

# The Changing Social and Religious Role of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar: A case study of two nunneries (1948-2010)

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## Abstract

Communities of nuns have been a feature of life in Buddhist societies since early times. The nuns in present-day Myanmar consider themselves descendants of Nuns Mei Kin and Mei Nat Pay who were royal teachers during King Mindon (1853-1878), who held the Fifth Buddhist Council. In this paper, I discuss how the religious and social standing of nuns in Myanmar has helped to empower women by the pioneer work of the respected nun Daw Nyanacari. She established a Buddhist nunnery in 1947 that has developed an outstanding reputation for theological academic excellence and acts as a role model for other nunneries. The monastic community is pivotal for the socio-religious life of the Buddhist population, operating through a network of monks, nuns and lay supporters extending to the remotest villages. Nuns are looked upon as actors who do Buddhist missionary work as well following the legacy of Daw Nyanacari.

From the time of the State Peace and Development Council (1997-2010) and even more since the transition of 2011/12 a major change has occurred in that nuns increasingly turned to social welfare types of activities for the underprivileged in the community whereas before, they mostly taught Buddhist scripture to nuns and a Buddhist lifestyle and meditation to women. These new activities are quite unique, and in some ways resemble convent or missionary schools run by Christian establishments. I argue that social welfare activities conducted by nuns in Myanmar can enhance their social and religious capital and are thought to bring religious merit. I examine this change with the example of the Shwemyintzu nunnery founded in 1993 in the legacy of Daw Nyanacari, but taking a somewhat new path by venturing into more secular and educational social work.

## Introduction

Nuns, commonly referred to as *thila-shin*, meaning “owners of virtue”, were addressed by several names in late 20th century Myanmar history. A *thila-shin* is regarded as a daughter of Buddha in Myanmar. Their lifestyles are a shaved head, monastic robes, and codes of ethical discipline. They dress in pink and brown cotton robes, live on alms food donated by the lay community, and refrain from taking solid food after midday. The central ethical principles they live by are the precepts common to all Buddhists: to refrain from taking life, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants. In contrast to lay Buddhists, however, Buddhist nuns take a vow of celibacy. This voluntary decision frees them from many of the typical responsibilities of household life. Some Buddhist nuns focus on solitary meditation practice, while others run busy temples or keep international teaching schedules. Unlike most monks, not all nuns receive a formal Buddhist education; some, however, hold PhDs. According to the Ministry for Religious Affairs there are around 6,000 *thila-shin* in Myanmar. But their actual number is several times higher since many women join the religious life for a short period, most preferably during the summer holidays between March and May.

Buddhist nuns hold an ambiguous position in Myanmar society. They are not recognized as *śrāmanerika* (novice nuns), due to the lack of *bhikṣuṇis* (full female equivalents of the monks) to ordain them.

During the period from the ninth to the eleventh century AD Theravada Buddhism was introduced by the Pyus to the Mons and by the Mons to the Barmars of Bagan. Female members of the Order, descendants of the Pyu Period, were probably equally engaged in the promotion and propagation of Buddhism in the Bagan Period. But only the significant monks' names are found in the Bagan stone inscriptions. Yet the term *Samgha* means an aggregate and denotes both *bhikkhu* (ordained monk) and *bhikkhuni* (ordained female members of the Order). Therefore, going by the stone inscriptions, we can assume that *bhikkhunis* also existed in the Bagan period between the 11th and 13th centuries (U Ni Tut, 2003).

In the Inwa period, female members of the Order were called *Thadin Thone* (U Kala, 2006: 313). *Thadin Thone* (*Thiddin The*) means a female spending her days observing the precepts. They came to be known as *Thila* in the Nyaungyan period (U Tin, 1976: 226). In the Konbaung period they were referred to as *thila-shin* (Nuns).

The organisation of *thila-shin* in Myanmar was acknowledged by both the kings and the people under the reign of King Mindon (1853 to 1878). King Mindon had requested the nuns Mei Kin and Mei Nat Pay to come to the capital city Mandalay and instruct his queens into the monastic order as *thila-shin* after meeting Nun Mei Kin (Yawei Tun, 1998: 82-85). It seems to me that the female members of the Order were most respected during the rule of King Mindon.

