years ago, the nuns also known as Dasa Silmatavo, mothers of the ten precepts, was found to be in a marginal position and they had neither educational opportunity nor money to travel. They were unable to attend the classes in some traditional Buddhist schools according to the research done by Devendra (1988:263). Due to the nuns' low status, families are often reluctant to allow their daughters to enter nunhood.

Contrarily, when looking at the status of the nuns in the Mahayana countries like Taiwan and China, nuns receive full ordination. When compared with the nuns in the Theravada countries, they enjoy a relatively equal religious identity as monks, and are recognized both in the monastic community and society at large. This is in spite of the fact that the allocation of duties and leadership is still influenced by Chinese patriarchal tradition. The Taiwanese *bhikkhuni* community is well established and nuns enjoy a higher social status, because of the advancement in education in both secular and Buddhist studies. They have been a significant force in securing full ordination for nuns from Theravada countries, as well as in Tibet, where the origin of the *bhikkhuni* lineage is obscure (Li 2000).

Across the Theravada region, nuns are still struggling for social acceptance and monastic acknowledgement for their women's rights to full ordination. However,

² Depending on the fluctuation of the exchange rate, one dollar might be equal to about 800 kyats.

organizations like Sakyadhita, the International Association of Buddhist Women, have established networks of nuns from different sects across the globe. These networks have adopted programs and projects to improve the nuns' facilities and educational opportunities, including the establishment of full ordination.

In spite of challenges and constraints, female ascetics are seen to utilize the religious space not only for their educational and spiritual advancement, but also for the educational benefit of disadvantaged girls. For instance, with the support of the Thai Mae Chiis' Institute and leadership of some educated mae chiis, Dhammacarinii Witthayaa School at Samnak Chii Ratburi (Ratburi nunnery) is providing educational access to poor girls and nuns who cannot access government secondary schooling. The first mae chiis' college in Thailand, Mahapajapati Theri College has also provided secular and Buddhist studies to mae chiis since 1999 (See more detail in Falk 2007). This is proof that female ascetics are as capable as male spiritually and morally.

2.2 Historical and contemporary contexts

2.2.1 Culture, Religion and Gender

Given the above overview of nuns' lives focusing on the implications of unequal institutional structures, this section highlights the historical and contemporary contexts that have shaped the nuns' lives. Across the countries in discussion either in Thailand, Sri Lanka or in Burma, it is the cultural and traditional attitudes and practices that relegate women to a subordinate position, as manifested throughout the history of humankind. As part of culture, religion is also found to influence, and be influenced by social and ideological culture. Brahmin tradition, which is also known as Hindu culture nowadays in India, where Buddhism was born has influence on Buddhism. It can be seen in some Buddhists texts, and in the patriarchal interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. This undermines the egalitarian doctrine of the Buddha. In consequence, it is discernible that Brahmin culture has infiltrated the Theravada Buddhist countries and affected the legal and institutional structures that enforce its principles and practices, in relation with gender issue.

2.2.2 Historical context

In Brahmin culture, women are regarded as men's possessions and are to be submissive under male dominance, either that of father, husband or sons throughout their whole life. For instance, if a woman could not give birth to a son, her husband can find new wives. Women are regarded as the inferior sex and their gender-specific bodily functions (menstruation and childbirth) are identified as dangerous and polluting to male purity (Gombrich cited in Hamilton 1996:94). This might be the reason that women are never allowed to assume any religious identity or any status of their own. Instead, they are only allowed to take part in performance of religious rituals as servants of their husbands (see more in Leslie cited in Hamilton 1996:93).

Such social realities made the Buddha think twice before letting Mahapajapati Gotami, his stepmother, be ordained as the first Buddhist nun or *bhikkhuni*.³ Finally, the Buddha took a radical step and reversed the conventional tide of rejecting women in the public and religious sphere. The Buddha confirmed the fact that women are equally capable of achieving enlightenment as men.

On the other hand, the influence of Brahmin culture is seen in the *Cullavagga* (Book of the Discipline), a *Vinaya* Pali text for *bhikkuni* that concerns the *bhikkhuni*'s relative position in the Buddhist community. The eight special rules, known as *garudhammas*, contained in the *Cullavagga*, are said to be presented by the Buddha as a condition for allowing his stepmother Gotami, into the *Sangha* community. Some scholars like Kabilsingh (n.d), Kusuma (2000), and Vine (2000) have shown their doubt and confusion about whether those rules were set by the Buddha Himself or not.⁴ Nonetheless, according to the critique of the text, the rules appear to subject nuns to the dominant position of monks. Citing the first rule as an example, a nun, however senior, must always bow down to a monk, however junior.⁵

Another gender biased text, *Jatakas* (a collection of texts) dated from the 5th century of the Common Era included negative comments about women (Law cited

³ For a detailed account of the Gotami's ordination, see Murcott 1991.

⁴ Levine (2000) assumes that there might be male prejudice that had fundamentally altered or misrepresented the rules during a lapse of three centuries when the rules of conduct for nuns promulgated by the Buddha were finally written down.

⁵ See *Cullavagga Vinaya pitaka*, vol.5, *Cullavagga*, trans. I. B. Horner (Oxford: Pali Text Society 1988) x1.2, 354-55.

in Collett 2006). In describing the defects and vices of women, this text warns monks to guard against them.

2.2.3 Legacy of Brahmin's culture: Contemporary time

Societal stereotypes and negative attitudes towards women have been handed down as a legacy of Brahmin culture. These stereotypes and attitudes have encroached on Buddhist communities across the region. Women are expected to fulfill their predetermined obligation in society as mothers and wives. It is challenging for women to enter the nunhood, as this is regarded as failing to take their expected role as found in the cases of countries in discussion (Bartholomeusz 1994 and Falk 2007). In contemporary Sri Lanka, in spite of the fact that progress has been made on the status of nuns in the religious realm through ordination and training in religious education and wisdom, the female renunciants with rural backgrounds still face suspicion for defying the traditional social order (Bartholomeusz 1994). In the early 20th century, a woman's decision to renounce lay life aroused much speculation and there was curiosity to find out whether she might have psychiatric problems, or whether she chose this path as a convenient way to survive. However, a man's decision to join the *Sangha* order was respected and celebrated (Weerakoon 1989).

Similarly in Thailand, women's renunciation is regarded as a rebellious act attracting criticism and suspicion from society and religious authorities for rejecting their revered roles in society as mothers and wives⁶. From his study of a popular Thai text, Keyes (1984) notes the role of a woman as 'mother-nurturer' to nurture her son and allow him to enter the monk community as a novice. Kirsch (1985:304) notes that "the monk's role is the most esteemed role in Thai society and that women are categorically denied admission to this role." The greatest religious reward a woman can gain is through her son's ordination. On the other hand, a daughter can never transmit such high quality merit to her parents due to the fact that customarily she is not entitled to enter the religious realm (Falk 2007). Instead, she is expected to take her lifelong obligation to look after and, if necessary, to support her family possibly by engaging in sex labor (Falk 2007).

⁶ See more stories of mae chiis regarding their decision to renounce and the challenges they have to face in Falk 2007.

2.3 Burma

Like other Theravada countries, the societies in Burma are also male dominated. This section provides an account of the socio-economic context in which the socially engaged nuns in Burma are situated and how their life has been affected.

Burma has a very similar landscape to other Theravada Buddhist countries, in terms of nuns' lives, but it has its own specificities given the different historical and political backgrounds. There is scant literature on nuns in Burma such as Kawanami (1997, 2007), Carbonnel (2009), Ya Wai Tun (1998), Petrich (n.d) and Mi Mi Khaing (1984). The work of Kawanami (1997, 2007) and Carbonnel (2009) are contemporary and they analyze the ambiguous position of nuns in relation with their daily actions and situations. The work of Ya Wai Tun (1998) is more concerned with the historical background of the nuns.

2.3.1 An overview of modern day Buddhist nuns in Burma

Since the loss of the *Bhikkhuni sasana* in Burma (fully ordained female *Sangha*) sometime back in the eleventh century⁷, the idea of reinstating the lineage has been rejected by the majority of the monks' community. 'The State *Sangha Maha Nayaka* Committee (SSMNC)' (the *Sangha* Committee at the national level)⁸ issued two publications in 2006 regarding the debate on this issue,⁹ and it decided and explained that the *bhikkhuni sasana* was irrecoverable in Theravada Buddhism (see SSMNC 2006a and 2006b).¹⁰ The religious status of nuns exists in a pendulum position swaying between the lay and the religious realm. This entails an ambivalent attitude towards their religious authority, and less material support and societal respect. The exception is only for those well-known scholarly nuns who are bestowed rewards and honorary titles for their high achievement in the state ecclesiastical examinations. These exceptional nuns tend to enjoy a relatively higher social status in comparison to ordinary monks.

⁷ Regarding when *Bhikkhuni* lineage disappeared, there is no clear evidence and according to historical evidence, some suggest that the lineage died out in Burma in the thirteenth century and some estimate it already died out since 11th century in Sri Lanka (see more detail in Ya Wai Tun 1998).

⁸ Regarding structure of the *Sangha* organization in Burma, see more detail in Tin Maung Maung Than 1988:42.

⁹ The debate on the issue is beyond the scope of this study and detail account will not be given.

¹⁰ A Burmese nun who was ordained in Sri Lanka was rejected by the state *Sangha Nayaka* Committee and subsequently the issue was made public with the explanations of the rejection.

Nuns, known as *thilashins* in Burmese (keepers of precepts), are generally distinguished according to their commitment towards religious practices, i.e., *pariyatti* nuns who engage fulltime in learning and teaching Buddhist scriptures and *patipatti* nuns who practice meditation (Kawanami 2010:214). With the increasing participation of Buddhist nuns in social work, a third category of nuns can be added to the general prototypes, i.e., *parahita* nuns who commit to social work. The researcher interviewed mostly *parahita* nuns because they devote their time to *Loki* (this worldly) matters, specifically providing secular education and taking responsibility for school administration.

All of the head nuns of the monastic schools have at least completed the advanced stage *Pathama gyi*, one of the five progressive levels of the state monitored ecclesiastical examinations,¹¹ and attain a *dhammacariya* level (Teacher of Dharma, the highest level of the five), which is the prerequisite for establishing a nunnery of their own. One of these nuns even holds a full *Sasana-dhaja Siripavara Dhammacariya* bestowed for completing the *dhammacariya* exam in combination with honors in Myanmar Language.

Despite the fact that they spend most of their time in *Loki* matters, they do not ignore the *Lokkutara* (other worldly) practices, such as practicing meditation and chanting verses of Buddhist scriptures as part of their daily routines. Since they themselves were once committed student nuns, they encourage those student nuns who are keener to devote only to the *Lokkutara* trainings to do scriptural studies at the nearby *Thilashin Sarthindaik* (nunnery schools) which mainly focus on *pariyatti* study. In addition, to adhere to the *patipatti* practice, their schools are regularly turned into mass meditation centers¹² for at least a week during the summer school holidays.

The head nuns interviewed in this study are all *ngebyu*, i.e., virgin nuns who entered nunhood since childhood or at relatively young ages in their early twenties. The *ngebyu* nuns have never been married. They are different from *tawdwet* nuns who were married before renunciation at an old age. While most of the *parahita* nuns included in the interview are *ngebyu*, a few of them are *tawdwet* who volunteer to

¹¹ Five levels are elementary *Abhidhamma* (Buddhist philosophy), *Pathama-nge* (the primary state), *Pathama-lat* (the intermediate stage), *Pathama-gyi* (the advanced stage), and *Dhammacariya*.

¹² Practicing meditation at the mass meditation centers is popular in Burma and especially during the holidays, laypeople at different ages and nuns and monks also participate. Most of the meditation centers are led by monks, (See more detail in Jordt 2007), but nowadays a few nuns also lead such centers (See more detail in Jordt 2007).

do teaching activities at the schools. The other nuns interviewed at the schools were two *pariyatti* nuns in their early twenties who are currently under rigorous training for their *dhammacariya* exam, and two *patipatti* thilashins who are in the *tawdwet* category. But those two *patipatti* nuns have done rigorous meditation practices throughout their renunciation life for 16 and 6 years respectively, and have earned a degree of credibility in their expertise in meditation and assisting others with the medication techniques.

While teaching the dharma within one's nunnery compound is the religious vocation of the dharma teacher nuns, they rarely give dharma talks in public because this particular practice is regarded as the prerogative of male monastic members. Very few nuns possess the interest and courage to enter into this realm on a par with their male counterparts. Kawanami (1997:216-7) finds that the nuns do not want to challenge the social conventions and do not want to appear as bold and daring in the public eye, even though they are capable of doing so. This is why they hardly officiate at religious ceremonies in public, and just take the roles which complement the monks (Kawanami 1997).

There might be at most two or three '*dhammakathika* nuns' throughout the whole country. One of those very particular nuns is the one who the researcher had a chance to interview on the issue in question. In order to earn 'credibility' as a *dhammakathika*, the nun took classes run by the renowned *dhammakathika* teachers who teach how to give dharma talks. She also pursues meditation trainings and practices in addition to her study for ecclesiastical examinations. She has then attained the level of *dhammarcariya* and practices the vocation of preaching at one of the *tazaungs* (the place where Buddha images are situated and offerings and dharma talks are held) at the famous historic Shwedagon Pagoda during the Sabbath days of the Buddhist lent. She inherited the legacy of her teacher nun who gave dharma talks at the same *tazaung* for many years before passing away in 2002.

Nuns in Burma including the nuns the researcher interviewed tend to keep eight or nine precepts,¹³ but there are also nuns who observe ten precepts¹⁴. Those

¹³ Eight precepts include: 1) abstaining from killing, 2) abstaining from stealing, 3) abstaining from extra-marital affairs, 4) abstaining from telling lies, 5) abstaining from drinking alcohol, 6) abstaining from eating between noon and dawn, 7) abstaining from watching, performing entertainment and beautification, and 8) abstaining from sleeping at high, big and luxurious bed.

¹⁴ In addition to the eight precepts, the other two additional precepts include spreading 'metta' (universal love) to the universe and abstaining from handling cash.

nuns are residing in Pa-Auk Tawya (Pa-Auk Forest Monastery)¹⁵, situated in a forest near the village of Pa-Auk, 15 kilometres southeast of Mawlamyine, capital city of Mon State in southern Burma. Pa-Auk is a well known meditation center which has branches abroad. Nuns there emphasize the teaching and practice of meditation together with other monk residents and laypeople including foreigners who come to practice meditation at the center. Nuns in Pa- auk tawya are closer to fully ordained monks in their religious status, except for the *Vinaya* rules (monks are required to adhere to 227 rules), as they abstain from keeping or handling money and instead receive cooked meal during their alms rounds. The population of Pa- auk tawya nuns might be very few since the number of residents including nuns, monks and the laypeople varies seasonally from 500 to 1000.¹⁶

However, the population of nuns in Burma is more than 40,000 throughout the country, which may be the largest in Southeast Asia (Kawanami 2010:214). All over the country, almost 500 thilashins had achieved the *Sasana-dhaja Siripavara Dhammacariya* title by 2007 (Kawanami 2010:219). This legacy of learned skilled in Buddhist scriptures seems to have been handed down from nuns of the King Mindon Era (1825-78) to modern-day nuns. It was recorded that two famous thilashins Saya Gyi (Great Teachers) Saya Kin¹⁷ and Saya May Nat Pe¹⁸ were well respected countrywide for their learned skill in *pariyatti* and *patipatti*. Many of Saya Kin's disciples become famous dharma teachers, and they have subsequently handed down their lineage to next generations of their student nuns. As a consequence, the alumni networks of Saya Kin's students have expanded throughout successive generations and nowadays there are about 300 independent sathindaiks (nunneries) run by Saya Kin's students. Those nunneries include the famous Thameikdaw Gyaung Sathindaik established in 1911 in Sagaing and its branch nunnery school, the famous Daw Nyanasari Myanaung Gyaung established in 1947 in Yangon (Kawanami 2010:216-7). In her detailed record of the famous Thilashin Sathindaiks in Burma, Thiri (2006)

¹⁵ About Pa- auk forest monastery see detail in <http://www.paaukforestmonastery.org/rules.htm>

¹⁶ See more detail (Ibid).

