



Buddhism and Economic behaviour in Myanmar

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Myanmar

With this blog post I want to introduce my current REALEURASIA-field work in Patheingyi, Myanmar. First, I will address links between Buddhism and economic action more generally. Second, I will describe in more detail what I am doing at the moment.

Seven months have passed since I arrived in Myanmar in August last year. I came to a country that was still ruled by a former military elite, and now I am living in a society under a democratically elected government, the first one since the military takeover in 1962. I have witnessed historical elections in November 2015, people's insecurities about the voting process and their huge excitement after they learned about the results. The National League for Democracy, party of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, was clearly favoured by the vast majority of people I met – and it won a supermajority of 77%. Because Suu Kyi was banned by law from becoming the president herself, she presented her old friend and colleague Htin Kyaw on 15th March 2016 as Myanmar's new president. While this choice seems to please many of her voters, the two new vice presidents evoked mixed reactions. One belongs to the ethnic minority group of the Chin and is Christian by religion – promptly, ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks announced public rallies to protest this choice.¹ The other vice president was elected by the military that still holds considerable power in the parliament (25% of the seats are reserved for them). He is said to be a military hardliner and played a vital role in past decisions to crackdown pro-democratic protests.² This already hints at the seemingly unfulfillable expectations the new government faces. Members of the former elite want to secure their influence while a large part of the people calls for democracy and change. Minorities ask for more protection and rights while some nationalist forces (supported by a not so small portion of the country's overall population) expect the government to promote and protect Buddhism which they understand as inherently linked to the ethnic identity of the majority group, the Bamar. Economic issues are, of course, also widely debated, e.g. new laws

for banks and foreign investment. Changed policies give rise to new economic opportunities and challenges. My research is without doubt taking place in an utterly exciting time.

Buddhism and Economy

Our REALEURASIA-project seeks to discover and understand links between religion and economic behaviour. In this context it is interesting that I am not only living in an evolving democracy, but according to a recent report also in the „most generous country in the world“.³ This ranking, called the World Giving Index, is published annually by the London-based Charities Aid Foundation (CAF). The result does not surprise me, given that the survey behind it did not measure actual amounts of money donated by a country's population, but took into account the willingness to as well as the act of charitable behaviour, such as volunteering and helping strangers, and of course donations (religious donations included). Many people in Myanmar volunteer and help, preferably on monastic compounds, and donations are the most directly observable type of economic action that is linked to Buddhism. The Buddhist gift has been studied quite extensively, and with reference to Marcel Mauss several scholars discussed the question of reciprocity in Buddhist gift-giving processes.⁴ However this theoretical question might be answered (opinions differ here), it is undeniable that the act of giving continues to play an enormous role for Buddhist lay people of all social strata, and thus for their household budget. Lay followers give food, items and money during the monks' daily alms rounds, during religious holidays or on regular pagoda visits. Some of my informants claim to donate half of their income to monasteries and I have seen people giving sums that convert to hundreds of dollars during Pagoda festivals.



Donation boxes in a monastery in Sagaing.

(Photo: Laura Hornig)

A Buddhist monk was the first person I met to criticize this practice. In order to learn more about Buddhism, I spent the first month after my arrival in Mandalay and neighbouring Sagaing, which is known to be the religious centre of Myanmar. Filled with clusters of monasteries and temples it hosts thousands of Buddhist monks, nuns and laypeople who devote their time to meditation and the study of Buddhist teachings. I interviewed several people there, trying to keep a focus on religious ideas and suggestions linked to economic

behaviour. "Many people misunderstand the point about donations completely", the senior monk of a monastic school told me. "They believe the act of giving helps them to gain merit – which would result in a better situation in their future existence. They think, the more the better. In the end, they donate too much. Any extra money that people have is directly given to monasteries. But the Buddhist teachings tell very clearly how you should handle your profit: divide it into four." (this refers to the *Pattakamma Sutta*) Slightly changed from the original teachings and adapted to the situation of a contemporary business, the monk suggested the use of each fourth as follows: "One fourth for future investment, one fourth for yourself and your family, one fourth for donations and social welfare and the last fourth, you save." Hence according to this monk, there is a mismatch between religious teachings and the actual behaviour of many people, as they often donate more than the teachings suggest.