In the monastic hierarchy in Myanmar, there is a clear status difference between those who engage in *Pariyatti* (teaching, learning) and those who engage in *Patipatti* (practicing meditation) (Yawei Tun, 1998: 42). Nuns, like monks and novices, engage in the learning and teaching processes of *Pariyatti* (teaching) and *Patipatti* (practicing). Some nuns established education centres (nunneries) for nuns where they teach *Pariyatti* literature. They aimed at propagating and promoting the *Sasana* (teaching of Buddha).

Therefore, nuns' involvement in teaching was considered to have higher importance than their practicing meditation. The first independent nunnery school was founded by the above-mentioned Nun Mei Kin in Gutalon Gyaung in the mid-nineteenth century. Nun Mei Kin taught Myanmar language and Buddhist scripture to village girls who had little opportunity to access any form of education. Her nunnery school produced many prominent disciples who later continued her lineage through their academic achievements (Saw Mon Nyin, 1999: 308). This went in parallel with a general shift - furthered by the actions of King Mindon - that took place in the social attitudes of Myanmar people who no longer subscribed to the view that women do not need education (Hiroko, 2013: 163). In the colonial period, (1886-1947) new nunneries emerged especially in the Sagaing hills. Nuns of the Sagaing Hills have played important roles in the *Pariyatti* education of nuns during the colonial period<sup>1</sup> (Yawai Tun, 1998: 240-265).

In spite of this nuns faced many challenges in their *Pariyatti* education which they had to receive from monks. For example, some abbots laid down a rule at their monasteries that monks should not teach *Pariyatti* to nuns and women in general. U Nanda, Shankalaykyun Sayadaw (1810-1858), did not even teach Buddhist scripture to his younger sister, Nun Mei Kin. U Devinda, Taung-bi-lu Sayadaw in Sagaing, did not refuse to teach nuns and laywomen, but he always kept a curtain between himself and the students (Daw Kusalavati, 2008: 114-115). Therefore, it was not as easy for nuns to learn *Pariyatti* as it was for monks. Those who have excellent knowledge in *Pariyatti* literature have usually been monks. However, only few of them<sup>2</sup> thought that nuns should be educated in *Pariyatti* up to the highest level. But with some educated monks supporting nuns and the nuns themselves persevering in their attempts to acquire a religious education, finally the educational standard improved (Myanmar.cm, 2016) since 1945.

## Short overview: historical and legal positions of nuns

Nuns engaged exclusively in two religious activities: *Pariyatti* and *Patipatti*. They did not get involved in secular activities or establish any secular association or organisations, but neither did monks before 1954. This created difficulties when the 1953 Land Nationalisation Act was enacted. The nun community needed to get particular recognition from the State as a religious organisation with a claim to religious lands. In 1954, legal

1 Some significant nunneries of Myanmar in the Colonial Period were; Ambaramra Nunnery (Shwe-daung), Ariya Maggin Chaung (Mingun), Ate Tawya Nunnery (Yangon), Aye Myo Chaung (Sagaing), Aye Nein Yeiktha Malarama Nunnery (Yangon), and Aye Nyein Chaung (Sagaing), Dhammika Nunnery (Pyay), Gugalay Chaung (Religious Retreat) (Mingun), Guni Chaung (Sagaing), Ingyin Myaung Nunnery (Pyay), Khemarthaka Thikshin Taik Nunnery (Mawlamying), Khemesakka Nunnery (Monywa), LediDhammaMedani Nunnery (Monywa), LediDhammeSaka Nunnery (Monywa), Maggin Nunnery (Pyay), Myan Aung Nunnery (Monywa), Nibbanda Chaung (Sagaing), Nibbanda Nunnery (Pyay), Samiddodaya Teaching Nunnery (Sagaing), Shamin Chaung (Mingun).