¹⁷ Saya Kin is said to study Buddhist scriptures from an unknown nun in her childhood and later learned Pali and other cannons from an ex-monk teacher (Ya Wai Tun 1998).

¹⁸ According to Ya Wai Tun (1998), Saya Kin was recorded to pass away in 1883, and the birth date was estimated to be in 1815. For Saya May Nat Pe, there is no mention of the date of her death, but estimated to be 10 years older than Saya Kin and the birth date is around 1805. She probably passed away before 1885 when the last dynasty of the Burma kings was conquered by the British.

highlighted the venerable images of the nuns residing in the nunneries and how they are well disciplined, respectable and learned.

With the support of the parliamentary government (1948-56) after the independence of Burma, Buddhism has flourished and the educational standard for nuns has improved. Being recognized for their educational excellence in Buddhist scriptures, contemporary nuns are regarded as dharma teachers and practitioners and have been integrated as affiliated members of *sasana* since 1982¹⁹. Nuns are also bestowed a degree of authority to conduct their communal affairs at township and state/divisional levels through the Buddhist Nun Organizations, albeit under the supervision and guidance of monks.

2.3.2 Nuns' religious position and its manifestation

As mentioned above, their educational credibility can be seen as one of the reasons why they are integrated into the monastic order. However, their lower status in the religious realm correlates with some disadvantages in their religious vocation. Even though they can sit for the state ecclesiastical exams on a par with male monastic members, they face disadvantages related to their religious position. For instance, they do not have access to the two state *Piiyatti Sangha* universities in Yangon and Mandalay that were opened in 1986. However, nuns and lay people can apply for admission to the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) that was established in 1998. The admission requirement for monks and nuns is that they need to have English proficiency in addition to their *dhammarcaria* certificate.²⁰ The majority of the nuns find it difficult to learn English due to various reasons. Most of the *ngephyu* nuns only received a secular education at the primary level and they never learned English when they were young. By the time they finish the *dhammarcaria* level, they have to face the age factor when they try to learn English. They find that it is difficult to learn a new language as they get older. Otherwise, even if they want to learn, they rarely have enough to spend on tuition fees or transportation fees to get to the training center, even if the training is free of charge.

¹⁹ Regarding the beginning of the national registration for thilashins, see more detail in Tin Maung Maung Than (1988).

²⁰ See at MORA: http://www.mora.gov.mm/mora_itbmu1.aspx.

On the other hand, the advantage of being a fully ordained member is that when a novice turns 18, he can attain monkhood with the support of an *upathika* or *upathikama* (regular lay donor of the monk). Even though a young novice student also has to face similar hardship like student nuns, generally for a male monastic member, he has at least a regular lay donor to support his education or his other necessities after he has received monkhood. In the case of the nuns, they lack such sponsorship and rely mostly on their alms rounds, though there are a few nuns whose relatives or parents can give regular support.²¹

Most of the nuns interviewed mentioned the financial constraints they have to face in pursuing their education, especially at the *dhammarcaria* level. Even though they can study for the lower level exams at their nunneries, at the *dhammarcaria* level, they often need to commute to the monasteries where the monk teachers give the lecture for the exam free of charge. Most nuns find the cost of transportation and stationeries like text books and note books to be a burden on them. The money they earn during the alms rounds hardly covers their education related costs in addition to the cost of their food consumption.²²

Nuns are only allowed to collect uncooked rice during the two days preceding a Buddhist Sabbath day, *uboknei*, according to the lunar calendar. Although the alms round is a religious vocation, the lower religious status means that nuns can collect only raw rice or trivial amounts of cash whereas monks collect cooked food. The implication is that it takes nuns more time to prepare food and especially during the ecclesiastical exam time, nuns find it time consuming to go for alms rounds.

Kawanami (2007) and Carbonnel (2009) give a detailed analysis of the nuns' vocation on alms rounds based on their interaction with lay people. Since it is difficult for a nun to secure regular donors, they tend to be subjected to a biased image as pitiful and helpless. This image bears the meaning that they turn to begging for survival due to extreme hardship and poverty. To make it worse, due to the changing life style in the congested urban areas, the religious transaction between the donors and the nuns loses its religious value. It becomes increasingly impersonal as indicated

²¹ Only two nuns out of about 10 nuns who are *ngebyu* mention that they have support from their parents or their relatives. Since most of the nuns come from a poor family background, they have to rely on their alms rounds.

²² According to some nuns, depending on the locations they go for alms round, they might collect between 3000-4000 kyats a week. However, they have to contribute 2400 or 1000 with rice 2 pyi (1 pyi (rice/condensed milk) = approx. 250 ml) to their nunnery each week.

by a sign that says 'self service' by the door or outside of several households where a large bowl of raw rice is left unattended (Kawanami 2007). That not only diminishes the religious worth of the nuns, in fact it deprives the religious meaning of the transaction in which the donors show respect to the religious personnel with symbolic gestures after making the offering, and in turn the nuns bestow blessings on them by chanting. Sometimes the act of false nuns²³ tarnishes the image of the real nuns, and laypeople do not seem to care anymore. They just offer trivial cash or a small spoon of raw rice to any women or girls who put on the nuns' robe (Kawanami 2007).

However, in rural villages and local towns, laypeople have had close relationships with monasteries and nunneries for generations. Normally a personal and friendly relationship is maintained between the laypeople and the monastic members including the nuns (Kawanami 2007). Even in the urban area, performing of the alms round in groups can bring religious significance. As Carbonnel (2009) illustrates, alms processions organized by well-known nunneries with the support of the local chief earn more credibility in the eyes of laypeople. A large network of pre-established donors is usually informed ahead of such occasion and normally a good number of donors take part in making offerings to the nuns.²⁴ At one of the nunneries studied, alms rounds are conducted regularly in procession with about 10 to 20 nuns who wear the name tag of their nunnery. The name tag serves them as a symbolic capital since their nunnery school is already known by the community nearby and it help distinguish these nuns from false nuns as well. It also helps signify their monastic identity.

On the other hand, unlike the fully ordained monastic members, sometimes, the close relationship with laypeople might exert influence on the nuns. It relates with one Burmese social convention that is the 'social norms of reciprocity' as Kawanami (2007) notices. Within this context, if someone does a favor to someone else, the favor should be returned in any form. Otherwise the favor becomes a burden in such a way that it incurs the patron-client relationship. The ones who just receive favors but cannot return them back are subjected to the influence of his or her benefactors. The implication of this for the nuns is that they tend to be subjected to the influence of their bossy donors, denigrating their role as religious personnel.

²³ They pretend to be nuns and do the alms around like the nuns do for their livelihood

²⁴ Carbonnel (2009) gives the example of the alms procession organized by Nyanasayi Nunnery in Yangon and the Myaouedi Sathindaik Nunnery in Manadalay.

Contrarily, monks are not subjected to that kind of relationship since laypeople believe that donation to the highly revered *Sangha*, who adhere to the *Vinaya* rules, brings about an immense amount of merit for the betterment in their present and next life. In addition, the present benefit is that monks give sermons that contribute to the personal inner peace of mind, development and ultimately to the state of supreme Happiness, *nivarna* that the Buddhists aspire to. That is why monks are highly influential in the society as benefactors, and the *Sangha* is regarded as a “Precious Gem.”

Since nuns lack such kind of religious authority, they are treated differently. In an account from a lay donor of a nun the researcher interviewed, her community use to organize *Kahtein thingan* (a ceremony in which robes are offered to monks)²⁵ for monks. This lay donor suggested that her community also organize an event to offer robes to nuns as well, but her suggestion was rejected and finally she had to organize the ceremony for the nuns by herself without much contribution from her community. Nuns also do not get much support from the government. This is the same for monks who are not from famous monasteries and nunneries. A Thilashin sarthindaik (nunnery) which has more than 50 nuns may receive some packs of rice once a year, but sometimes the rice are of very poor quality. Sometimes some rice trading companies are forced to donate the rice. They are instructed by the government. At one time, according to a nun interviewed, a rice trading company sent very low quality rice unfit for human consumption to a nunnery.

Due to their difficult life style, entering nunhood for life is not a welcoming option especially for the *tawdwet* nuns although nowadays more and more girls and women are receiving temporary nunhood.²⁶ While people pay respect to *ngebyu* nuns, *tawdwet* nuns are suspected that they use the ascetic life as their recourse when they have to face crisis in the middle of their life such as divorce or debt burden. In the past, some Burmese comedians²⁷ used to make fun of the *tawdwet* nuns with a joke²⁸ that reveals the societal attitudes towards nuns. On an account of two *tawdwet*

²⁵ Robes offered to the *sangha*, between the first waning day of *Thadingyut* (approximately October) and the full moon day of *Tazaungmon* (approximately November) in the traditional Burmese calendar.

²⁶ Kawanami (1997) points out the increasing trend of temporary nunhood and a sign of respect and recognition of the nuns' religious position.

²⁷ In Burmese traditional dances, jokers make jokes to entertain people during the break times after and before the dancers perform with dances.

²⁸ The joke goes that ‘*Maythilashin* (nun), the ones whose husband died, son died, business lost and debt to be owed...’

nuns, they mentioned how their decisions to enter nunhood were rejected by their relatives and friends even though both of them had relatively higher socio-economic status in their lay life within the context of Burma. One of them is a former middle school teacher and a single lady and the other is a former civil servant and a business owner. However, according to their experiences, nowadays, people have more contact with nuns at either the mass meditation centers or educational centers like the monastic schools where *tawdwet* nuns and *ngebyu* nuns alike have shown their commitment to their religious practices, Buddhist studies and humanitarian work. This has changed people's perception and nowadays such kind of jokes about *tawdwet* nuns are not heard anymore.

In helping improve the status of nuns, the important role of monks has to be acknowledged. For instance, the researcher interviewed an abbot monk who is supporting his two outstanding student nuns who are pursuing Buddhist studies at the master level abroad. Carbonnel (2009) also depicted an interdependent relationship between nuns and monks in such a way that there is the possibility that a nun who takes care of a monk at a monastery can meet the monk's lay donors who might offer her a nunnery of her own later.

Monks have played an influential role in the lives of most of the nuns like other Buddhists in the country. It is almost always the case that through the network of the monasteries situated in every village, a lay woman enters nunhood and it is always the monks who give her the precepts with the view of legitimizing the process, referring to the time when the Buddha Himself gave the precepts to nuns (Carbonnel 2009). While most of the ritual and social ceremonies, such as the undertaking of meritorious deeds for birthday or deceased kin, are held at monasteries, nowadays some people also hold such ceremonies at nunneries.²⁹ And, on those occasions at nunneries, nuns used to invite monks to perform the rituals as a sign of reverence to the monks' religious authority, even though nuns are capable of performing such rituals.

Nuns' reverence for monks is associated not only with the *Sangha's* religious authority and its supportive relationship with the nuns, but also with some traditional and cultural norms regarding the gender issue. Kawanami (1997) found that

²⁹ But Carbonnel (2009:276) remarks that people tend to choose nunneries for holding ceremonies as a cheaper alternative compared with ones held at monasteries.

some nuns do meritorious deeds, such as serving monks with menial and domestic chores, with the hope to be reborn as men in their next life. Such traditional attitudes towards women as an inferior sex are focused on women's bodily function. Their assigned roles as wives and mothers are signified by bodily and social functions such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, having to tend to her husband and attachment towards one's children and parents. Burmese Buddhists believe that those sufferings, or *dukkha*, are specific to women, hence women are regarded as belonging to the weaker and more submissive sex.

They also believe that it is bad *kamma*, or wrong action in the past, which makes one be reborn as woman or gay in this life. Such an interpretation of *kamma* which gives more weight to the pre-deterministic perspective undermines the Buddha's teachings of qualities and action of humankind that can bring about the good for oneself and society in the present time. According to this teaching, no one should be discriminated against based on sex, gender and race. The traditional gender belief is one of the reasons why some nuns are satisfied with their present status as nuns, as they think that they have escaped from the physical *dhukkha* that ordinary laywomen have to suffer, except for menstruation. And, 'this rejection of sex, rejection of reproduction, rejection of the endless cycle of rebirth, and rejection of suffering, come across as a powerful religious statement from the Burmese Buddhist nuns' (Kawanami 1997).

Another implication of such a notion is related to the usage of *hpon*, which means 'the nobility of the glory of manhood' in the Burmese language (Than Than Nwe 2003). In this discourse, monks are regarded as *hpon gyi*, or the great glory. Even though the usage of *hpon* can refer to a highly respected nun as Kawanami (1997) finds out, generally it is used only for exceptionally respectable women who have high social or economic or political status. Meanwhile the usage is applicable to manhood as men are always regarded as candidates of monks, or *hpon gyis* who can bring great merit to laypeople, and especially to the mothers of *hpon gyis*.

In addition, nuns' religious position as affiliated members of the *sasana* might be one of the reasons why nuns are not keen on receiving *bhikkhuni* ordination on equal terms with the monks. Kawami (1997:220) suggests that 'equality and independence may not be an attractive proposition for them, rather is seen as

threatening and confusing to their basic sense of religious identity'. However, according to Ashin Pinnya Wuntha (2010), there have been quite a number of unsuccessful attempts to re-introduce *bhikkhuni* ordination in the 1930s and 1950s respectively by two very learned monks. It shows that there are male supporters of the women's right to participate equally in the religious realm with their male counterparts.

2.3.3 State, the *Sangha* and the affiliated community of the nuns³⁰

Moving from the general overview in relation to the socially engaged nuns' religious position and its implications, the position of the monastic members relative to the state will be highlighted in this section to help visualize the whole landscape in which those nuns in this study are situated. As mentioned in the earlier section, in terms of institutional structure, nuns are affiliated members of *sasana*; they are also included in the relationship paradigm between the state and the *Sangha*.³¹

The state's policy towards the *Sangha* community falls into two strategies: cooptation or manipulation and suppression. State control over the *Sangha* community existed in various forms throughout the military regime especially for those who speak out against the regime. For instance, a number of directives were set to restrict the freedom of monks between 1963 and 1967 under the Revolutionary Government (Gutter 2001). Under the banner of the cleansing, maintaining and perpetuating the *sasana* (Buddhist teachings), many monks were disrobed and forced to leave their monkhood including the politically motivated monks.³² By issuing the *Sangha* law in 1990, the state attempted to interfere in the *Sangha*'s affairs. For instance, according to the article 16 of the *Sangha* law, the Director-General of the Department of

³⁰ Since the new Prime Minister Thein Sein assumed office in March 2011, some reformative signals have been made and how far his government will relax the state's tight control over the populace remains to be seen. Hence, the political context set in this study can be considered relevant until July 2011, when the researcher did the field study.

³¹ *Supra* note 1.

³² Even though some bogus monks who are against the *Vinaya* rules, like abusing the monkhood to gain material wealth, are removed and the action was applauded by some under General Nay Win's regime (see more detail in Tin Maung Maung Than 1988), the military regime mainly targeted the politically motivated monks (see more detail in AAPP 2004). Since the Buddha Himself said that people have the right to topple the abusive rule who violate the '*Dasa Raja Dharma*', or the ten principles of the kingly virtues in *Milinda Panha* and in *Jataka* story, the political engagement of the monks in nonviolent way is not against the *Vinaya*. However, the successive military regime used various measures to suppress the movement of the monks who speak out against the mismanagement of the government.

Religious Affairs³³, who was a military officer, “shall cause the delegated person to file a direct complaint” against a member of the *Sangha* who breaks the rules and regulations that are not specified whether religious, military or otherwise. (See more detail in Gutter 2001 and AAPP 2004). Thus, rather than the *Vinaya* rules, the *Sangha* community is subjected to the rules and decrees issued by the military junta. These rules authorize the army commanders to disrobe the monks and jail and torture them.