It was Edmund Leach⁵ who stressed the distinction between traditional and practical religion. While Max Weber⁶ concluded people's expectable behaviour more or less directly from religious teachings, Leach acknowledged that the "gap between the theology of the higher philosophers (...) and the religious principles which guide the behaviour of an ordinary churchgoer may be very wide indeed." (Leach 1968: 1). In contrast to theological philosophy which is often preoccupied with the life hereafter, practical religion is concerned with life in the here and now. Referring to a study on Thailand, Leach states that practiced Buddhism is "a cult for the living, not a theology for the dead and dying." (Leach 1968: 3). This is to say, it is one question what Buddhist teachings suggest in regard to economic behaviour, but it is a completely different question whether and how people follow these teachings, or whether they actually even know them.

The reasons why people in Myanmar donate so much to religious institutions are manifold. A religious explanation has already been addressed by the monk that I quoted: Buddhists believe in rebirth. Donations, in the Buddhist understanding, are a way to gain merit. In Theravada Buddhism, the practice of giving, *dana*, is the first of ten qualities (*paramita*) that need to be practiced and perfected on each person's spiritual path to reach enlightenment. By accumulating merit, people work toward a better life situation in their future existence.

But donations also contribute to social redistribution. There are monastic schools for children, some monasteries offer shelter for poor or sick people and help to finance and organize other forms of social support. In my current field site one monastery helped to finance operations for several elderly people who needed surgery for their eyes and several University students who do not have relatives in the town stay on monastic compounds for free.

A third reason for donations must be understood in the context of social networks and prestige. As already explained by Melford Spiro 50 years ago, religious festivals and ceremonies in Myanmar are joyful social events that can strengthen community ties and come

with very worldly pleasures, such as food and music.⁷ Often these ceremonies are sponsored by one family on a specific occasion like a wedding anniversary or on certain Buddhist holidays. As a sponsor of this event, the family will be in the centre of attention and gratitude, and surely gain social prestige. Donating in Myanmar is often a public act. The names of donors and the amounts of money they gave are displayed on lists in every monastery and sometimes announced with loud speakers. Prominent figures and politicians are broadcasted on TV while they donate money for religious purposes.



Shwemokehtaw Pagoda in Patheingyi.

(Photo: Laura Hornig)

But Buddhism in Myanmar is also supplemented by widespread beliefs in astrology and spirits („Nats“). Thus, spirit mediums and astrologers are consulted by a large number of people, including high ranking politicians. In my interviews with 'spirit mediums' and fortune tellers I learned that people also ask them for advice concerning business decisions. In fact, I think one needs to understand astrology and belief in spirits not as something that exists alongside or unconnected to Buddhism. Seen from an emic perspective all of these elements are interwoven parts of one belief system. This can be illustrated by the legend that Buddha's birth was foreseen by astrologers. Additionally, the connection between Buddhism and astrology can be seen in the fact that many fortune tellers have their work place on Buddhist pagoda compounds. Furthermore, Pagodas often host statues of famous spirits („Nats“) that people worship alongside the Buddha. Buddhist teachings are thus not the only spiritual source that influence people's thoughts and actions.

Patheingyi

Let me now describe in more detail how my field research went so far. After my initial period in Sagaing it was time to see what role religion plays in the everyday life of business owners in Myanmar and what other values shape their notions of morality – and how this influences their actual behaviour. I have chosen Patheingyi, the capital of Ayeyarwady Division, as the field site for this main part of my research. As a middle sized town in lowland Myanmar it matches the criteria of REALEURASIA's research framework.

I arrived in Patheingyi in mid-October, after having been to Thailand for some weeks to attend a

Burmese language course. Patheingyi turned out to be a bustling town, of course with a big golden stupa in the town centre. A clock tower and some other interesting architectural remnants are reminders of a century of British colonial rule. The town lies on a river and hosts a port, a busy area with many ships being unloaded and regular ferries transporting people from one side of the town to the other. The streets between the river and the town's main market are especially lively, crowded with trucks, cars, motorbikes, bicycles, pedestrians, dogs, goats and chickens and countless piles of goods in front of stores. Patheingyi's population is mainly Buddhist but with considerable ethnic and religious minority groups. Beside countless Buddhist monasteries there are also Hindu temples, Christian churches and mosques. From the city centre to the many different wards surrounding it, a large part of people's lives takes place publicly, including a lot of economic activities. I immediately knew which problem I would NOT have – a lack of small family run businesses. In fact, it seems that almost every house contains a kind of business. Houses are often flat with only two or maximum three storeys. In the ground floor, there is very often a kind of shop, so that basically in downtown one shop is next to the other. Usually the families running the businesses live in the very same house. They open the whole ground floor during the day (doors are often as broad as garage gates) and in the evening they would bring all goods inside and close the gate. There are grocery shops next to pharmacies, sewing shops, printing- and copy shops, clothing shops, electronic shops, shops selling bus tickets and plastic goods, and countless others. Additionally there are markets in many parts of the town where people buy fresh food and everyday items. Further, there are also a lot of mobile traders on motorbikes or bicycles or on foot with a small tray that they carry. These vendors sell, for example, snacks, betel nut packs (chewing betel nut is very common), newspapers, ice cream, lottery tickets or balloons for children. Economic changes are visible in the form of new banks and smartphone shops opening everywhere in town. Many roads are being paved and a lot of construction is going on. Buddhist monasteries are also newly build or renovated.