2 Htootkhaung Sayadaw (1798-1880) was one of the first monks who supported higher *Pariyatti* education for nuns. Masoeysin Sayadaw (1879-1975) supported the idea that higher *Pariyatti* education was a necessity for nuns. Mahagandayon Sayadaw (1900-1977) accepted the nuns to teach *Pariyatti* Literature. At present time, Pali University is teaching both monks and nuns *Pariyatti* in the same classroom only keeping a curtain between two groups.

disputes arose over the nationalisation of religious lands (burmalibrary.org, 2016). The Land Nationalisation Act stipulated that areas that were known to have been donated by Burmese kings for religious purposes were exempted from nationalisation. Monks were officially recognised as religious personnel but nuns were not officially recognised as religious members of the Order (*Samgha*), so the nunnery premises were claimed not to be exempted. This came to light in the legal disputes in 1954. Here the argument was put forward that nuns were not members of the Order. The nuns were much more indignant about the claim that they were not members of the *Samgha* than about the prospect of the nationalisation of their religious lands. They argued that, since they were not engaged in lay affairs, they were members of the *Samgha*. As religious personnel both monks and nuns had no right to cast their votes in the Parliamentary Elections, but monks were recognised as religious members whereas the state regarded nuns as non-religious members.

In the light of these developments, nuns established their own associations to engage in Government and social affairs when their religious interests demanded it. The first of these associations, Myanmar Nun League of Sagaing Hill Ranges was formed in 1954. Some years later, in 1961, Sasana Hitakari, Nun League of Myanmar, was formed in Yangon (Yawei Tun, 1998: 271-274).

In the early 1980s, an organisational framework for the monastic community was implemented nationwide. The National Committee of Supreme Samgha Council was created. Meanwhile, registration for both monks and nuns was made compulsory in 1981, essentially requiring them to possess a monastic address. Since then, Myanmar Buddhist nuns are no longer entitled to hold National Registration Cards like laywomen. They are given *thila-shin* ID cards which are neither like a laywoman's nor like a monk's. The membership cards are to be issued only to permanent nuns aged twelve and above. The leader nun must endorse the academic career in the records whenever a nun moves from one nunnery to another.

Myanmar nuns initially became incorporated into the State Samgha Organisation<sup>3</sup> when the Council for Buddhist Nuns was established in 1982. The State Samgha Organisation became the highest decision-making body for the *Samgha* in discussing and making decisions on monastic affairs. This was meant to consolidate the state organisation and also stipulate a legal framework for nuns, operating as the highest representative body for Buddhist nuns in Myanmar (Thilashin Ahpwe-asi Achekhan Simyin, 1981: 3) In the structure of the *Samgha* organisation the highest organisation for nuns is at the state and division level. They have permanent organisations only at the divisional or regional levels. Nuns like monks are subjected to civil laws as well as regulations set up by the State Samgha Committee. Township and divisional executive nuns' organisation committees settle disputes among nuns. In case of any dispute, nuns can turn to the nun organisation in the respective township. If one of the sides is not satisfied with the decision made by the organisation, they can move the case to the township or divisional Samganayaka committee to solve the problem. The respective Samganayaka committee examines the cases forwarded by the two sides. Then, they hand the case back to the nun organisation with guidelines and suggestions on how to proceed. If the

3 It was established in 1974 led by monks and the State. It is called Samghanayaka.

case concerns or involves secular authorities, for example if the disputed persons need to be arrested, the nun organisation has to cooperate with the local authorities (Interview with Ma Kusalanyani, 2016). In the State Samgha Organisation the top position is occupied by monks. Nuns have decision making power only at the divisional level.

## Nuns and voluntary social work

Since the majority of Myanmar citizens are Buddhist, they abide by the moral codes taught by the Lord Buddha. These moral codes oblige society to show empathy, and provide charity towards their elderly parents as well as to old people and disabled persons, in general. According to the law of *kamma* in Theravada (an impersonal, natural law that operates in accordance with our actions) present deeds determine the future life of each individual. Therefore, Myanmar people including the ancient kings performed meritorious deeds in the hope to get a better life in the future. In this context, social service is considered meritorious.

Although the members of the Buddhist monastic community have renounced the worldly life, they still have an important contribution to make to the welfare of the society, since the rule of *kamma* and merit applies to them as well. Traditionally both monks and nuns have inter-acted with society in ways similar to those of social workers and counsellors. Myanmar nuns actively engage in domestic activities such as cooking for alms-giving occasions, organising catering services at religious occasions, and basic services for the community. These activities are thought to bring meritorious return (Interview with Ma Kusalanyani, 2016). Nowadays, in the Buddhist religious community in Myanmar nuns are increasingly recognised as ritual specialists, educators and propagators of Buddhism. They have detailed knowledge on every ceremonial procedure so that they complement the monks in Buddhist ceremonies.