Although the ecclesiastical courts or *Vinicchaya* Committees are formed with venerable monks for solving cases and conflicts in accordance with the *Vinaya* rules, they can handle only a few religious matters. They cannot handle cases like ‘effort to disturb the administration’ (SSMNYK 2005). It shows that the phrase ‘effort to disturb the administration’ is included to suppress the monks who speak out against the military regime. It has similar implications for nuns as the affiliated members of the monastic community, and nuns’ involvement in the political and social movement is also suppressed.³⁴

On the other hand, the state also adopts a system to appease the *Sangha* community. Kawanami (2009) presents how the state tries to patronize and co-opt famous and charismatic monks with privileges and status, and this practice endangers the reputation of the concerned monks. But she also notes that people in Burma are more interested in the moral integrity and charisma of the monks concerned and the state’s interference rarely divert their respect for the monks. It has the same effect on the nuns with privileges and status as well. Such mechanism of the regime to legitimize their power by manipulating Buddhism is well noted in the work of scholars such as Kawanami (2010), Houtman (1999) and Philp and Mercer (2002). Even though the military regime tried to follow the examples of the ancient kings by presenting themselves as pious leaders by building pagodas or by patronizing famous monks and nuns, their attempt to seek hegemonic control over the whole population revealed their true characteristics from time to time like in the cases of the 2007 saffron revolution when a number of monks and nuns were imprisoned or tortured.³⁵

³³ Department of Religious Affairs was under the Ministry of Home Affairs and Religious Affairs until 1992, before the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Religious Affairs were reformed separately.

³⁴ Hundreds of nuns together with monks were jailed after the 2007 saffron revolution (see more detail in HRW 2009).

³⁵ See more detail in Ibid 2009.

The legacy of fear that the totalitarian rule of the military regime has instilled in the mindset of the monastic members and the general populace alike is still inherent today. Like everyone else, the religious personnel who try to seek the social and political spaces to take part in the decisions which directly affect their life have to face restrictions and intimidation. It was ‘a cycle of fear’ that the dictators were scared of the peoples’ power and it made them co-opt or intimidate or threaten or oppress the general populace. And they issued the decrees that ensure the surveillance over any suspicious act of the common people who might have the potential to engage in any social or political movement against the regime. In fact, within that context of the junta’s paranoia, any social movement, even providing access to education for children could be regarded as a suspicious act. The government recognized that the power and influence of a grass root leader or an organization could amount to a counterbalance against the hegemonic power at least at the local level. That is why, as Steinberg (1997) points out, there was no space for civil society in Burma. An example can be seen in the recent history of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), which started as a social welfare organization and later turned into a political party with a new name of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the party that won the latest election and is currently in power, USDA used to force students and civil servants to become its members in an attempt to take hegemonic control over the populace (Network for Democracy and Development 2006;Houtman 1999). And they gave no space to other civil society movements. Such an act of denying the basic rights, such as the right to participate in public life and the freedom of association, contributes to a lack of growth either at the individual or societal level. Consequently, the ‘cycle of fear’ perpetuates, keeping the country into the least development status³⁶ in addition to the other mismanagement of the regime.

Regardless of the fact that currently the government has shown some signals to adopt reformative measures in the economic and political spheres, how far those spaces will be opened and in what manner is still not clear³⁷. The reminiscences of the military junta’s paranoia such as xenophobia and restrictions on some social

³⁶ Burma ranks as low as 132 in the 2010 in Human Development Index (HDI), see more details at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>.

³⁷ As UN Special Rapporteur on Burma, Mr. Tomás Ojea Quintana makes a remark on his last visit in August 2011 that despite some political developments, human rights violation is still continuing under the current government.(ND-Burma 2011)

activities³⁸ still can be seen. Monks and nuns are also still under surveillance and restriction especially for those who are engaged in social or political activities.³⁹ Even for those religious personnel who run the monastic schools at their monasteries and nunneries with official permission of the state, as will be seen later, they are not exempt from the state's suspicion and restriction. This has an indirect consequence of the government hindering the efforts of monastic schools.

2.3.4 Integration of the nun-led monastic schools in the process of reviving the monastic education system, and related challenges

Background of the revival of the monastic school education system

Nowadays, more and more nuns are pursuing secular education in addition to the *Lokkutara* education. At the same time, the phenomena that small girls at a very young age, ranging from five to six years old, are taking refuge at nunneries and enter nunhood is increasing due to poverty, internal armed conflicts, lack of access to education or lack of guardianship. Some of the girls have one or no parents. Most of them are from the border areas and a few of them are from remote villages in the country's central and lower parts, where access to education is scarce.⁴⁰ They are sent by their distant relatives or other community members through the network of the monasteries and nunneries. With the realization of the need to provide access to secular education for those young nuns and other children who lack access to the government school mainly due to poverty or lack of documents⁴¹ from the surrounding communities, the *parahita* nuns became involved in the monastic education system since 1997. At that time there were altogether four such monastic schools throughout

³⁸ For instance, a former military officer who was also a volunteer of a blood donors group affiliated with the National League for Democracy (NLD) was jailed recently, accused of breaking the Electronic Transactions Act, Article 33(a). In this case, the person's involvement with the social activities organized by NLD might be the issue (see more detail in the Irrawaddy 2011 at <http://204.93.223.220/print_article.php?art_id=21970>. Meanwhile some NLD organized social activities are allowed.

³⁹ For instance, Shwe Nya War Sayardaw, the dean of Shwe Nya War Buddhist University in Rangoon, is restricted not to deliver *dhamma* talks (Arkar Moe 2011) at http://www.irrawaddy.org/highlight.php?art_id=17286.

⁴⁰ On one account, in a remote area of the Rakhine State, even though there is a state school, due to the transportation barriers, the teachers come to school four or five days a month and students don't learn at school in that situation.

⁴¹ Since many of them are seasonal workers, they tend to lose their documents, like birth registration and etc., in the process of migrating for work.

the country. In the academic year of 2007-08, there were altogether 28 monastic schools led by nuns and 1,315 schools led by monks (Katppiya San Lwin 2010). By the year 2010-11, there were 21 nun-led schools and 173 monk-led schools in the Yangon Division alone (Monastic School Education Supervisory Committee 2010).

As shown by the data, the number of the monk-led schools outnumbers that of the nun-led schools because the monastic education has been a major activity for the monasteries throughout the history of successive kings in Burma. The lineage of these activities was handed down to the modern-day monks.⁴² It can be said that monks are more resourceful in terms of know-how and finance for schooling activities when compared to nuns, although monks and nuns have the same vocation, that is receiving donation from *upathika* and *upathikama* (lay donors). Because the monastic schools do not receive any support from the government⁴³ and the schools often do not charge any fee from poor children, they have to solely rely on the donation of their lay supporters. Hence, the financial sustenance of a monastic school depends on the charisma of the head monk or nun. Generally, monks who are regarded as ‘the field of merit’ for their religious authority have more lay donors.

In the past, monasteries were the only educational center for boys to learn basic literacy and the Buddhist knowledge which enables them to lead a moral life. Since the families in the ancient time lived on subsistence agriculture systems, the sons normally inherited the family livelihood and the monastic education was sufficient for him to lead a decent life without vocational training. In the old days, kings also used to be the students of monastic schools. Royal princes learnt astronomy, arithmetic and Burmese medicine at monasteries (Lu Pe Win cited in Cheesman 2003). However, girls were denied access to the monastic education and they learnt basic morality from nuns. According to the record, the girls from both the royal and non-royal families were educated under Saya Kin’s tutelage during the King Mindon’s era.

During the era of the successive kings the relationship among the state, the *Sangha* and the monastic school was founded on mutual cooperation and reciprocity.

⁴² Regarding the history of monastic education, see more detail in Katppiya San Lwin 2010. Katppiya San Lwin’s writings appear biased from the researcher’s point of view since some of his judgments about the historic events like the 1988 student strike apparently lack the analysis on underlying causes. However, the author’s work is informative on the historical development of the monastic education. About critical analysis on monastic education, see more detail in Cheesman 2003.

⁴³ Starting from the academic year 2011-12, a government supported organization named *Sangha noakgaha athin* that was formed in 2010 donates some text books to monastic schools.

The *Sangha* helped maintain the state's stability by instilling the moral character in the lives of the youth. Meanwhile the kings, either tyrant or noble, acted as the supporter and promoter of Buddhist teachings, and served as good *upathikas* (lay donors) who did many meritorious deeds such as building religious monuments and residences for monks (Khin Maung Maung cited in Gil 2008). At the same time, they ensured the smooth functioning of the monastic order in accordance with the *Vinaya* rules by appointing the *sasanabaing* (the head of the *Sangha*) (Gil 2008). However, the kings had little control over the autonomy of the *Sangha* and its influence on the daily life of the society.

Nowadays, this relationship has shifted, and the monastic school and the *Sangha* are subjected to state control and manipulation. Unlike the traditional monastic school system in which Buddhist education alone is sufficient, these days, the monastic schools become the place of necessity for poor children who will be otherwise deprived of access to secular education. With the deteriorating economic situation of the country, 32.7% of the population lives under the poverty line⁴⁴ and poverty is one of the main causes of the increasing numbers of out-of-school children, though other reasons include conflicts on the borders, inaccessibility to the school due to the isolation of localities and poor teaching quality at schools. Even though the primary school education is free in theory, parents have to subsidize costs such as school uniforms, teaching materials and school infrastructure.

When the monastic education system was revived in 1992, the military regime had to acknowledge the importance of the monastic schools that helped fulfill its 'education for all' policy adopted in 2002 (San Lwin 2010) for the least cost. It is also in line with the ideology of the higher echelon of the *Sangha* administration that the youngsters need to be instilled with Buddhist culture, so that they become moral people.⁴⁵ In this way, the current monastic education system is open to both girl and boy students, as well as young nuns and novices. After some years of the revival of the system, the nun-led monastic schools were encouraged since higher administration

⁴⁴ CIA country report available at <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>>.

⁴⁵ During the meeting led by the State *Sangha Maha Nayaka* Committee (SSMNC) on the monastic education, training people to be moral is spelled out as one of the purposes for the monastic education system (see more detail in San Lwin 2010).

monks think that it is safer and more appropriate for adolescent girls and nuns to reside at nunneries or to go to nunnery schools rather than monasteries.⁴⁶

Regarding the criteria for running the monastic schools, the State *Sangha Maha Nayaka* Committee (SSMNC) issued the rules and regulations for those schools. These rules and regulations are mostly related to sufficient infrastructure; qualifications of the school teachers; roles of the central, divisional and township supervisory committees; and the objectives of the schools. The supervisory committees at the central, divisional and township levels are supposed to monitor the functioning of the monastic schools. The supervisory committee at the central level consists of three head monks from the SSMNC; Minister and Deputy Minister for the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Director General (DG) and Director of the Department of Religious Affairs; Director Generals of the following departments including the Department of the Basic Education, the Education, Planning and Training Department, the Immigration Department, The Ministerial Department of the Development of Border Areas and National Races and Department for the Promotion and Propagation of *Sasana* (The Buddha's teachings). The divisional or state level supervisory committee includes the chair and secretary monks of the township supervisory committees of the monastic schools; chief education officer or deputy chief education officer at the divisional or state level; and religious officers at the divisional or state level. The township supervisory committee includes the head monk of a monastic school in the township; the head nun of a nun-led monastic school; township religious officer; township education officer or township deputy education officer; and the head master of a basic primary school or a basic secondary school (SSMNC 2005).

To get permission to run the school at the township level, the nuns in this study had to get signatures from various departments including the township and local authorities to ensure that their school is officially registered at the Department of the Religious Affairs. Then they had to seek approval from the township education authority, township religious officer⁴⁷ and a recommendation from the township

⁴⁶ The issue was discussed during the fifth meeting of the central supervisory committee of the monastic school education (see more detail in Lwin 2010).

⁴⁷ The township immigration officers are also the township religious officers. Since the Ministry of Immigration and Population undertakes the activity of issuing *Sasana* membership records, immigration officers at the township level have the responsibility to issue *Sasana* membership records to monks and nuns. It seems that because of the function, the township immigration officers are regarded as the religious officers.

Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee and the divisional supervisory committee of the monastic schools. With the approval of the Minister of the Ministry of the Religious Affairs, the official permission certificate is issued to the respective school heads with the signature of the Director General of the Department for the Promotion and Propagation of *Sasana* under the Ministry of the Religious Affairs.

A brief sketch on the situation of Basic education in Burma

The state education system in Burma is divided into three levels at the basic education stage: primary school level, lower secondary or middle school level, and upper secondary school or high school level. The primary school level includes kindergarten or grade 1 to 5. The admission age to the kindergarten is from 5 years old. The middle school level consists of grades 6 to 9 and the high school level comprises grades 10 to 11. The monastic schools are allowed to open only up to the post primary level, which is from grades 1 to 8, since the academic year 1998-99. An academic year starts from 1st June of the year and ends in February of the next year. The final exams of all the standards except the matriculation exam, normally take place in February. The matriculation exam normally takes place in March.

At grades 1 and 2, the new system of continuous assessment was adopted starting from the 1997-98 school year. For the rest of the grades at the primary level, the chapter end exams are held and the progress is recorded in the Comprehensive Personal Record (CPR) including the assessment on the extracurricular activities. At the lower and upper secondary level, students have to sit for the chapter end exams for about 8 times in one school year. In addition, at the end of the second semester, the basic education middle school examination and the basic education high school examination (matriculation) are held respectively (see more detail in UNESCO 2011).

Students who fail the matriculation exam more than two times are not allowed to attend the formal regular school anymore. They can prepare for the exam by taking tuition classes outside as the external students. They can sit for the exam only at the time when the exam is held normally after two months of the regular matriculation exam time. The monastic school students also sit for the grade 10 and 11 exams as the external students since the monastic schools are not officially allowed to run the grades 10 and 11. The monastic school students took classes that help them

prepare for these exams at the monastic schools. However, it is speculated that such an arrangement for the monastic school students might not be allowed in the near future, as it is now only allowed at very few townships of Yangon Division.

Although the 2005 primary school net enrollment ratio⁴⁸ is quite high, with 98% for male and 100% for female children, secondary net enrollment ratio is relatively low with 43.3% and 42.8% for male and female children respectively (UNESCO cited in UNICEF 2008). This indicates a high drop-out rate and 45% of children never complete the fourth grade (Quintana 2011). The Deteriorating situation in the education sector is mainly the result of the government's low expenditure on education that is as low as 0.5% of the national budget (Taisamyone 2007). However, recently the so-called newly elected government⁴⁹ increased its national budget allocation for education to 4.13 % (Associated Press 2011).⁵⁰

In fact, as the result of a very low expenditure for the education sector, the government school teachers' salaries are poor and the quality of education at school is low, with crowded classrooms and inadequate teaching materials. Even though 97.7% of primary school teachers and 93.8% of secondary school teachers were certified to teach according to the national standards in 2005-06 (Ministry of Education cited in UNESCO 2011), the inherent problem with the low expenditure for the education sector negatively affects the quality of education. The government school teachers are trained at the education colleges affiliated to the Institutes of Education for 1 to 3 years. The colleague students who complete the one year program get a certificate in Education and can teach the primary school level. If the students finish the additional one year program, they get a diploma in teacher education and can teach the lower secondary level. To get the bachelor degree in education (B.Ed), the students need to finish up another year of study and they can teach at the upper secondary school level.

The school teachers also get in service trainings like child-centered learning approach (CCA) trainings and life skills trainings with the support of

⁴⁸ "Net enrollment ratio" is the ratio of children of official school age based on the International Standard Classification of Education 1997 who are enrolled in school to the population of the corresponding official school age. Primary education provides children with basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills along with an elementary understanding of such subjects as history, geography, natural science, social science, art, and music" (definition of UNESCO). See more detail at < <http://glossary.uis.unesco.org/glossary/en/home>>.

⁴⁹ The 2010 election in Burma is regarded as sham as recorded in TACDB 2010. It is viewed as a mechanism to try to legitimize the military government by changing it into the civilian form.