As I am not permitted to stay overnight at the home of local people I accepted the offer from the local university, to live in an empty house on their compound. I purchased a motorbike in order to spend as much time as possible in businesses.



Street in Pathein.

(Photo: Laura Hornig)

Interviews and observations

I started visiting some businesses and introduced myself. People found it often very strange that I came here alone, that I am living on my own, and the kind of research that I am doing is not at all familiar to them. Pathein does not see many foreigners, there are no foreign NGO workers or journalists and most tourists skip the town on their travels. It took me some effort to make people understand roughly what I am doing and what I am interested in. A few times someone mentioned the idea that I could be spying for my government about new investment opportunities. This thought is not surprising in a country that has been under military rule for decades. All political opposition was harshly suppressed and the military regime made extensive use of spies, so that people were suspicious and careful about whom they talk to.

It turned out to be quite difficult for me to find a good interpreter and assistant. Not many people speak English and students are busy during the semester. But I managed to find some people with decent English who help me during interviews, after I explained them the methodology of doing anthropological research.

I found that a good way to get started is to interview business owners in a more formal setting: I made appointments and interviewed them in a semi-structured fashion with a focus on my research interest but of course never limited to it. This worked better in the beginning than just casually hanging around in the businesses. The interviews gave me a first overview of people's attitudes and practices. I learned about saving and insurance groups set up by communities, different ways of getting money in times of need (from family, friends, moneylenders, pawn shops), a common mistrust toward banks, the importance of donations, small religious rituals that should help the business flourish. People stressed mutual help and support, but I also heard about serious competition and accusations of dishonesty, cheating and greed.

Some challenges in field work are linked to its location. Pathein is relatively small, but it is still a town. Urban anthropology has its own difficulties – unlike in a village the researcher will probably never reach the point where everyone finally knows him or her. He or she will evoke surprised reactions until the very last day. He or she will constantly meet new people and lose some contacts that at first appeared promising. On the other hand, an urban area with its dynamic character often brings unexpected turns in the process of research: some days pass without much progress and suddenly an event can bring important new insights when you expect it the least. I had to get used to the fact that no matter how ambitious I am the course of research is only to a limited extent within my control – there is always a certain degree of unpredictability.

With the months I became more confident, and those people I met regularly trusted me more. I

started meeting the same people on a regular basis. I accepted every invitation that I got and attended Buddhist ceremonies, weddings and birthday parties. I developed closer connections to some business owners and now I spend time in their businesses regularly. A language barrier remains and I have difficulties to take part in the working process actively as business owners do not seem too comfortable with me working physically, other jobs demand skills or training which I do not have. However, I always offer to help and ask people to teach me about their work. My field work is now a mix of intensifying existing connections while still finding potential new informants.

I have identified a number of core cases for my research that allow me to understand how people deal with current economic changes in the country and learn more about local perceptions of family and household. I go to tea shops, mini marts, potteries and rice mills. I am doing interviews and participant observation in some larger workshops where the owner feels an obligation to help his workers in times of need – apart from their usual salary. I visit workshops that increasingly face serious problems as the demand for their products decreases. I start looking more into the topic of child labour in small businesses, a phenomenon that is very widespread in Myanmar and can potentially tell me a lot about emic perceptions of family structures, social responsibilities and moral values.

Looking ahead

In the second half of my research I aim for an even more focused way of participant observation in a small number of businesses. I will continue to follow new paths to a certain extent as well, but I want to make sure that my data does not remain too broad and fragmented. Certain topics and cases deserve a more in-depth study now.

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⁴ For a recently published set of papers see a special issue of the Religion Compass: Nicolas Sihlè, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière (2015) (ed.): Comparative anthropology of Buddhist transactions: moving beyond the Maussian terminology of the “gift.” Religion Compass,

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