On the other hand, and somewhat contradicting the above, Buddhists in Myanmar commonly upheld a view that monastic members should not intervene in secular life, which often involved wasting time filling forms and dealing with corrupt officials. In their view social work is actually a poor diversion from what monasteries and nunneries should work for and, for that reason, it has become disputed, as if it was a disruption for monks and nuns (Hiroko, 2013: 47)

## Monastic Education

Since the colonial period and before, social work was to a large extent in the purview of Buddhist missionaries, monasteries and Buddhist lay voluntary organisations. After independence, the state took over welfare tasks to some extent in cooperation with religious bodies. The Ministry of Social Welfares established in 1953 with the advice of United Nations should carry out social services more effectively. Alongside, the government established a Mass Education Council under the Ministry of Social Welfare with the intention to educate the people in rural areas. This was considered one of the most relevant sectors. Since the time of AFPFL (1948-1962) government joined hands

together with monks and nuns to provide primary education. The objective of the Monastic Education Plan (medg.org, 2016) was to provide primary level education to the children of rural areas<sup>4</sup> before implementing the Act of Primary Compulsory Education System in 1950 (Than Htut, 1980). Under this system, monasteries and nunneries taught from kindergarten to fourth standard in remote regions where there were no state schools. Nuns worked on this primary education plan as part of their religious work.

After the military coup of 1962, welfare and social services by religious bodies were curtailed. Only from 1997 onwards was it again possible to work in this direction (see below). Some nunneries then took up social welfare for underprivileged girls. Since these nunneries were considered secular charity organisations and not religious bodies, they had to register with the Ministry of Social Welfare Relief and Resettlement.

Today some Nunnery Education Schools still follow the model of Monastic Education Schools. Nunnery Education School called Zambu Ushaung Thilashin Sarthintaik in Yangon Division. Nunnery Education School Shwe Sin Min Thilashin Women Parahita Pannyaye School in Pyin Oo Lwin, Mandalay Division under the headship of Daw Nandasangi, and Aye Yeik Mon Nunnery in Mandalay all provide free education for students from primary level to grade eleven. The first mentioned school accommodates nuns who belong to different ethnic backgrounds such as Rakhaing, Pa-O, Palaung, Shan and Mon. All also serve as orphanages where orphans and especially underprivileged girls from these ethnic regions receive education and vocational training (Htay Hla Aung, 2013: 39). The nunnery organises short-term meditation retreats in the summer holidays as well (Kyaw Zin, 2012: 17).

The nuns of the last-mentioned school are struggling hard to feed more than two hundred orphans and send them to school. It would be imperative to introduce innovative practices such as environmental work and new teacher training techniques to make progress and improve Myanmar's educational standards. Some nunneries also work as Learning Centers for nuns and girls, providing cultural and academic education for children and adults to improve their lives until they return to their home (mandalay-projects.net, 2016).

## Missionary Activities

Buddhist nuns focus on teaching lay people moral lessons as taught by the Buddha. Their most important duty is to encourage people to understand the teaching correctly. They also go to remote areas and deliver the messages of the Buddha to people living there. One special component of nuns social work is therefore missionary work which has become popular and developed vigorously in the image of Christian missionary establishments. Therefore, Missionary work is an important task of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar. The efforts of Daw Nyanacari disciples (see below), frontiers missionary worker Daw Dhammacari, Daw Weijesi (B.A), and Daw Pannacari of the Mawlamyine

4 To assist in providing basic education needs of the country especially for children from needy families and orphans — filling the significant gap in the education system.

Khema-rama nunnery are worth mentioning here. Daw Dhammacaryi, a native of Myeik in the southernmost part of the country went as far north as Putao, Kachin state to carry out missionary work there. Except for some Buddhists, Putao and its surrounding area was inhabited by Ka-chins, Shans, Rawans, Lisu and Danu indigenous races who profess Christianity or Spirits worship. The ethnic minority Buddhist community there had founded a Dhamma Centre and a religious propagation group, which needed a missionary nun.