⁵⁰ The new so-called civilian government is starting to show the signal of reforms in some areas and increasing budget for education is one such action.

UNICEF. However, in reality, due to the inadequate teaching materials and lack of infrastructure, the method cannot be applied effectively at the classroom level. Compared with the government schools in the core townships of Yangon city (Yangon city consist of 33 townships), most of the government schools in the satellite townships of Yangon city are still under developed, and are not well equipped with adequate teaching materials and school infrastructure such as sanitary latrines and clean water system.⁵¹ At those schools, a teacher might teach a class of around 60 students. For those schools with poor infrastructure, noises from neighboring classrooms interfere with the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Due to low salaries, the government teachers often give private tuition to their students to earn extra cash, and those poor students who cannot afford to pay for the tuitions rarely learn at school. Even though, officially, the government school teachers cannot receive extra money for private tuition, in reality, the practice is still going on. According to conversations with children who have shifted from the government schools to the monastic schools, they did not learn at the government schools and tended to learn more at the monastic schools. Interviews with their parents and the teachers also confirmed this. Although there might be very few exceptions based on the location and individual experiences, this general trend reflects the situation of schools within the Yangon peri-urban context that this study was conducted.

Consequently, an increasing number of less well-off parents stop sending their children to government schools and, instead, send them to monastic schools where their children learn better without cost. In this way, the monastic schools become not merely an alternative for poor students; it also gains popularity with the parents who opt for cheaper expenses for better quality education or at least even if for the same quality.

In fact, most of the monastic school teachers do not attend the teacher training courses at the Education Colleges like the government school teachers. They instead get in service trainings related with skills in teaching subjects and the child-centered approach with the support of the UNICEF and some other international organizations. Most of them are graduates in various other fields and not specifically

⁵¹ It is based on an interview with a teacher from a monastic school who did volunteering with some government schools.

in the education field. However, they are required to teach their students until they really learn well at their respective levels. Since they cannot give extra tutoring sessions to those children like the government school teachers, there is equal treatment towards children in the monastic schools in terms of teaching and learning the respective lessons.

Another problem in the state education system is related to rampant corruption⁵² like in almost every sector of the country.⁵³ During this study, it is found out that such corruption practice starts to intrude into the monastic education application process. One credible source, a friend of one of the head nuns interviewed, had to pay the bribe to the township education authority to get his approval and signature. Even though the motive of the nun who colluded in the corruption is unknown, she definitely failed to consider the wider implications of the action. And it might have repercussion for the other nuns and monks running monastic schools in the future.

Challenges faced by the monastic schools

Given the fact that the monastic schools help increase the country's literacy rate and reviving the monastic school system is in accordance with the regime's attempt to project itself as a Buddhist identity, the monastic school system was encouraged. However, the government did not give monastic schools permission to open the middle and high school levels, with the exception of very few monastic schools that were given permission to open middle and high schools before the year 1998. In the 2007-08 academic years, out of 1,343 monastic schools all over the country, there are only two high school level monastic schools and 112 middle school level monastic schools. The rest are either at the primary level or the post primary level. However, the nuns and monks who are working on the ground see the need and benefit of having permission to open their schools up to the high school level, because the children from their schools come from poor families and the monasteries are the only hope for continuing their education. Also, the monastic schools seem to be a place of wealth distribution in the country since rich business people give large

⁵² Related with corruption and other problems in education, see more detail at <http://www.irrawaddy.org/highlight.php?art_id=20954&page=1> and <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2011/06/21/mizzima-news-corruption-in-burma-part-ix-primary-school-fees/>.

⁵³ According to Transparency International, Burma and Somalia rank as the world most corrupted countries out of 180 countries in 2007. See more detail at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7012367.stm>.

contributions to those schools. In fact, the number of children who get benefits from the monastic education system is still very limited compared with a large number of the children who have dropped out of school before completing the fourth grade.⁵⁴

Though the students who have finished the primary level or the middle school level at the monastic schools are accepted at the government schools to continue their education, in reality, it is only for those students who can afford to go to the government schools. For the poor students, their opportunity to get a higher education is limited. To circumvent the situation, some monastic schools are affiliated with the monastic schools that were given permission to open a middle school level prior to 1998. This means that monastic schools which are officially allowed to open only a primary level school teach their students up to the middle school level and those middle school students are listed at a monastic school officially allowed to open a middle school level. For high school level students, some monastic schools teach their students high school lessons independently, so that they can take the matriculation exam as external students.

Though the government officially states that school curriculum changes are beyond the capabilities of the monastic schools, making it inappropriate to provide the high school education, there are other underlying factors regarding the matter. In accordance with the government ideologies, the monks at the central administrative level try to limit the growth of the monastic schools, stating that the purpose of the revival of monastic schools is to teach the Buddhist culture and the religion, not secular education. However, given the government's failure to give access to the secular education for poor children, the ideologies contradict the social realities and it becomes a hindrance for the monks and nuns who are running the monastic school.

The potential of the monastic schools to get stronger while state schools are getting weaker might be one reason why the government intentionally prevents monastic schools from hosting high school level courses. That is definitely what the government wants to avoid. Throughout the military regime, the authorities have tried to diminish the influential role played by monastic members. They might be worried

⁵⁴ The population of Children under the age of 18 is approximately 40% of the population of approximately 55 million. (AIPMC n.d) at <www.aseanmp.org/docs/resources/child_rights_in_Burma.pdf> According to Quintana (2011), 45% never completes the fourth grade and even if it is assumed that that number do not count that of the children who go to the monastic schools and if it is assumed that all monastic students continue their post primary education, the total number of the monastic school students at the various grades that is 196,458 (Ministry of Religious Affairs 2008) is just a fraction of those children who are still out of schools.

that the monastic schools will become a breeding ground for a younger generation of high school students who might challenge their policies and ideologies. Therefore, this is one of the reasons that the monastic schools are required to adhere to the government curriculum. Another possibility might be that the quality of the state education is already low and quality control over other education providers may be beyond the scope of the educational authorities and infeasible within the current circumstances.

CHAPTER III

CASE STUDIES OF THE SOCIALLY ENGAGED NUNS: LIFE AND WORK OF THE NUNS, CHALLENGES AND WAYS TO OVERCOME

The previous chapter discusses Burma's political and socio-economic context and the monastic institutional structure in which the socially engaged nuns are situated. This chapter gives an analysis on their work-related motivation and challenges and examines their work from the human rights lens. Before an analysis, a specific account of their life profiles and their schools is given. It serves as the groundwork for a forthcoming analysis on the challenging issues and the nuns' work from a human rights perspective.

3.1 A brief sketch of the nuns' life profiles and their schools

In spite of the fact that the head nuns in this study have come from the slightly various socio-economic backgrounds and were attracted to nunhood for various reasons, they all entered nunhood at relatively young ages. What they have in common is that they have enhanced their lives through education and they all are running the monastic schools at their nunneries. This section gives an overview of the life profile of each head nun and their schools.

*Daw Marlaryi and the Pinnya Parami nunnery school*⁵⁶

Daw Marlaryi is now in her early thirties. She entered nunhood when she was 11 years old after she finished her primary school. Her desire for learning Buddhist studies attracted her to remain in the nunhood ever since. Her parents did not reject her decision, although they asked her to come back for continuing her secular

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All the names of the nuns and schools in this thesis are pseudonyms.

education. She recalled how she had to face hardship during those days as a student nun at a thilashin Sarthindaik (nunnery school) in a small city.

Since my parents are farmers, they could not support me and I had to rely on my alms rounds. Every week I had to contribute 2 pyi⁵⁷ of rice and 1000 kyats⁵⁸ for my food and lodging⁵⁹. When I had exam or was not feeling well, I had to owe the cost for my food until later after the exams when I could resume the alms round. There was no one to donate books for my study. I didn't even have a new robe per year. I had to lead a thrifty and stringent life style. (Daw Marlaryi)

Since she had an ambition to become a teacher nun, she studied quite hard. She passed with a distinction in Buddhist studies at the religious exams held by a private religious organization in the city. When she finished her advanced level exam, she and her close friend established their own nunnery in 2006. They bought a small plot of land with the money contributed by their families and relatives. Like other new settlers of peri-urban areas, they had to face lack of water facility and electricity when they started to build a small thatched hut on their plot. Daw Marlaryi recalled that they had to carry water from faraway water sources and also struggled with floods during the rainy season. In spite of the hardship, she tried her best to educate the young nuns who came to take refuge at her nunnery by opening the Pinnya Parami Thilashin-led monastic school (nunnery school) at her nunnery in 2008.

The Pinnya Parami School is located in the southern kayain (district) of Yangon Region.⁶⁰ After an approximately one and half hour drive from Yangon city⁶¹ to the south, one can get to the school. The school exists in the peri-urban⁶² context within an accessible distance from the urban area but much influenced by a countryside atmosphere. The majority of the population of the Padauk ward⁶³ where the school is situated mostly work at garment factories in the nearest industrial estate, which is about half an hour drive from the ward. A number of them work as agricultural laborers. The rural dwellers in the surrounding wards and village tracks mostly work as seasonal workers at paddy fields, or on agriculture farms, or at

⁵⁷ 1 pyi (rice/condensed milk) = approx. 250 ml

⁵⁸ supranote 3.

⁵⁹ At the nunneries, Buddhist studies are mostly taught free of charge.

⁶⁰ Yangon Region is the smallest and the most developed and densely populated in Myanmar.

⁶¹ The driving speed is about 30 to 40 kilo meters an hour (20 to 25 miles/hr).

⁶² Periurban is defined as "characterizes some activities occurring near the city limits, in the areas that we usually call "urban fringes"." See <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=periurban>>.

⁶³ The name of the ward is also a pseudonym.

construction sites. They were relocated from their previous village tracks when a dam was constructed near their villages.

While there are some wooden houses and a few brick houses along the bumpy road that leads to the Pinnya Parami nunnery school, some small bamboo thatched houses can be seen near the school adjacent to a large paddy field. For those poor families in the Padauk ward and the surrounding rural communities, the school becomes a place that provides access to the formal education system to their children who are denied access to the government school mainly due to poverty. The Pinnya Parami School runs kindergarten to post primary schooling. However, for grade 9, which is the highest middle school level, the Pinnya Parami School is affiliated with a monastic school that was given permission to open up to grade 9 prior to 1998. This means that the grade 9 students at the Pinnya Parami School are officially enrolled at the other monastic school that the Pinnya Parami is affiliated with.

In the academic year of 2011-12, there are altogether about 490 students including boys, girls, young thilashins and koyins (novices) from the nearby monasteries and nunneries where only Buddhist studies, and not the secular education, are provided. There are around 150 young thilashins students who are residing at the Pinnya Parami nunnery and whose ages range from 4 years to 17 years.⁶⁴ Many of them come from broken families from different parts of the country including the remote ethnic villages of Shan State, Kayin State, Mon State and Rakhine State. They arrive at the school mostly through the network of the *upathika* and *upathikama* (layman donors and laywoman donors) of the famous Pa Auk Tawya (Pa Auk Forest monastery)⁶⁵ who contribute a large donation to the Pinnya Parami School. For the young nuns who have lost either one parent or both, the nunnery school becomes a refuge and a place to learn secular and Buddhist education. Meanwhile, some of them are sent by their parents or relatives solely for the educational purpose. The government education is not accessible to them due to poverty in many cases or lack of educational facilities for geographical isolation or ongoing ethnic conflict.

⁶⁴ Among 150 young nuns, about 10 nuns are taking grades 10 and 11 at the other monastic schools. Because of slight fluctuation in the numbers of the students and young nuns coming in and going out of the school, the number is best approximated.

⁶⁵ The Pa-auk monastery has branches in Yangon, Mandalay, Hpa-an and Dawei. For more detail of the monastery, see < <http://www.paaukforestmonastery.org/aboutUs.htm?>>.

In the academic year of 2011-12, there are altogether 19 teachers consisting of 8 lay female teachers, 8 nun teachers and 3 male teachers. Most of them have bachelor degrees in various fields such as Geography, History, Mathematics or Myanmar. The lay teachers live in the same township⁶⁶ that the school exists. Almost all the nun teachers are residing at the nunneries. Most of them just finished their matriculation exams and while waiting for their result, they are assisting the classroom teachers. Two of the nuns are *tawdwet* nuns who used to be middle school government teachers during their lay life. They are now taking the role of managing in teaching tasks at the Pinnya Parami School. Some members of a civic group are also volunteering at the school by teaching the children English proficiency during weekends and the summer holidays.

Daw Nyanasari and the Thitsar Wardi nunnery school

Daw Nyanasari in her late thirties holds a full *Sāsana dhaja Siripavara Dhammacariya* for completing the *dhammacariya* exam (the fifth level) in combination with the honors in Myanmar language. She entered nunhood when she was 10 years old after she finished her fifth grade. In her case, her parents encouraged her to enter nunhood temporarily due to her sickness since they believed that it could bring good health to her. Later she was also attracted to studying the Buddhist scriptures and decided to remain in the nunhood ever since. Compared with the other head nuns in this study, her family could afford to support her throughout her student life. She was sent to a famous nunnery. When she established her own nunnery in 2004, her two relative monks and a teacher monk donated some plots of land. The lay donors of the monks also contributed to the construction of the first residence building. In 2006, she started the Thitsar Wardi thilashin-led monastic school at her nunnery.

The Thitsar Wardi School is situated in one of the 33 townships that Yangon city has encompassed.⁶⁷ After driving about an hour from the Yangon city center to the outskirts in the north, it reaches the top of a country lane where there is a small sign that shows the direction pointing towards the Thitsar Wardi nunnery school. After travelling about a fifteen minute drive on the bumpy, windy and muddy lanes

⁶⁶ Administratively, states and divisions are divided into districts that consist of townships. Townships include towns, wards and the village tracks.

⁶⁷ Yangon city consists of 33 townships.

just after a heavy rain, gradually voices of children and teachers working on their lectures are getting louder. Finally the nunnery institution can be seen inside the two adjacent compounds. One compound is about 150 feet in length and 160 feet in width and the other one is about 140 feet and 100 feet in length and width respectively.

The Thitsar Wardi nunnery school officially teaches the primary level (that is from kindergarten to grade 5). However, to accommodate students of the middle school level, the school is affiliated with the same monastic school that the Pinnya Parami School is affiliated with. In the academic year of 2011-12, the total number of school children including the young nuns residing in the nunnery is 285. Around 100 young nuns ranging from aged 5 years to 18 years old are currently dwelling at the nunnery. There are also about 40 high school level students including nuns and lay students who are preparing to sit for their respective exams as external students.

Unlike the Pinnya Parami nunnery school where most of the young nun population lacks both or one parents, most of the young nuns are sent to the Thitsar Wardi nunnery school by their parents or relatives mainly for educational purposes. They mostly come from the remote ethnic villages of the northern and southern Shan state through the network of student monks who are studying Buddhist scriptures at the monasteries in Yangon. Some parents take their children to the school themselves and others ask student monks who visit their home town to bring the children to the nunnery on their way back to Yangon. Since they see no opportunity for their children to get education in their villages due to poverty or lack of the educational facilities, they choose to send their children far away up to Yangon.

The rest of the students come from the Thazin Ward where the Thitsar Wardi nunnery school is located. There are also a few young koyins, novices and young thilashins from nearby monasteries and nunneries. The majority of the population of the Thazin Ward is workers who live on daily wages and work seasonally at construction sites or doing other odd jobs. Most of them cannot afford to send their children to government schools. At the satellite townships of Yangon city, the socio-economic status of the township dwellers is quite different. Some government officials or business people are also residing in some of the wards in such townships, and there are also laborers who migrate around for seasonal agricultural or construction or handyman jobs in some of the other wards in the same townships.

In the academic year 2011-12, there are altogether 10 teachers consisting of 2 nun teachers, 3 male teachers and 5 lay female teachers. Nun teachers are residing at the nunnery. One of them holds a bachelor degree in *Pali* subject. The other one is currently in her second year doing distance learning for her bachelor degree in economics and also assisting with teaching at the school. The rest of the teachers live in the nearby wards and all of them are bachelor degree holders in various subjects. According to Daw Nyanasari, at her school the lay teachers are working almost on voluntary basis out of their good will rather than relying on their meager salary. She said she could not give a good salary to them. Those teachers are teaching at the primary and middle school levels, while Daw Nyanasari also has to hire other part time tuition teachers who teach the high school level students to prepare for their matriculation exam.

Daw Thitsar, Daw Ohnmar and the Metta Nadi School⁶⁸

Daw Thitsar, in her late thirties, is originally from an ethnic farming village in Bago Region. She said people in her village supported their children's education even though they are poor and uneducated themselves. Nowadays, due to dam construction and relocation of her village, villagers are getting poorer than before and one thing she is happy about her work is that she can help support her villagers in some way by enabling the continuation of their children's education. After the matriculation exam and when she was about 17 years old, she entered nunhood with the encouragement of her devout Buddhist school teachers. She faced rejection by her father who reminded her how difficult the life of a nun is. As she recalled her experience:

I entered nunhood at a forest monastery near my village. On the days of the alms rounds, I had to wake up as early as 3 am in the morning and had to cook breakfast for the head monk. Then I walked for two hours to the nearest town to perform the alms round there. That time, I only collected about 100 kyats (about 0.8 cents) per day. I felt so embarrassed to do alms rounds sine some people just pretended not to hear our chanting voices. And sometimes they might go inside to take money or rice. When they took so long, we thought that they won't be

⁶⁸ The name of the nuns and the school are pseudonyms.

coming out to offer things to us and we left. Then they came out and we were scolded that we were not patient and so on. (Daw Thitsar)

However, she said she felt more satisfied to be in the nunhood when she arrived at a nunnery in Yangon since she was able to continue her secular education and, at the same time, pursue Buddhist studies. She then decided to remain in the nunhood for life. By the time she finished the advanced level of the ecclesiastical exam, she also finished the final year of her undergraduate degree.

For Daw Ohnmar, her dream to become a school teacher was shattered when she had to leave school even before she finished her primary school. As an eldest daughter, she had to work full time on their family's farm since then until she reached 20 years of age. As time went by, her daily life in the paddy fields went on without change. However, a day had arrived when she could see the beginning of a change in her life and a new hope and an opportunity to fulfill her lost dream. A lucky draw was opened to both girls and boys in her village to get financial support for entering temporary nunhood or novicehood during the summer. Her little sister applied for her and she won the prize. Regardless of the rejection of her mother, she was eager to enter nunhood. When she learnt that she can do Buddhist studies and become a teacher nun, her determination to remain in nunhood for life was quite firm. That was how she left her quiet farming ethnic village in Irrawaddy Region and left for Yangon to pursue Buddhist studies. Finally, with her perseverance and the support of her sympathetic teacher nun, she was able to finish the advanced level in the Buddhist study exam. In 2001, in her early forties, she was able to establish a nunnery of her own together with her close friend, Daw Thitsar, with the donation of a lay woman whom they have known for 7 to 8 years during their alms rounds.

Two of them together started the Metta Nadi monastic school at their nunnery in 2006. The Metta Nadi School is located in the same township as the Thitsar Wardi School and only about fifteen minutes drive away. The school has only one compound of around 180 feet and 150 feet in length and width respectively with altogether 4 buildings. While all the nuns are residing in two buildings, the other two are school buildings. With the increasing numbers of the school students, a few makeshift classrooms have been built to solve the immediate problem and accommodate the additional one hundred plus students.

Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar were struggling with the problem of inadequate infrastructure at the moment when the research was conducted. Unlike the other schools, about six female teachers are also residing in the Metta Nadi School since they come from places far from Yangon. When the school started, Daw Thitsar could not afford to pay for the teachers' salaries and she had to ask for help from volunteer teachers from her native village. They have passed the matriculation exams in their native places when they arrived at the Metta Nadi School. While they were helping Daw Thitsar with teaching the children, they also did their distance learning for their respective undergraduate degrees. Now they all are graduates and officially appointed as the school teachers. In the academic year of 2011-12, there are 11 full time teachers who are teaching at the primary and middle school levels. About 8 part time tuition teachers were also hired for grade 10 and 11 students for their matriculation exam.

The Metta Nadi School was officially granted permission to open up to the post primary level, which is also affiliated with the same monastic school as the other two schools in this study. There are altogether 417 students including 104 resident nuns. Altogether about 60 high school level students are also preparing for their external exams. Like the other schools, most of the young nuns come from different parts of the country such as Shan, Rakhine and Kayin States through a network of monasteries and nunneries. While a few of them lack both parents, most of them are sent by their relatives mainly for the educational purpose. For instance, in the native village of Daw Thitsar and the surrounding villages in Irrawaddy Region, due to the dam construction, villagers were forced to relocate and their livelihood was destroyed. Parents find it difficult to send their children to school anymore and they send them to the Metta Nadi School. Some of the children have dropped out after their middle school level for a few years and they resume their education at the nunnery. One particular thing about the Metta Nadi School is that in addition to the young nuns, there are also a few girls who are Christians and residing at the nunnery school to sit for their high school exams as external students.

The rest of the students are from the surrounding communities and they come from poor families that rely on seasonal work as their livelihood. Like the other school settings, the Metta Nadi School is also situated within the peri-urban context

much influenced by the rural atmosphere. The nature of the parents' seasonal work moving around from place to place has an effect on the children's education. Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar are trying to accommodate these situations of the children as the educational providers. Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar encourage the parents to arrange for their children to remain at school for the whole year. Some parents left their children with their relatives to continue their education. However, some have to bring their children with them and leave the school half way through the school year. Since the nuns encourage these children to really learn, these children will most likely be asked to remain in the same standard for the next academic year until they pass the respective exams and they really learn the lessons of the respective grades.

3.2 What motivates nuns to get involved in the monastic school system?

The desire to improve the lives of young nuns and poor children through education is the main motivation underlying the work of all the head nuns even though there are slightly varying details regarding the motivating factors that made each of them realize their dream.

Just after Daw Marlaryi of the Pinnya Parami School moved to Yangon, she was in her late twenties and she did blood donation at the Yangon General Hospital. After the blood donation, she was given a pack of white powder with English letters on it. Reasonably thinking, any person might assume that the hospital gave the present of milk powder to be consumed to help refill the lost energy. Instead, she found out later that it was a pack of washing powder and her lack of knowledge and lack of literacy in English language nearly got her in trouble.

Taking the lesson to her heart, she realized the importance of the secular education in daily life. She also noticed that those nuns who entered nunhood after finishing the matriculation exam took only 3 to 4 years to finish the fourth level of the ecclesiastical exam. For *ngebyu* nuns like herself, without secular education, it generally takes them about 10 to 11 years to attain the same level. Then she realized the benefit of learning *Loki* (secular) education that helps learning the *Lokkutara* (the Buddhist scriptures) education get easier.

In the meantime, at the nunnery where she was staying, she was assigned to teach very young nuns of 5 to 6 years old since she was patient with the children. For the young nuns, *Thinbongyi* (the traditional spelling book) appears difficult and she suggested that the nunnery use the kindergarten curriculum of the secular education which is more interesting for young children with pictures and rhymes. Her proposal was rejected. She therefore decided to establish her own nunnery. Before she could open the thilashin-led monastic school at her nunnery, she started to fulfill her desire to provide secular education to her young nuns. First she tried sending them to a government school. But the school refused to enroll them because of their nunhood. She therefore decided to let them leave the nunhood and take the lay form. However, she found out that some of the young nuns were not happy in the lay form and that made her think of how she can provide the secular education for those children who want to remain in the nunhood. Therefore, she applied for permission to open the thilashin-led monastic school at her nunnery.

For Daw Nyarnasari of Thisarwardi School, her own experiences related to pursuing further education motivated her to run the school. Her educational excellence in the Buddhist scriptures did not help fulfill her dream to pursue the Master degree in the Buddhist studies at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University. The barrier that she could not overcome was the English language requirement. This made her realize that it is beneficial for nuns to learn both secular and Buddhist studies to be able to extend their learning horizon and their world of experiences.

Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar of Metta Nadi School were teaching their young nuns the kindergarten lessons at their shabby looking nunnery built of bamboo huts on a particular day of the year 2003 before the monastic school was opened at their nunnery. A group of female seasonal workers working at the paddy field adjacent to their nunnery heard those voices. Due to their seasonal work, the workers lack necessary documents, like the family registration, to send their children to government schools. They all approached the nuns and explained about their difficulties in sending their children to government schools. They requested the nuns to accept their children to learn the basic literacy lessons at the nunnery.

The two nuns accepted their request. However, the nuns reminded the parents that the children's attendance at their nunnery would enable them to know how

to read and write, but would not get the formal attendance recognition like in government schools. The purpose of the nuns was to teach their nuns only t Buddhist scriptures and not secular education. However, one of their students was very outstanding and intelligent and they felt sorry for him and worried that it would be a waste of his time and future if he was still out of the mainstream education system. Daw Ohnmar recalled that “he can be an engineer or a doctor when he grows up. We have to take the responsibility for his future and find ways to make our school officially recognized. That was how we started this monastic education system.” All the nuns interviewed regard themselves as workers who help nurture the self development of the children and some refer to the word “*hpon*” (glory)⁶⁹ as an inherent quality that their children possess. In their words, they are just taking the role to help implement the education project with the support of all the stakeholders including the volunteers and the donors to help improve the children’s lives.

The nuns’ attitudes indicate the value they put in the children and the expectation they have for them. Their attitude towards children is underpinned by their Buddhist world view that everyone has potential to realize their dreams that they aspire to for the good of themselves and for society. “Education is important for children. It will enable them to differentiate what is right from what is wrong. If they become educated, they will have more choices in life. Generally education can equip them with the ability to do good things for themselves and for society,” said Daw Marlaryi.

The Buddha Himself adopted an egalitarian doctrine rejecting the caste system and social injustice. He became an inspiration for the oppressed low caste *varna* to change their conditions that was predetermined by their Brahmin culture. Likewise, the nuns are motivated and inspired by the future and the potential that the vulnerable children have. They are helping those children overcome their vulnerability. In other words, the nuns’ endeavor to provide education can be seen as empowering the children and, in turn, the action empowers the nuns themselves. That leads to their successful attempts regardless of challenging factors and difficulties on their way ahead.

⁶⁹ ‘*hpon*’ is normally used for the venerable monks and the females or males who are highly respected with their high social and economic status.

3.3 Challenges and ways to overcome

Some of the challenges the nuns have to face are mainly related to the political and social context in which the nuns are situated. Such factors are the economic situations of the country, failure in the education sector, some restrictions on civic activities and the government's two tier approach to the monastic members. These have had some impact on the work of the nuns. In addition, their standing as a nun and lack of the religious authority has also some implications for their work.

(i) State Control and nuns' resistance

When Daw Marlaryi started to open the school, the local authorities asked her whether her activities were related to any organization and if so, she could only be affiliated with the junta-sponsored organizations (GONGOs) like the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA), Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAFF),⁷⁰ and so on. It was a typical action that such kind of organizations used to take with the intention of ensuring their hegemonic presence and control even at the ward level. The local authorities have no interest in tolerating any kind of power that could counterbalance their hegemony. Therefore they attempted to restrict the nun's freedom of association and the right to participate in public life.

Daw Marlaryi simply rejected the attempt of the GONGOs to manipulate her activities by using the moral integrity and perseverance. She refused the proposal of those organizations by saying that "I am not working for my own interest or for any other purposes. I am working purely to provide education for poor children. You can wait and see how I work. There is no organization I am affiliated with and I won't be affiliated with any organizations including yours." She believes in her righteous manner in the sense that her motive for running the school is not underpinned by any

⁷⁰ Those organizations were mostly organized by the junta as part of the strategies to represent and mobilize military interests within the society and infiltrate communities at ward, village, township and divisional levels. See more detail at Altsean-Burma (n.d) at < [http://www.altsean.org/ Key%20Issues/KeyIssuesMilitary.htm](http://www.altsean.org/Key%20Issues/KeyIssuesMilitary.htm)>. Nowadays USDA becomes the Union Solidarity and Development Party that was elected as government in 2010.

self serving motives or any political motivation. That belief empowers her not to be submissive to the authority's demand.

Similarly, all the head nuns had to face the intimidation and restrictions. They were told not to receive trainings held by foreign organizations or not to get support from foreigners. They were also asked to inform the local authorities in advance before the arrival of foreign visitors. However, all the nuns exercised their rights to take decisions on their own affairs. For instance, Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar who are eager to learn anything that will be beneficial to their school simply accept such kind of training offered from some NGOs. Some of the buildings in the nunneries were constructed with donation of some foreign organizations and the nuns accept any visitors including foreigners. In a particular incidence, the local authorities learnt that Daw Nyarnasari had completed a nunnery building with the contribution of some foreign donors. They felt quite offended that they were not informed about this in advance before the construction. They warned Daw Nyarnasari not to accept such kind of donation next time and also to inform them in advance before she does something similar in the future. But it was not clear what action the authority would take or could take in this regard.

In response to the authority, she said:

We are mendicants and have to accept whatever from whomever. If you offer donations, we will also accept your donations. If you don't want us to accept the others' donations, you should donate the same what they are going to donate us. Then we would not accept their donations but only yours. (Daw Nyarnasari)

Her words indicate that their action was morally and ethically correct because their vocation relies on receiving the donations of the laypeople. What they did was in accordance with their ascetic practices, while what the authorities were demanding was in breach of their responsibility to respect the rights of the public to have freedom of association and to make their own decisions on the matters that directly affect their lives. Her words also seem to point to the responsibility of the state and, in turn, it renders the claim of the respective authorities unreasonable and illegitimate.

(ii) Conflict of Interest and response with moral authority

When Daw Marlaryi started the school, she faced the rejection of the people in the community who are related to the government school in the ward where the nunnery school is situated. Those people worried that the children from their government school might shift to the nun's school. This will jeopardize the funding of their school. The teachers might also lose chances of earning extra income by giving after-school tutoring to their own students who do not learn much in class. Those people accused the nuns of colluding in corruption with the township education authority to get permission to open the school.

In spite of this accusation, the nun was able to respond to disturbances with her moral authority and the genuine work that made those noises stop. Since the majority of the school children come from the surrounding communities that cannot go to the government school, the issue of the conflict of interest did not come up as they worried earlier. Only a few government school children have shifted to the nun's school since their parents could no longer afford to support the continuation of their children's attendance at the government school. In the meantime, the nunnery school was receiving a good reputation for the nun's hard work and the charisma. The laypeople become more confident in the nun's work and tend to donate more to the school. This success of the school within a few years gives the nun credibility.

Daw Marlaryi said that:

Our school accepts only the poor children. Those children who can afford to go to the government school do not come to us. One or two years after, those people who accused us [of corruption] realize that the school is accommodating only the vulnerable children who will be otherwise deprived of education.

One of the parents in the community, in describing how poor the children who come to the nunnery school are, also added that:

Some children have to walk across the muddy paddy fields about half an hour during the rainy season to get to the nunnery school. Some have to dig bamboo shoots and sell them. Some have to carry water and sell water. They come from the nearby poor farming communities and they might not get education otherwise if the nunnery school did not exist.

The value of the nun's work and the school's reputation has confounded the earlier accusations. In this way, Daw Marlaryi has overcome the issue of possible tension with some community members.

(iii) Some doubt about the nuns' involvement in the secular education and responses

Regardless of the fact that the monastic school system was revived due to the necessity of giving secular education to poor children, some religious personnel raised their doubts on the legitimacy of monks and nuns being involved in the secular education apart from teaching the basic Buddhist literacy. The nuns in this study have to face the accusation that they are working to get benefit in the *loki* (this worldly matters) realm by using their religious vocation of receiving donations from the donors. While some Buddhists think that way, some non-Buddhists think that the monastic school education system is used to disseminate Buddhism to non-Buddhists, thus expanding the dominance of Buddhism.