Daw Dhammacaryi, accompanied by another nun, went to Putao in 1964 to fill the gap. She explained the *vippassana* in a simple manner to male and female yogis, i.e. those practicing religious meditation. At the same time, school education up to the seventh standard from primary to middle school levels was provided for these people, just as the Christian missionaries did. In a similar manner, nun Ma Weijesi, at the Sasana Beikman on the Sagaing Hill range, had Palaungs, Shans, Kayins, and Kadu girls trained for the nunhood along with Myanmar novices. Daw Weijesi had even more ambitious plans for the propagation of the Buddhist faith which included the opening of Buddhist missionary schools where lay youths as well as nuns could get a modern education. The ultimate aim was to educate nuns in both secular and religious studies to enable them to head Buddhist missionary schools in the near future. The success of such endeavours as that by Daw Weijesi would enhance the missionary work by Myanmar Buddhist nuns in general.

To further this aim, the Sasana Hitakatari League of Nuns opened a *Thalashin Tekatho* (Advanced Study Centre for Nuns) in 1969 at the Mawlamyine Nunnery, on Boundary Road in Yangon. Nuns who had passed the *pahtamapyan* (senior standard exam), and those who held the *dhammacariya* (Teacher of the Dhamma) *Pali paragu* title, were accepted at the centre. The subject components included both religious and secular subjects, e.g. Mathematics, and History, Geography etc. as minor subjects. Some controversies arose over the teaching of secular subjects like English to women who were supposed to have left the worldly life behind, and consequently, teaching of secular subjects ended after four years in favour of teaching Buddhist treatises. Nevertheless, the nuns who graduated from the *Thilashin Thekatho* were well qualified for missionary work.

## Contemporary Changes

In the wake of nationalisation policies of the military government in 1964,<sup>5</sup> social service was monopolized by the Ministry of Social Welfare. From 1962 to 1988, Myanmar practiced socialist policies and the state did not encourage and even hinder private volunteer work including nuns' missionary work. After the army-staged coup of 1988 and the formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1989 internationally enforced sanctions affected Myanmar people's social and economic life negatively. To lessen the country's economic and social hardship, the State Peace and

5 The military government took power in 1962. It wanted to move the country forward according to the 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. So in 1964 all private sector enterprises were nationalized by the Burma Socialist Programme Party.



Development Council (SPDC, 1997-2010) loosened some of the central controls on the economy and made attempts to encourage foreign investment and foreign organisations to enter the country. Subsequently, the state recognised social organisations as local volunteer service and permitted them to function again. The Ministry of Social Welfare issued permits to these social welfare bodies such as Home for the Aged, missionary work etc. by registering them as organisations.

The year 1990 was a turning point for nuns in Myanmar in another respect. Since the early 1990s, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (1988-1997) government realised the value of Buddhism as an effective political instrument and actively appropriated the notion of *Sasana* (the community of believers) to consolidate political legitimacy (Saw Mon Nyin, 1999: 110). In particular, nuns engaged in social work have come to play an important role in this new direction and they increasingly took an active role to support the state as dutiful guardians of *Sasana*. Thus, Buddhist nuns are no longer seen as merely pious laywomen, though they are still not accepted as full members of the Order. Dr. Hiroko Kawanami evidenced this by pointing at the frequent usage of honorific and deferential terms by the Myanmar public in addressing *thila-shins* as great monastic members (Saw Mon Nyin, 1999: 110).

In the light of an improving religious and social standing, most nuns now are increasingly aware of the importance of religious education. They study the Buddhist scriptures and even can take part in competitions for academic excellence together with monks. This has enhanced their status and provided them with increased donations from both government and private donors.

With the new opportunities since the late 90s Buddhist nuns became increasingly active in the public welfare sector and included also in their missionary efforts activities such as providing education and daily expenses at their nunneries to under-privileged girls as well as those of Kachin, Wa and Shan ethnic minorities in the border areas of Northern and North Eastern part of Myanmar where a civil war was raging. At these nunneries, nuns took care of orphans and children from poor families. Parents were willing to send their girls to a nunnery because they could not feed their children well and support their education.