Regardless of such suspicion, this research finds that the nuns in this study are very open-minded and believe in the right to the freedom of religion. Daw Marlaryi said that "by providing children with secular education, they will be knowledgeable and be able to make their own choices and decisions. Whatever religion they follow, they need to do the good for themselves and for their society." It is commensurate with what the Buddha has taught in *Kalama Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya*, regarding the freedom of inquiry, critical thinking and freedom of choice for the good and benefit of all. In fact, a lay donor who is very close to Daw Marlaryi is a Christian woman and Daw Marlaryi said she never imposes her religion on her lay friend. In the case of Daw Thitsar and Daw Ohnmar, they themselves are ethnics and from their ethnic villages, some Christian children come and study at their school. Those girls are not required to accept Buddhism as their religion.

In response to the criticism about their involvement in the secular education, all the nuns refer to the sacrifices the Buddha made for the benefit of people. Some refer to the act of the Buddha taking care of patients as an example of social work in the Buddha's teaching. Daw Marlaryi, Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar

relate how they have sacrificed their study for *dhammacariya* level exam and have committed to their social work. They believe that what they are doing is in accordance with the Buddha's teaching.

Daw Marlaryi said their work also bring benefit to the *lokkutara* (other worldly) realm, not only to the *loki* (this worldly) realm. Daw Marlaryi expounded her views on that.

While Sarthindaiks (nunneries or monasteries that teach only the Buddhist scriptures) produce monks and nuns who are learned in Buddhist studies, our monastic schools produce educated laypeople that pay respect to the Buddha's *sasana*. Our monastic students are expected to become good *upathikas* and *upathikamas* (lay donors of the monastic members). (Daw Marlaryi)

Daw Marlaryi's Buddhist world view is that while the secular education needs to be learnt for self development in this present life, as monastic members, nuns need to learn and practice Buddhist studies as a means of repaying the debt of gratitude they owe to their donors. The intention is that in case the young nuns give up nunhood, it is expected that the secular training will make them employable. If they decide to remain in *sasana*, the number of learned nuns both in the secular and dharma fields is expected to enhance the image and social standing of nuns.

(iv) A dilemma issue in the nuns' work and the responses: Access to education versus the best interest of the children

A question may be raised as to why the Buddhist girls who want to take refuge in these nunneries are required to enter nunhood. In response to this question, all the nuns said that it is related to the administrative and security reasons.

As nuns, they wear the same clothing and eat the same meal. There is no inequality in their economic and social status. There cannot be destructive competition among them. In addition, it is safer for their life. A nun might be less vulnerable to be exposed to possible sexual assaults than a lay girl. As females dwelling together at a place, it is the best for us in nunhood. (Daw Nyanasari)

Another reason is that the nuns are entitled to go collect alms, which helps support their daily living. However, the nuns do not allow very young nuns, aged around 5 to 6 years old, to go on alms rounds since they are too young. At Daw

Marlaryi's school, one third of the young nuns are at those ages and she adopts the system of entrusting the responsibility of taking care of very young nuns to the elder nuns. This helps create an atmosphere of a family. She said, "Taking the role of parents, we take care of the whole family and they need to take care of each other as sisters. I give incentives like giving prizes to the elder sisters if the younger sisters are clean and tidy".

Since all the head nuns interviewed have received trainings on 'life skill' and 'child-centered approach' conducted by the UNICEF, they try to create a child friendly atmosphere in their schools. This includes giving the children time to play and taking the young nuns who are residing at the nunneries on pilgrimage to other parts of the country during the summer holidays. Meanwhile, the children are also required to adhere to daily schedules of saying prayers and studying hard.⁷¹

It can be seen that the nuns are trying to adopt the administrative system that help meet the best interest of the children. However, since the meaning of 'the best interest of the children' itself appears debatable when taking into consideration whether children can participate in the matters that affect their lives or not. The researcher's conversations with some young nuns gave the impression that they wanted to come to the receptive nunneries for study as they realize the importance of study for their life. Some said they are happy to be at their nunneries. In spite of this fact, there might also be some young nuns who feel happier to remain in their native places, but were asked by their parents or relatives to leave for far-away places for educational purposes. Whereas the nuns' work help fulfill the right to education, it seems debatable whether it is the best interest of the young nuns to stay at the nunneries. For some, it can be argued that young girls should grow up in their native places among their relatives. However, given the difficulty to get access to education at their home towns, it seems that priority is given to education and the young nuns are sent far away from their home towns.

⁷¹ Although slightly varied, mostly the schedule at the nunneries includes prayer time in the morning and in the evening, study time, school time, time for cleaning and other household chores and time to play. They have to wake up in the early morning around 4 am and sleep at 9 pm for the young nuns. The elder ones go to sleep at 10 pm. The young nuns can sleep for 3 hours during the days when there is no school. Normally the nuns' schools are closed for two days before the Buddhist Sabbath Day since during those two days, nuns do their alms performance. For the young nuns aged between 5 to 10 years old, they do not need to go alms round and they can take rest during those days.

On the other hand, it can be said the nuns' work is in accordance with the best interest of vulnerable girls whose lives are protected from being exposed to dangers, such as being trafficked or other exploitative acts. As Daw Marlaryi recalled her conversation with a lay donor who is working at a hotel, she said "I was requested to accept all the children who come and ask to take refuge at my nunnery. This donor has met some young girls who were asked by their relatives or parents to work in the prostitution business. He said that if such girls are taken care of at our nunneries, they won't face such situations."

(v) Financial Constraints: the effect on quality of education and coping strategies

1. Quality of education

Another overall challenge that the nuns have to face is related to the quality of education. Depending on the charisma of the respective nuns, the amount of support they receive slightly varies regarding the teaching and learning materials and financial support necessary for the school related costs such as teachers' salaries and school infrastructure.

One thing that the government education department gives support to the monastic schools is provision of teaching skill trainings to the teachers from the monastic schools. They are trained together with the government school teachers with the support of the UNICEF. The British Council also gives trainings on various teaching methods to the monastic school teachers. However, the applicability of child friendly methods the teachers have learnt in the respective classroom environment also depends on the adequacy of the teaching and learning materials that can be provided in the classrooms and the conditions of the school infrastructure.

At Thitsar Wardi School, Daw Nyarnasari is struggling to find enough funding to build a library while Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar are expecting donations from donors to be able to extend classrooms to accommodate the students who are currently learning at makeshift classrooms made of bamboo and thatched roofs, and to build a playground for the children. While a child friendly atmosphere is conducive for the best learning environment for any child, it might be more of a

necessity for the monastic school children since they have come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such an environment can help increase their learning capacity. Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar well acknowledge the need for that.

Our children are not like the others. Since they are poor, they don't have enough nutrition and they need to be stimulated to enhance their learning ability by using the child friendly methods. That is why I always remind my teachers to learn and apply as much as they can the best methods suitable for our children. (Daw Thitsar)

2. Coping strategies

Though they could not provide adequate facilities to create the best learning environment for the children, within their limited resources, they managed to provide the best education possible. A tangible result is that the nuns' schools have gained a good reputation among community members that their children really know how to read and write compared with the children who go to government schools and do not take extra paid tutorial sessions with their teachers. They compare the skills of the primary school level children in reading, writing and mathematics. Interviews with the monastic school teachers and the parents of some children who have shifted from government schools to the monastic schools in this study have confirmed this.⁷²

The head nuns were nurtured in an environment where disciplines were well respected and they worked hard to achieve high academic standards they aspired to. Similarly they want all the children to learn civic values, monastic moralities and to be successful in their learning.

My ambition is to enhance the life of our children through education. I always teach them to try their best. Since they come from various backgrounds, some of them were not taught about manners. They might be undisciplined or use abusive languages. So we have to teach them to be polite and to have good manners. (Daw Ohnmar)

⁷² It seems that conflict of interest issue might likely arise as having seen in the case of Daw Marlaryi's school due to the fact that the nuns' schools provide free and better quality education than some of the government schools and government school children might be shifted to monastic schools. However, most of the parents who can afford to pay extra tuition fees send their children only to government schools due to the belief that government schools can guarantee the legalization and continuation of their children's schooling. On the other hand, monastic schools have to rely on the government for their permission to be opened and hence the certainty of their continuation is not guaranteed.

Simply they are determined not to fail in what they are doing and to prove that they are capable and accountable to all the stakeholders they are dealing with. With that motivation, they utilize various means to enable their children to learn their lessons very well.

On one account, Daw Ohnmar said how she held a meeting with the parents of the school children who were frequently absent for various reasons and discussed with them how to get the children back to school. Similarly, Daw Marlaryi also relates to how the numbers of students from her surrounding communities have increased who come to school regularly every academic year.

First year, they enrolled and then after a few months, some of them disappeared. I had to make inquiry of their problems and seek agreements with their parents to send their children regularly and to participate in monitoring the children's progress. Since we provide everything that is necessary for schooling like stationeries, they just need to come down to school. The children who are working also can work outside the school hours. (Daw Marlaryi)

Given the financial constraints they have to face, they are struggling to provide a quality education to the children. However, they try their best to draw on available resources. Those resources are related to their educational credentials and ascetic practices. They capitalize on those resources and earn trust and support from the lay donors. In response to the question of how they have overcome all those challenges, they attribute what they have achieved so far to their spiritual qualities such as patience, perseverance, good will, loving kindness and sacrifice. "To take this responsibility (running the school), we have to be passionate, dedicated, patient and have to work hard," said Daw Nyarnasari.

Among the three schools, Daw Marlaryi's school seems to have made more progress in terms of physical infrastructure and material support. The difference might depend on the charisma of each nun. On one account, Daw Marlaryi described how she managed to provide the basic facilities that she lacked as a student nun.

Motivated by the good will that those children don't suffer hardship as I suffered, I managed to provide clean toilet and water facilities. When we were young, we had to walk far to the toilet that might be as far as 250 feet away from the main

building out in the field.⁷³ Especially during the night, it was dark and we were scared to use the toilet. Again to fill the water in the toilet, we had to carry water from far away water wells. Now I tried my best to eradicate such kind of hardship from their lives as much as I can. (Daw Marlaryi)

A male teacher from Daw Marlaryi's school notes that even in some government schools in the peri-urban areas, the clean toilet and water facilities⁷⁴ are not provided like in Daw Marlaryi's school. He expressed his appreciation for the nun's effort.

Regardless of the slight differences in receiving support from the lay donors, all the nuns manage the functioning of their school projects by relying on their vocation of alms round and also by contributions of individuals or local civil society volunteer groups that give support to the nuns in terms of finance, materials or labor. Mostly those local civil society volunteer groups are formed informally among friends or through a network of people in similar occupations to contribute their energy, time and money to the *Parahita* (social work) activities of the monasteries and nunneries. For instance, a group of doctors who have recently graduated come to the Metta Nadi School every Saturday to give medical treatment to the young nuns at schools and people in the community. At Pinnya Parami School and Thitsar Wardi School, individual doctors come once a week and give treatment to the children at the school and also the community members. Some civil society groups include a group of students who collect money among themselves and donate books or other necessities for the children. They also come and teach the children the English language proficiency once a week. A local company has been supporting the salaries of the teachers at the monastic schools on a regular basis, as a result of the recommendation of the head monk of the divisional supervisory committee of the monastic schools.

⁷³ In the past, in the rural areas, there were no fly proof latrines and even if they are fly proof, those latrines were simple pit latrines and built faraway from the main building where people live. Until now in some areas, people still use simple pit latrines.

⁷⁴ In peri-urban areas and even in some satellite townships, at government schools, even if clean toilet systems like flush latrines are provided, due to poor budget and maintenance, the sanitation is poor and the environment is not child friendly.

(vi) Implications of the nuns' religious position and gender issue

1. Gender biased attitudes towards the nuns, lack of religious authority and overcoming strategies

Nowadays the nunnery schools in this study present an image of established institutions with one- or two-storey brick buildings completed about five years ago, and with some additional construction. However, at the beginning, the nuns started with poor looking bamboo and thatched huts in which submissive looking nuns were reciting their scriptural texts and teaching the small nuns kindergarten lessons. Their position as women and nuns with their quiet lifestyle and their poor infrastructure exposed them to some prejudice at the beginning. Daw Ohnmar relates her own experience.

Due to the fact that we are women and we are nuns, people look down on us and we are subjected to criticisms and skepticism about whatever we do. And hence we have to struggle a lot. Even though people dare not look down on men regardless of whatever they do, for women, we are subject to the watchful eyes of the people who are ready to put the blame on us in case something went wrong. Hence we have to be very careful in every single detail in whatever we do. We have to be very attentive and stable. We have to be too cautious not to make any single mistake even by accident. We don't expect praises. We just expect fair judgment about our work. We just want to do very well. (Daw Ohnmar)

All the head nuns had the experience of being watched with suspicious eyes when they started to establish their nunneries. The new establishment of a monastery is generally welcomed by the community without much questioning. In every Buddhist village in Burma, there is at least one monastery, an essential place for the villagers to hold the ritual ceremonies. Whereas a nunnery lacks such kind of credibility and the act of some of the false nuns also tarnishes the reputation of other genuine nuns.⁷⁵ Only after a few years when the community realizes that the nuns are genuine, hard working and respectable, such kind of suspicion has melted.

In one account, Daw Marlaryi recalled the criticisms she had to face during the construction of a two-storey concrete building of 74 feet in length and 32

⁷⁵ Even though those nuns who have finished at least the advanced level of the Buddhist studies exam can establish their own nunneries, in some places, some of the nuns lack such qualifications and are subject to the suspicion about their motives as to whether they establish a nunnery for personal gains and economic reasons.

feet in width at her nunnery. When the cyclone Nargis⁷⁶ destroyed their bamboo school building, a donor offered her a new one-storey brick building. She capitalized on this opportunity and negotiated with the donor to build a two-storey building using his donation as a foundation. Her intention was to use the downstairs for classrooms and the upstairs for a prayer hall and accommodation for the young nuns.

Since it took some months before she could find additional donors who would contribute to the on-going construction of the building, some lay people criticized that she was just a nun and she should not have expected to receive donations like a monk. What they meant was that a monk's expectation to be offered a two-storey building is legitimate while a nun's expectation is just an act of greed. During the conversation with the nun, the nun revealed her feeling that she felt sorry to be accused of being greedy to expect a two-storey building and not being satisfied with just a one-storey building. When the researcher asked whether a similar criticism might be made if she was a monk who expected such kind of building for his monastery, she said people might not dare to make a similar judgment about the motive of the monk in that case. According to her, she acknowledged the fact that the religious status of a monk is incomparably higher than that of a nun and she said she never expected to be treated like a monk in terms of gaining financial support.

In response to such criticisms, Daw Marlaryi said "what I am doing is not meant for my personal gains, but with genuine goodwill for the young nuns and the children. When I started the school, there was no regular donor. But I decided to rely on the alms round to support the school". She believes that it was because of her moral integrity that she could finally overcome those difficulties and the construction of the two-storey building was finally completed with additional contributions contributed by some donors.

2. Ambivalent position between the secular and religious realm

It is a tradition in Theravada Buddhism that socially engaged monks and nuns solely rely on donations from willing laypeople. For instance, the Sitagu Sayadawgyi U Nyanissara who is doing a lot of social work such as running the Sitagu

⁷⁶ Nargis is a destructive storm that killed thousands of people in the country in 2008.

water donation project, Ayudana Hospitals⁷⁷ and International Buddhist Universities only rely on the donations willingly donated by lay people.⁷⁸ Strictly adhering to the *Vinaya* rules, Theravada Sayadaws (venerable monks) avoid earning income through the means of “Business of Religion” that is what the religious personnel of the other religion and Mahayana Buddhism are practicing for supporting their charity activities.⁷⁹ Theravada Sayadaws are mindful of a pure form of livelihood that is conducive to dharma practices and they regard their practice as sustainable and worthy of respect and donations.

In accordance with their ascetic practice, all the nuns interviewed are very cautious about asking for donations, raising funds and seeking donors. Daw Marlaryi explains how nuns, as the affiliated monastic members, may choose to adhere to the *Vinaya* rules⁸⁰.

Even though we are not *bhikkhuni* (fully ordained female monks), we would like to follow the *bhikkhuni* practices as much as we can. For *bhikkhu* (male monks) and *bhikkhuni*, according to *Vinaya* rules, even though they can accept the donation offered by any lay person, they are allowed to ask for donation only from the laypeople who have already committed to providing them with the donation they may need or from their mother or sister. They are prohibited from asking for donation from just any person who has not made such a prior commitment to provide for their needs. (Daw Marlaryi)

At monasteries run by male monks, financial matters are handled by laypeople called *kappiyas* (stewards) instead of the monks, while the monks are just taking the monitoring role. The presence of stewards in monasteries thus allows monks to adhere to the *Vinaya* rules. Traditionally, for nuns, such kind of assistance is not available since they are not required to avoid handling money. In fact, nuns are not prohibited to handle money and they can collect cash during their alms rounds while monks are prohibited to do so. However, the nuns’ intention to adhere to the *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* rules indicates that as the affiliated monastic members, they endeavor to seek credibility in the religious realm.

⁷⁷ There are now altogether 12 Ayudana (donation for lives) Hospitals.

⁷⁸ See detail about Sayadawgyi and his projects at <<http://sitagu.org/burma/>>.

⁷⁹ See more discussion on business of religion at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/burmese/interactivity/2011/09/110908_biz_religion.shtml>.

⁸⁰ The monastic rules applied for the ordained monks.

In the case of monks, a good *kappiya* knows what his monk needs and he might ask a lay donor's contribution to what his monk needs without jeopardizing the monk's adherence to the *Vinaya* rules related to asking for donations. However, in the case of the nuns, their ambivalent position sometimes situates them in the lay realm and they themselves can lead fund raising activities without any requirement to stick to the *Vinaya* rules related to asking for donations. However, the nuns make efforts to practice the *Vinaya* rules as much as they can, and an implication is that they limit themselves to their alms round and asking donations only from their regular lay donors who have already committed to supporting them. "Even though we respond to the request of the lay donors who ask us what we need and what they should offer, we normally will not simply ask donations from any lay person" said Daw Marlaryi. This practice partly contributes to financial constraints the nuns have to face in their work. On the other hand, it can foster some credibility in the ascetic practices of the nuns. Hence it earns trust, respect and support of some lay donors who have good knowledge of the *Vinaya* rules and appreciate the nuns' attempt to seek their religious worth.

3.4 Looking at the nuns' work from a human rights perspectives

Even though the nuns never attempted to discern their world views and their work from a human rights perspective, an analysis of their work and their social attitudes in this respect might enrich one's understanding of the socio-economic and political context in which their work is situated. In addition, it will earn a better understanding on how their Buddhist world views have influenced the ways they respond to challenges in life and work.

1. Freedom and human dignity

The head nuns suggest that their hardship in life is much related to their ascetic life style, rather than the implications of the institutional structure and the country context. Daw Marlaryi says that a nun should be content with what she has. Nuns, she said, should try to overcome their cravings for any sensual pleasure either in meals, clothing or entertainments in accordance with the Buddha's teaching. Referring to her life experience, she said that:

The majority of nuns live a stringent lifestyle. We have only two set of clothing. One set is kept as presentable and used when going outside so that the others cannot look down on us and our religion. We also have meat only once a week, and for protein, we are satisfied with peas. (Daw Marlaryi)

Daw Marlaryi seems to take pride in the liberation from sensual desire and the inner tranquility of mind. The meaning that her words bear resonates with what Aung San Suu Kyi (2011) refers to as the Buddha's teaching in her Reith lecture.⁸¹ She said that, "Buddhism teaches that the ultimate liberation is liberation from all desire." As Aung San Suu Kyi (2011) comments on that, the statement seems to bear the meaning that the teaching of the Buddha do not correspond to the human rights concepts that are based on the desire for freedom. However, as she refers to the example of the saffron revolution led by the monks in Burma in 2007, the monks and the nuns alike demanded for the basic rights of the people to affordable food.

In the case of Daw Marlaryi and the other nuns in this study, they seem to have strong desire for their young nuns and the poor children to get access to education. This suggests that what Daw Marlaryi meant by taking pride in being liberated from the desire for craving is that any physical hardship or inconvenience could not destroy her inner peace and freedom. Instead it fostered endurance to stand for hardships and at the same time, to work hard to escape from those hardships for herself and for her children.

Even though the nuns do not describe what they are doing as trying to fulfil basic rights of those children, their work represents their belief and their expectation that through education, lives of those children can be enhanced. In other words, their work is helping to realize the potential of those children that is inherent in every human being that can bring about the good for oneself and for society.

Thus, the nuns' point of view resonates with Article 1 of the UDHR which says "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Scholars like Keown (1998), Perera (1991) and King (2005) have established the linkage between the nature of goodness in human beings that Buddhism believes in and the concept of

⁸¹ Aung San Suu Kyi 2011. 'Liberty', Lecture one of Reith Lecture Series titled Securing Freedom on BBC Radio 4. For more detail, see <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/rmhttp/radio4/transcripts/2011_reith1.pdf>.

human dignity and equality. This resonates with what the head nuns believe in, as they strive for dignity as displayed by their life accounts and their work.

Daw Marlaryi said that “good luck means good work” in response to some comments that she was lucky to be successful within a few years. She said “I believe that as long as we work with good intention, it will bring about good luck. But on the day the work with this righteous mindset stops, what we call ‘good luck’ will also stop. In fact, we always tell others that we are workers not Sayagyis (head nun teachers).” The world view of Daw Marlaryi can be seen as practical and modest. Her world view as a Buddhist regarding the concept of *kamma* (action) is also notable. People normally tend to consider *kamma* only from its deterministic point of view within the context of Burma. In this case also, some of Daw Marlaryi’s commentators think that Daw Marlaryi’s past action made her lucky in this present life and time. However, they tend to forget the importance of the current actions that can bring dignity back to the lives of the vulnerable children as Daw Marlaryi has pointed out.

2. Responsibilities versus rights

From the nuns’ accounts of how they have overcome various challenges in their work, it seems remarkable that Buddhists respond to social problems based on the world view of taking responsibility, rather than taking a confrontational approach in demanding for one’s rights. As Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai Buddhist scholar, said, “the classical Buddhist texts do not refer to rights, human or otherwise, but rather to duties or responsibilities” (cited in King 2005:132). It is reflected in the attitudes of the nuns that they try to observe the *bhikkhuni* rules as much as they can. This means that they regard adhering to the monastic rules as their responsibility regardless of whether they are recognized as fully ordained members of the *Sangha* community or not. And they also have no intention of making such a demand. Rather, they pay more attention to how to make themselves relevant as the affiliated monastic members.

This line of thinking is also reflected in an effort of a head monk of the supervisory committee of the monastic schools. He tried to take a stance in harmony with the authority so that their work might not be subjected to the state’s suspicion and might win the state’s support. Once the head monk of the monastic school supervisory committee at the divisional level told Daw Marlaryi that they had to be thankful that

the state apparatus recognized the existence of their schools and did not interfere with their activities. He said that this state recognition should suffice and the nuns should not expect more from the state in terms of material support.⁸² Sayadawgyi (the venerable monk) always play a protective role in relation to the nuns. According to the nuns, he often says that the nun-led schools are opened with his encouragement, not by the initiation of the nuns themselves. Daw Marlaryi said that Sayadawgyi is very thoughtful and tries to protect the nuns' work with his influential authority.

Daw Marlaryi echoed the Sayadawgyi's speech that was given during the opening ceremony of her school where the government personnel from the respective department responsible for giving permission to open the monastic schools were present. This is what she said:

According to what Sayadawgyi said, the monastic schools are beneficial to the state in the sense that we help save the government's budget. Because of the fact that the monastic schools are taking responsibility to provide education to children with the donation of the laypeople, the government does not need to spend on the teachers' salaries or students' educational expenses. (Daw Marlaryi)

As in his speech, Sayadawgyi seems to assume that the government will also take its responsibility to spend the budget saved in a fruitful way for the public. It might be true that in the time of the Buddha, the traditional society can be entrusted on each other based on the model of a web of interdependent society. However, as Donnelly in King (2005:132) points out, in this modern world due to such factors as fragmentation of societies with modern markets and states, one cannot expect that the system of mutual support in interdependent society will bring about peace and harmony like in a traditional society. In other words, in the primitive era, life was simple and traditional societies seemed to be more cohesive and people could be trustworthy. People could be held accountable for the responsibilities they had to take within the context of interconnected relationships. Contrarily, in this modern world, things are getting complicated and people are getting less trustworthy. For instance, without the framework of good governance system, the state fails to function properly.

⁸² Except for a certain amount of rice donations organized by some government departments occasionally, there is no regular donation from the government for the monastic schools. Starting from the academic year 2011-12, a government supported organization (GONGO) named *Sangha noakgaha athin* that was formed in 2010 donates some text books to the monastic schools.

Within this context, people in power tend to abuse their authority without being held accountable for their actions.

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, it is obvious that the state of Burma has failed to fulfill the rights of people and make necessary efforts to take responsibility in relation to the provision of education. In the particular case of Sayadawgyi's harmonizing attempt, it seems workable in a short term in the sense that it can help ensure the smooth running of the monastic schools. In that sense, Saydawgyi's request for the state apparatus to support the effort of the nuns seems to have more authority and legitimacy.

On the other hand, it appears that such an approach is risky because it is possible that the respective monastic members might be subjected to the state's manipulation.⁸³ In that case, the Buddhist world view of taking responsibilities in a non-confrontational manner seems not in accordance with the human rights values. It seems that avoidance of adversarial relationships with the state, such as in demanding for one's rights, is a tradition in Buddhist countries.

In spite of this, as was seen in the 2007 saffron revolution involving demands for the rights to basic necessities, there is also an aspect of Buddhism that is in conformity with the human rights norms. The Buddha Himself said that people have the right to topple the abusive rule that violates the *Dasa Raja Dharma* (ten principles of the kingly virtues) in *Milinda Panha* and in *Jataka* story (titles of the Buddhist texts).

Similarly, in this study, as was seen earlier, regarding the head nuns' response to the disturbances of the state apparatus, the nuns took the stance of non-acquiescence and resistance. They ignored the unreasonable demand of the local authorities that they comply with state rules and, instead, exercised their rights to decide their own affairs.

3. *Taking responsibilities and meeting rights*

The action of local civic groups that are volunteering to contribute their time and money to the nuns' work, as discussed earlier in this chapter, portrays a web of interconnected society in which individuals and the society take their share of

⁸³ Regardless of such risk, as mentioned before, in Burma people tend to pay more attention to the moral integrity and the charisma of the monks or nuns.

responsibilities to help provide the basic necessities required for the self development of the poor children that the state fails to provide for. These civic groups can also be regarded as exercising their rights to freedom of association and participation in public life in their own ways to help fulfill the children's rights to life, education and self development amidst difficulties.

As Daw Marlaryi said "We are doing what you (the government) are supposed to do because you are not doing it. In this way, we make you realize what you should have done and what you need to do." It indicates that they attempted to empower the children with their available resources in a collective manner and, in turn, it empowers them and helps them find the means to be able to exercise some of their civil and political rights. This situation could be seen as a silent revolution within the context of Burma. In this study, Daw Marlaryi and the other head nuns well realized the country's situation specifically related to the problems in the education sector that the state needs to be held accountable. They have found themselves to have taken an unusual position being involved in the secular realm by working as the education service providers. This was not their expected position as religious personnel. All the head nuns said if all poor children could get access to secular education without their support, they would be happy since that situation would allow them to commit only to teaching and learning Buddhist studies. It reveals that their current role as education providers was just only the choice they had to make based on the current country situations. Otherwise, their choice would have been different and they would be making more commitments in the religious realm. Such kind of situation led the nuns to take their position in a critical way. This reflects the nuns' critical attitude towards the situation that had impact on their life and work. In other words, such an attitude indicates that there is the potential to change the current situation even though it is just on an individual basis and on a small scale.

CHAPTER IV

THE NUN'S ACTIVITIES AND CHANGES IN SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

4.1 Possibility of change in societal attitudes towards nuns and women

Owing to the spiritual and moral qualities and their leadership abilities, the head nuns have made some progress in their work and proved their credibility and earned trust and respect of their stakeholders. The three lay female teachers interviewed mentions that the nuns are their ideal persons and whenever they face difficulties, the image of the nuns encourage them not to give up.

An ambivalent attitude towards the nuns has been changed. A male teaching staff from the Pyinna Parami School admits that before he came to know more about the life and work of the nuns he is now working with, he did not understand the life of the nuns very well and underestimated their effort and capabilities:

I thought that they are just leading an easy and unproductive lifestyle without much effort and aim in life. Their status is low and poverty stricken. That is why they have to collect rice donation without having any other means for their survival. I never thought that they will be able to run the school like that. Now I am very impressed with the head nun for her work. (A male teacher from Pyinna Parami School)

Another female teacher from Daw Nyarnacari's school also said that she never thought that nuns are hard working before she started working at the school. She realizes that the nuns are quite disciplined and that it would be difficult for a lay person to adhere to the strict daily schedule of the nuns. And she is also impressed by the nuns who do both secular and Buddhist studies at the same time.

A male teacher from the Metta Nadi School also did not think highly of the nuns and rarely made any donation to them before he came to work at the school. According to him, people mostly go to the monastery and rarely go to the nunneries

and rarely know about the nuns' lives. He said that his attitude has changed now and that he would donate more to nuns in the future.

Depending on one's personality and culture, the extent of respect towards the nuns that each lay individual has or show in public varies. While some lay men show their respect to the nuns in the same way as they pay worship to the Sangha by bowing down before the nuns,¹ some do not behave that way. For instance, the researcher noticed that one male teacher paid worship to Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar by sitting down and bowing down in front of them. Similarly, at Daw Marlaryi's school, on a birthday ceremony, three boys donated things to Daw Marlaryi and then they paid worship to her by bowing down. However, generally the majority of males and some females do not want to pay worship to nuns mainly for two reasons. One is because of their attitude that males are a superior sex and the other is related to nuns' lack of religious authority. Daw Ohnmar and Daw Thitsar recalled what their teacher nun, the late *dhammadhika* nun, told about the attitudes of some males regarding the worship towards nuns. At the nun's dharma talk, some men were seen standing at the corners of the *tazaung*² or nearby and listened to the sermon delivered by the nun. Being much influenced by their male superiority attitude, they did not want to bow down before the nun. That is why they did not come and sit down together with other members of the audience.³ Besides, due to the nun's low position in the religious realm, even some women did not want to bow down and some mentioned that they preferred to listen to the dharma of monks only.

Regardless of that, it may be said that the acts of the nuns who commit to humanitarian work and also to Buddhist studies and meditation practices, has gradually improved the general perception of the people on the nuns' role within the context of Burma.

Lay donors would visit a nunnery one time while they visited a monastery for a hundred times in the past. But now their visits to a nunnery increases by ten times than before. Earlier, nuns might not be invited to *soonsar* (breakfast or lunch

¹ In Burma, the Buddhists pay respect to the Five Benefactors: the Buddha, the *Dhamma* that the Buddha has taught, the *Sangha*, one's teachers and one's parents. Before the Buddha's image, they sit down, put the two palms of their hands together and bow down respectfully

² The place where Buddha images are situated and offerings and *Dhamma* talks are held at the pagodas in Burma.

³ According to the nuns, those men were passers-by at the pagoda and when they saw the nun's *dhamma* talk, out of curiosity, they stopped for a while and listened to the nun's *dhamma* talk. However, they did not have intention to pay worship to the nun.

meal that is offered usually to monks at a lay donor's house during a ritual ceremony). But nowadays people come to realize the nuns' effort and even invite nuns for *soonsar*. (Daw Thitsar)

Also on an account of the volunteer doctor from the Thitsar Wadi School, he never invited nuns to any ritual ceremonies held in his home in the past. However, after he became familiar with the work and life of the nuns while volunteering at the school, he started to invite the nuns to such ceremonies. On his account, the nuns sat together with other lay participants before the monks who sat at a higher level. However, the nuns sat in the front nearest to the monks and also said the prayers after the monks finished saying prayers.