In a parallel development, several nunneries in Myanmar sought to enhance their social and religious capital through various kinds of social work. Though by religious convention, nuns should stay away from secular activities, they have now reconsidered this concept in the light of changing conditions in the country and society. They adopt a new attitude towards social work, especially education and can count it as a merit-generating activity.

Since Buddhist tradition demands to help those who need assistance, private social service organisations have developed that are often more effective and efficient than state welfare institutions. These private institutions established by rich individuals continue to emerge. After the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, 1997-2010) opened the door to a Market Oriented Economy in 1997 the economy of the country stabilised and gradually developed as a result. This enabled private individuals to financially support religious functions and infrastructure.

Simultaneously, public opinion in Myanmar increasingly accepts the idea of nuns taking on a more active religious role and Buddhist nuns themselves are responding



to new demands placed upon them by society. Nuns' institutions are acknowledged as part of the social welfare type of institutions in Myanmar. We look now at two of these institutions a bit more closely, the Samiddhodaya Sukhitarama Myanaung Nunnery and the Shwemynitzu Nunnery School.

### Samiddhodaya Sukhitarama Myanaung nunnery (Daw Nyanacari sarthintike)

An outstanding example of furthering religious education for nuns is the mentioned Daw Nyanacari Myanaung Kyaung. Founded in 1947 by the late Daw Nyanacari, until today a highly revered nun, the nunnery with its 45 branches countrywide is one of the most prestigious schools for nuns in Myanmar. Its reputation for *pariyatti* (teaching, learning) and *patipatti* (practicing) attracts even nuns from other countries like Nepal, Vietnam and Germany. At the moment about 300 *thila-shin* are living permanently there to undergo their studies which include Buddhist literature, Pali, Abhidhamma, and other scriptures. Around 50 of them are attending the course for *dhamma-ariyas* (Teacher of the Dhamma), which is currently the highest educational title *thila-shin* can gain. This course takes around three years and allows the graduates to teach in other nunneries. Only religious scholars teach at this school which is administered by an Executive Committee of fifteen members under the leadership of Daw Zayawadi. The nunnery inspires girls from across Myanmar to get a religious education and/or to take up a religious life.

### Short Biography of Daw Nyanacari

Daw Nyanacari (1897-1976) was born in Tanthonpin village, which is in Myang Aung, Ayeyarwady region in lower Myanmar. Her father, U Ingyin was a village headman. Her parents were pious and brought her up in a religious environment where listening to monks' sermons was almost a weekly ritual. Once her nun friends took her to their nun teacher and it made her realize the possibility of not only learning the scriptures, but taking up a monastic life as a woman as well. When she told her parents that she wanted to become a nun, they did not allow her to enter the nunhood. As the youngest daughter she was expected to look after her parents when they got old. Therefore, she escaped from her home three times in succession. Eventually her parents accepted her decision and her argument that she would benefit them more by being a *thila-shin*. With her highly regarded knowledge Daw Nyanacari became later a respected Buddhist scholar, known as 'teacher for 500 *thi-la-shin* and more.'

Like other nunneries the Daw Nyanacari nunnery receives its main support from generous lay Buddhist persons and the families of the *thila-shin*. The Government donates only 200 sacks of rice each year. Twice a week the nuns go out to the markets and streets for receiving alms. The strictly organised day is filled with periods of studies, meditation and manual activities. A high-quality Buddhist education and meditation practice is the major concern of the nunnery. In addition, the nunnery has long tradition for admitting Buddhist girls between five and ten years of age during the summer

vacation. They don the nun costume and follow the novice routine. They are trained in basic Buddhist deportment and duties, such as presentation and offering of alms food, of votive water, of flowers, as well as the asking for precepts, taking of precepts, prayers and suttas. This not only provides them with religious knowledge, it is also intended as a training in graceful manners and elegant speech. Thus, Daw Nyanacari can be called the master of *thila-shin* Sasana in the post-independence period.

## Foundation and Development of the Nunnery

The Second World War spread to Yangon in December 1941 and the Japanese army ordered the people to evacuate Yangon. Daw Nyanacari's nunnery which she had established in 1939 in Yangon, was destroyed during the invasion, and she thus returned to Myanaung. Rather than living with her parents she stayed at Bhavana nunnery with her disciples and continued religious propagation (Tin Shwe, 1989: 78-80). During the Japanese occupation some people in Myanaung took refuge at Bhavana nunnery and Daw Nyanacari accommodated these refugees. She also took the responsibility to feed them.

Daw Nyanacari was not satisfied to just propagate the Buddhist religion from Myanaung with her then seventy disciples. Therefore, she attempted to extend the nunnery to Yangon. U Chit Maung, the donor who had helped her already with her first nunnery in Yangon, donated 1.636 acres of land situated on Kyuntaw Road, Sanchaung Township in April 1948 in place of the destroyed nunnery site.

When construction of nunnery was about to be finished in 1949, Daw Nyanacari moved to the new place. Food supply and accommodation were not as convenient as in Myanaung. But Daw Nyanacari persevered with teaching and preaching. After independence Prime Minister U Nu came to know about the nunnery and visited it personally. He donated a three-storied brick building to the nunnery in 1962.

In order to provide medical care to the student nuns and novices Daw Nyanacari desired to open a western-style dispensary, to which Lay donors U Pu and Daw Saw Kyi donated the requisite tools, equipment and medicine (Western dispensary). So Daw Nyanacari was able to open both a traditional and a western dispensary in the same year on campus for student nuns. After Daw Nyanacari died in 1975, the dispensary continued under the administration of the abess. The dispensary was closed temporarily by the military government, but could reopen in 1983 with the help of unpaid assistant doctors. Besides this, the nunnery also provided dental treatment from its foundation until today. In this way, the nunnery was able to provide not only for the spiritual, but also for the bodily needs of the nuns and their disciples (Interview with Daw Vimala, 2015).

## Shwemyintzu Nunnery School

While the Samiddhodaya Sukhitarama Myanaung nunnery concentrates primarily on religious education for novices and temporary student nuns, the Shwemyintzu nunnery in Yangon, though operating in the tradition of Daw Nyanacari, has a different focus.

It has been active in social work since 1993. The school is contributing significantly to the growth of civil society in Myanmar, which is undergoing a process of opening and reform that began in 2010. In this period the school has provided a public venue for Myanmar people to meet and participate in religious activities, and even to discuss politics and social affairs in a safe environment, because the political authorities regard Buddhist nuns as non-political in contrast to monks who have led politics in Myanmar since the colonial period. Thus, the school is contributing to the process of creating a public sphere free of government control. Since its founding, Shwemyintzu nunnery has functioned as a centre for education, boarding and fulfilling the needs of young girls from remote areas and orphans.

Among the many nunnery schools, which give support to education in Myanmar, Shwemyintzu is one of the most successful ones. It sees itself in the tradition of Daw Nyanacari, but goes beyond the activities and aims of the Samiddhodaya nunnery school which focuses exclusively on religion and religious issues to serve the extended needs of society. Shwemyintzu Nunnery school was founded by Head Nun Daw Sandar Thiri. It is situated at 31/10 North ward, Tharkayta Township, Yangon Region. In 2003, Head Nun Daw Ootra Nyani took over this responsibility. The aim of this school is to provide meals and lodging in addition to education to orphans and helpless young girls from remote places in Myanmar's border areas with China and Thailand. Most of the students studying at this school are from Shan State as well as Chin, Palaung, Pa O, Shan and Bamar (Interview with Daw Oottra Nyarni, 2015).

The vision of Shwemyintzu Nunnery school is "to raise children who can build their life to become highly developed and will become the bright star of the country" (Interview with Sayagyi Daw Oottra Nyarni, 2015). To be able to implement and achieve these objectives, the school provides education for students at primary and middle school levels. Besides education for the boarders, the school also serves as a day school for poor children and orphans from the vicinity.

The number of students has increased from only 30 in 2000-2001 to 152 students in the 2005-2006 academic year. This is because Shwemyintzu school not only provides free education, but also free exercise books, pencils and text books. It assists needy students and encourages and helps the parents whose children are working to earn money to let the children study at the school. Moreover, teachers teach extra time with the intention of not only helping students to pass exams but also to enhance their overall qualifications and competences. In addition, the school is conveniently located for the students' food and boarding for girls and boys who came from backgrounds of ethnic conflict (Interview with Daw Thida, 2015). The curriculum and syllabus from kindergarten to the 4th grade is the same as the government scheme. The school takes the responsibility of question setting and exam result issuing from kindergarten to the 4th grade.