Regardless of the fact that the general impression of the nuns becomes more favorable, the gender biased views influenced by the traditional Brahmin infiltrated culture and the patriarchal society still prevail. Three male teachers and five female teachers reveal such attitudes in their response to the question on their perception of the role of women in general. They portray women as submissive, weak, and less capable than men. Some of them think that in the administrative realm, men are more influential, decisive and capable while women look indecisive and less capable. A female teacher gave an example that at a university or a school, students tend to listen to a male teacher more than to a female teacher. Some of them also refer to the fact that during an assembly, specifically for religious purposes either at pagodas or at *dhamma* talks, males usually sit in the front.

The stereotypical image of women is underpinned by the traditional norms and culture. Traditionally, an ideal image of a woman is regarded as a good mother and wife who is submissive towards the husband and the son as revealed in the traditional Burmese saying which states that "husband is god and son is master". And a woman who gives birth to a son is regarded as a noble woman since her son can bring great merit to her by being ordained as a monastic member either temporarily or permanently (Belak 2002:42). Other traditional Burmese sayings that denigrate women such as "the hen's crow will never bring the dawn", "a wife is ruined when separated from her husband" and "day will not break for the hen's cackle, only for the cock's crow" reinforce such stereotyped attitudes towards women. Due to such attitudes, it seems that it is an acceptable behavior that a man would make fun of

women⁴ especially if they look attractive using slang words with sexual connotations. Even the young and beautiful looking nuns are not exempted. On one account, a nun interviewed said that a guy who passed by her while she was walking on a street told her that she was beautiful and sexually attractive. It seems that it is normal some jokers who entertain the audience with jokes at traditional dance performances would include dirty jokes that reveal that women are regarded as sex objects.

Within that context, women's advancement towards the highly respectable position on a par with men seems less favorable. Consequently, it has wider implications for the general female population even though some elite and educated women are not subjected to such cultural influences. As the CEDAW committee (2008) points out in its concluding observations, participation of women in Burma is very low in all areas of public, political and professional life including in the National Assembly and the realms of government, diplomacy, the judiciary, the military and public administration, especially at senior levels.

Due to the inherent traditional gender-biased norms compounded by the country's highly militarized context for some decades, women's equal participation in the political, religious or public realm still cannot be fulfilled. However, as can be seen in the cases of the head nuns in this study, there have been some improvements in overall attitudes towards the role of nuns within the context of Burma. If the number of nuns who can prove their credibility both in the social and religious realms increases in the future, it might probably lead to gradual change in the traditionally biased attitudes towards women in general. However, such changes have not yet been seen in this particular study as the attitudes of some interviewees cannot be generalized.

4.2 Nuns' Attitudes towards gender issue: Implication for gender equality in monastic structure

All the *parahita* nuns in this study notice that their network has expanded beyond their institutional premises by having to deal with various stakeholders relating to their work such as parents of the students, other community members, donors,

⁴ Mostly adolescent girls or women aged ranging from 16 to 35.

visitors, volunteers from the civic groups and non-governmental organizations, school teachers and students. Their experiences allow them to have more exposure to the outside world beyond the confinement of their day to day religious practices. They have also become more sensitive to the issues affecting the lives of the young girls such as poverty, trafficking, broken families and other social woes.

Gender related challenges provoke gender awareness that in turn serves as a motivating force for the nuns to strive for achievement and prove their credibility. The fact that the nuns are well aware of gender issues and have overcome gender stereotypical attitudes to some extent, does not necessarily lead to an aspiration to strive for equality in their religious standing vis-à-vis male monks. Their ideal figures that devote to improving the lives of young nuns and lay students with boundless motherly love, construct their gender identity in association with the traditional gender values. Instead of paving the way to the advancement in their religious status as a result of the advancement in their social standing, their compliance to the traditional gender roles seems to diminish their religious authority in the sense that the more they enter into the 'this worldly' affairs, the less they appear to commit to the religious preoccupation, the *pariyatti* work and the *patipatti* practice. As the result, it reinforces their ambiguous position in the religious realm and seems to push them towards the lay realm where a female seems to be more fit in according to the traditional norms.

In addition, their position in an interdependent relationship with monks makes it unthinkable for many nuns that they might deserve the full ordination on a par with the community of monks. The venerable *Sayadaws* (teacher monks) have taken an influential position in the lives of the nuns in the form of teacher-and-disciple relationship. Whenever the nuns need it, they can seek great support and advice from the Sayadaws. And whenever the teacher monks feel sick, the nuns are ready to take care of them. For instance, Daw Nyarnasari established her nunnery on a big plot of land that the three Sayadaws have bought for her. The name of Daw Marlaryi's school was given by a teacher Sayadawgyi whom they took care of when he was sick. He also made some donations to the school.

All the head nuns attribute their success in their monastic school project to the Chair Sayadaw of the supervisory committee of monastic schools whose technical advice and support has been invaluable for them. For instance, with the Sayadaw's

recommendation, a rich lay donor has made a significant financial contribution to their schools.⁵

Within that context, it is conceivable why the nuns themselves refer to the main reason given by the Sayadaws for the prohibition of women's full ordination in Theravada countries. According to the Sayadaws, the *bhikkuni* lineage, or lineage of fully ordained female monks, cannot be reinstated in Theravada Buddhism.⁶ This is because of the fact that to receive a full ordination for a woman, there must be at least five *bhikkhunis* to read the *Kammavaca*, (The Motion and the Three Announcements) and due to the absence of *bhikkhunis* whose lineage has irrecoverably been lost, the full ordination can never happen anymore for a female who enter into renunciation. Instead, in Theravada Buddhism, nuns in Burma take the role of the upkeep of the Buddha *sasana* and spreading its messages not as *bhikkhunis*, but as thilashins who are related to *bhikkhunis*. Daw Marlaryi of the Pinnya Parami School depicts the religious position of nuns figuratively.

Like a table stands with four legs, the Buddha *Sāsana* will last long only with the support of four audiences: 'bhikkhu', 'bhikkhuni', 'upathika' and 'upathikama'. And the *bhikkuni* lineage was lost since 11th century, like a leg which is broken. But the table can be used with a substitute leg even though the original leg was irrecoverable. The substitute one is not an original one, but definitely related to the origin by taking up its role. Similarly, nowadays thilashins are not *bhikkhunis* but the former is related to the latter in such a way that the former takes up the role of the latter.

Hence the venerable monks thoughtfully considered our status as the 'members of the *sasana*' and issued us the national registration card accordingly. That means we are neither *Sangha* inside the *sasana* nor outside of the *sasana*, but rather, we are integrated into the *sasana* as thilashins. (Daw Marlaryi)

The remark indicates that for nuns, it appears to be more crucial to get recognized by the *Sangha* community and the state to legitimize their religious status and, in turn, they are co-opted and subjected to the state apparatus under the banner of *Sasana-pyu* 'disseminating the Buddhist teachings'. They are entrusted with the task of

⁵ The researcher had an informal interview with the monk. And the monk gave a good recommendation about the nuns' work and their effort to provide education for children.

⁶ See more detail in (SSMNC 2006a and 2006b). The same reason was given by the two monks the researcher interviewed regarding the *bhikkuni* issue. However, the head monk of the monastic supervisory committee mentioned how nuns are intelligent and highly learned in Buddhist studies by telling some stories of outstanding nuns.

disseminating and maintaining Buddhist teachings in equal terms with the monks. Rewards and titles are bestowed upon the high achiever nuns and monks alike at the ecclesiastical exams and hence attract respect and support of lay donors. In this case, the gender issue seems irrelevant and their current position in relation to the *Sangha* and *sasana* seems to diminish the sense of gender awareness that has been essential in the struggle of the head nuns to prove their credibility in the male dominated social realm.

As a result, rather than being concerned about gender equality issue, nuns are more inspired to enhance their religious and social status with educational achievements. Most of the nuns who were interviewed emphasize the importance of observing the precepts. They believe that being able to keep the eight or ten rules properly is better than being committed to many more rules but not being able to keep them, as is happening to some monks. They feel that the eight or ten rules are manageable enough for them to remain in the *sasana* and they do not aspire to become fully ordained members of the *Sangha* community. They believe that it would be difficult for females to observe all the 311 rules for *bhikkhuni*. They speculate that the venerable monks might foresee that and decided that nuns should not pursue the *bhikkhuni* ordination.

On the one hand, such an attitude seems to be underpinned by the inherent traditional and cultural norms and the subsequent gender construct. On the other hand, it seems that the nuns are taking a pragmatic stance towards the issue of women's ordination and gender equality within the religious institution and choose to be satisfied with their current religious position despite the unfavorable conditions for women in the *sasana*.

Even though all the nuns in in this study, including the head nuns, refer to the fact that men and women alike are equally capable in practicing to attain *nirvāna*, (the state of enlightenment) in Theravada Buddhism, the influence of gender stereotypical attitudes is revealed in their remarks. A few female interviewees said that if they were to be reborn, they would prefer to be born a male, which is considered a superior sex. And some of them said that women tend to be selfish, arrogant and jealous and that is why *bhikkhuni* were required to obey *Gurudharma* (the eight special rules) in the first place. As mentioned earlier, the first of these rules states that a *bhikkhuni* 'even if she has been ordained for a hundred years' shall bow down before

a monk ordained 'even for a day'. This, some of the nuns said, could help tame the pride of *bhikkhuni*.

Some of the interviewees simply refer to the social realities. They consider the nunneries as a safe and secure place for young and old women alike to take refuge from being trafficked or exploited in various ways. For those women who want to lead a celibate life and want renunciation, the nunneries are the only refuges for them. A nun makes a remark that "if a single lady lives alone and a man visits her quite often, the community might circulate rumors about her virginity and her reputation might be damaged. But for a nun, her reputation cannot be damaged in this way".

The remark can be understood in light of the social realities that women have to face in such a traditional society where people live in an intricate network of relationships, where interfering in others' privacy is a legitimate act and the concept of the right to privacy is unheard of. Within such context, it is conceivable that nuns should take more pride in the nunhood as a safe, secure and dignified lifestyle and would not be interested in pursuing gender equality in the religious institutional structure. "I am so happy to be a nun. This life is safe. I can also get both education and merit. I can't imagine how my life would be if I were to be in the lay life at this moment," said Daw Ohnmar reflecting her own life experiences.

Only three out of 19 nuns interviewed think that it would be to the nuns' advantage to have a chance to be fully ordained. For the *dhammakathika* nun who has experienced skepticism and some discriminatory attitudes in her struggle, it is especially welcoming to earn credibility in the realm which is the prerogative of the monks. It seems that learned skills and practice in *vinaya*, *pariyatti* and *patipatti* serve as prerequisite to be successful in the preaching occupation as a monastic member. While a monk can fulfill all these requirements being a fully ordained monastic member, a nun lacks such kind of religious authority. She can observe the *vinaya* rules by herself even though she is not fully ordained. However, she still lacks the credibility that can only be achieved by the fully ordained monks who adhere to the *vinaya* rules. In that sense, some nuns find the idea of reinstating women's full ordination interesting. Consequently, such gender awareness might lead to reopening the same debate on gender equality issue in the monastic institutional arrangement within the context of Burma in the future.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The head nuns in this study consider their stringent life style conducive to practicing the *dhamma* practices in accordance with the Buddha teachings. They take pride in their ascetic practice as a means to lead to ultimate liberation that is liberation from all desires. However, they have a strong desire to improve the lives of vulnerable children through both secular and Buddhist studies. They consider themselves as playing a catalyst role to fulfill the potential of these children to bring about the good for themselves and for society. It motivates them to work hard to fulfill the right of children to get access to education. Their work indicates their Buddhist world view that physical hardship cannot destroy inner peace. Instead, it encourages endurance and hard work to change conditions for the betterment for oneself and for society. Their desire happens to be in accordance with the ideologies of the higher echelon monks that girls are more suitable to reside in nunneries than in monasteries. As the result, nun-led monastic schools were integrated into the monk-led monastic school system 5 years after the revival of the system in 1992. It was also the first time that nuns got involved in the monastic school education system that provides the secular education.

The *Sangha* and monastic school education system played a very significant role in cultural and educational aspects of ancient Burma's society. They instilled basic literacy and moral values in the lives of young boys who in turn became good *upathika* (lay men donors) to support the *Sangha* and the *sasana*. In this modern day, although the monastic school system reinstates its cultural and educational features, the paradigm has shifted. Nowadays, boys and girls, young nuns and novices learn at monastic schools led either by monks or nuns to get formal secular education.

Head monks and nuns of the monastic schools have to face challenges mostly related to the country's political and economic situations. Like the general public, monastic members also suffer from the junta's economic mismanagement in

combination with its repressive practices. As one of the effects of the junta's rule, in the education sector, the state education services lack quality, accessibility and affordability especially for poor children. In an attempt to respond to these situations, monastic schools also have to face challenges like providing quality education, having access to adequate funding and facing some restrictive measures by the state to ensure control over any civic activities of monastic members.

For nuns, in addition to such challenges specifically related to the context of the country, other layers of struggle concern their gender and religious identity. Such kind of challenges includes less material support, gender biased criticisms of their existence and their work in relation with their ambivalent position in the religious realm and their submissive looking appearance.

To cope with those challenges, the head nuns in this study have adopted different strategies. In response to the state's manipulation and intimidation regarding their work, the nuns in this study are found to adopt non-confrontational method in some cases and non-acquiescence method in some. Given their priority to take responsibility for giving poor children access to education, the nuns take a harmonious stance with the state apparatus so that it enables winning the cooperation of the state and the smooth functioning of their project. Although it seems risky in the sense that they can be subjected to the state's manipulation, it somehow reminds the state apparatus to help support their project in a more authoritative manner. However, they also take a non acquiescence approach by using their moral integrity and their selfless motives for their action, which renders attempts by some local authorities to interfere with their project illegitimate and unreasonable.

Gender based challenges somehow raise gender awareness that motivates the head nuns to work harder to prove their credibility. They capitalize on their educational qualifications, ascetic practices, perseverance and patience. They earn trust and respect of the respective stakeholders and are able to extend their network. Their work also becomes the motivation for each individual and the informally organized local civic groups to contribute to the responsibilities of taking care of the children with their finance, spare time and energy. In this way it helps those volunteers to exercise their right to participate in public life and freedom of association regardless of difficulties within the context of Burma

In spite of overall challenging issues such as financial constraints and ensuring the best interest of the vulnerable children they are taking care of, the nuns have made a significant progress in their work and it helps change the people's perception of the role of nuns in general. However, it does not necessarily lead to changes in the overall gender stereotypical attitudes in the male dominated society. Except for some elite and educated women, the general impression on the ordinary female population is still influenced by the notion of women's identity as submissive and inferior sex, which hinders the equal participation of females in public and political realms.

Similarly, in the religious realm, gender equality seems impossible within the current context. The nuns' involvement in the social realm that used to be associated only with monks does not necessarily inspire them to consider the possibility of female fully ordination. Their position in an interdependent relationship with monks and their inherent ideologies influenced by traditional and cultural norms have shaped their perspectives on the gender equality issue in the religious realm. Their image as motherly and righteous figures that endure hardship and commit themselves to the wellbeing of their young students also constructs their gender identity in association with the traditional gender values. In addition, due to the state ideology of *sasana-pyu* (disseminating the Buddhist teachings), they need to carry out their religious duty bestowed upon them as integrated members of the monastic community on a par with monks. Their equal position with monks in this regard marks the eclipse of the gender issue.

To sum up, even though nuns' work helps in enhancing the general reputation of the nuns, it has been a long way to change the stereotypical attitudes towards women in general. By implication, it can be seen that women tend to participate much less in the administrative realm at senior levels compared with their male counterparts. In addition, it is also unlikely that nuns' religious position can be enhanced on equal terms with male monastic members in the foreseeable future.

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