Sixty hours of Reading, Writing, and Critical thinking training are taught by teachers in Shwemyintzu School. The health care group gives lectures on health education to both teachers and students together with providing nutritious food once a month. The library group gives courses on library science to the two teachers from Shwemyintzu School and the group donated books for the school library. This group also holds a story telling competition, and debate once a year, so that students can acquire the abi-

lity being prepared and confident. The three teachers from Gitameit music group give painting training, drama training and music training (Interview with Daw Nyein Sanda Khine, 2015). Moreover, with the support given by other NGOs such as the Myanmar Medical Association and Pyinnya Tazaung Association (Light of Education), students' education and health conditions have been developed and teachers' qualities have been upgraded. Still, Shwemyintzu School provides students not only with formal education but also religious knowledge.

Nunnery schools have more financial burdens than monastic schools for they cannot get as many donations as monastic schools. Funds for Shwemyintzu School are raised in many ways, by collecting donations by nuns, and from local and foreign well-wishers. Still the most crucial challenge faced by this school is inadequate funds (Interview with Daw Aye Aye Thant, 2015). Although the abbess, head mistress and teachers try to make efforts to help education for helpless girls and orphans from the remote and border areas, they face great difficulties; still the nunnery has overcome any difficulties until now and has achieved public acclaim.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The monastic community is pivotal for the socio-religious life of the Buddhist population, operating through a network of monks, nuns and lay supporters. The status and social standing of nuns have been hampered by their lower status compared to monks, which has assigned nuns a half-way position between pious laywoman and religious mendicant. Improving nuns' religious knowledge and scriptural education can enhance their social and religious capital. An improved religious and social status of nuns in Myanmar since the 1990s has simultaneously helped to empower women and improve their status in Myanmar in general. This was mainly due to the guiding work of the Daw Nyanacari nunnery and Shwemyintzu nunnery. By raising the standing of nuns in Myanmar, the Daw Nyanacari nunnery has, at the same time, broadened opportunities for the country's women and girls. This nunnery has become a role model for Buddhist nuns in Myanmar. It has developed an outstanding reputation for academic excellence. With many lay donors coming to see the beneficial outcomes, the nunnery is now self-sustaining, entirely supported by lay donations within Myanmar. The nunnery's graduate students have opened branch nunneries and the school is affiliated with mission activities and social work for orphans and poor girls. Daw Nyanacari nunnery school offers a safe single-sex environment for women to study the scriptures, pursue a religious vocation and affiliate with lay supporters. Furthermore, their spiritual standing and so also financial and social support have been enhanced by the reputation, growth and financial success of the nunnery. The achievements of Daw Nyanacari's nunnery as well as her success in her personal life had a powerful influence on the religious and social work of nuns. The disciples of Daw Nyanacari set up their own nunneries in their home towns and villages after they had finished their educational levels and obtained their degrees. They follow in the steps of their pioneer Daw Nyanacari, but also, as we saw, sometimes go beyond her activities to serve wider society in a secular fashion as in the Shwemyintzu nunnery school.

This situation creates perfect conditions also for social work defined as missionary work. Nuns' achievements in social work also gain them a higher position in society in return. After 1990 it was learning by doing. Nuns' social work concentrated on primary education, but alongside they also provided healthcare, shelter, food, and clothes for needy people. The nunneries founded since the 1990s have become well known for the social services they provide. This is particularly true for Shwemyintzu nunnery, which has operated as a school taking care not only of education but also boarding and lodging for orphans and young girls from remote areas.

These two nunneries can serve as examples how the work of nuns extended and broadened from teaching the scriptures - initially to girls and women from the upper strata of society, then to poor and underprivileged girls as well - down to basic social services for poor women and people in general. This is the most crucial change in the profile of nuns in present-day Myanmar. By looking at this development process, we can also see how the broadening of nuns' tasks and activities has enhanced mutual understanding and respect between nuns, the people and even the state.

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