

On saints and wizards

Ideals of human perfection and power in contemporary Burmese Buddhism¹

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1. Introduction²

In the early eighteenth century, reformist monks in Upper Burma revived from long dormancy the practice of *vipassanā* meditation and along with it the belief that even in the present decadent age it is possible to attain liberation from *samsāra* in a single lifetime. While encountering initial resistance, over the course of the next century *vipassanā* practice received royal patronage and won acceptance from the country's monastic hierarchy. By the time

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² Pāli proper names of persons and texts in this essay that are of Burmese provenance are transcribed without diacritics according to their Burmese pronunciation except when their Pāli spellings have already entered the scholarly literature. Buddhist technical vocabulary in Pāli is transliterated according to the convention of the Pali Text Society.

Burma regained independence from Britain in 1948 the *vipassanā* ‘insight’³ meditation movement had become thoroughly institutionalized and integrated into the orthodox Theravāda establishment, even while it spawned charisma cults devoted to the veneration of alleged living *arahants*. By all measures, the popularization of *vipassanā* was one of the most significant transformations in Burmese Buddhism in the modern era.

Yet, in addition to *vipassanā*, the same period witnessed the rise of an alternative soteriology, one whose methods and orientation fall largely outside the parameters of contemporary Theravāda orthodoxy. Known in Burmese as the *weikza-lam* or ‘Path of Esoteric Knowledge,’ this tradition has as its goal not the termination of saṃsāric life in *nibbāna* as an *arahant*, but rather its indefinite prolongation through the attainment of virtual immortality as a *weikza-do* or Buddhist wizard. Because it operates at the periphery of Burmese orthodoxy, the *weikza-lam* has at times been subject to criticism, especially by votaries of *vipassanā*. Despite this, the modern Burmese *arahant* and the *weikza-do* share many qualities as ideal types including their ability to work wonders, and after their demise, to leave behind bodies that are immune to decay.

In this essay I will compare the *arahant* and the *weikza-do* as ideals of human perfection in contemporary Burmese Buddhism and discuss the contested religious claims of the traditions they represent. As part of this discussion I will review what is known of the modern evolution of these traditions in Burma noting their possible historical antecedents.

³ In the nineteenth century the term *vipassanā* and its corollaries *samatha* and *bhāvanā* were translated into English in a variety of ways by British civil servants, Christian missionaries and Orientalists. See e.g. Buchanan 1801: 272; Judson 1852: 503, 680; Childers 1875: 429, 580. The term ‘insight’ became the preferred translation equivalent for *vipassanā* among Burma’s Anglophone intelligentsia by the early twentieth century. See e.g. Shwe Zan Aung and Rhys Davids 1910: 210-212; U Nyana 1981: 1-32. On the dating of U Nyana’s work see Braun 2008: 345-346.

2. The revival of *vipassanā* and its initial reception

It seems that prior to the eighteenth century in Burma, as elsewhere in the Theravāda world, it was generally believed that it was no longer possible to attain enlightenment and hence *nibbāna* through *vipassanā* or any other means during the present age. The reason given for this was that the Buddha's 5000-year *sāsana* had by that time simply declined too much for such an attainment to be within reach.⁴ What was left for faithful was the path of merit-making by means of which they could hope to be reborn in the presence of the future Buddha, Ariya Metteyya, many millions of years from now. At that time, as Metteyya's disciples, enlightenment and liberation would be easy.⁵

The earliest known record of someone who challenged this assumption is that of a monk from the Sagaing Hills in Upper Burma named Waya-zawta whose movement flourished during the reign of Maha-damma-yaza-dipati (r. 1733–1752). Waya-zawta promised his followers *sotāpanna* through *anāgāmī* status if they would follow his teachings. Unfortunately for his disciples, upon his death his movement was suppressed by the Burmese crown as heretical. Writing a century later, the scholar-monk Monywa Hsayadaw (1767–1835) noted somewhat wryly in his royal chronicle, *Mahayazawin-gyaw*,

⁴ While the belief that the Buddha's *sāsana* or religion is in decline and will one day disappear from the world is pan-Buddhist, the notion that it will last specifically 5000 years is particular to the Theravāda and is first attested in the 5th-century commentaries of Buddhaghosa and in the *Mahāvamsa*. See e.g. Jayawickrama 1986: 27; Geiger 1993: 18. Note that Geiger gives "five hundred years" where it should read "five thousand years" (*pañcavassasahassāni*).

⁵ Since at least the 11th century, inscriptions at Pagan and elsewhere in Burma have recorded the wish of donors to attain liberation as disciples of Ariya Metteyya or to become *bodhisattas* at that time. See e.g. Ray 1946: 162; Pe Maung Tin 1960: 383–384. Liberation at the time of Metteyya has also been the most commonly made wish of scholar-monks expressed in the colophons of their learned treatises. See e.g. Namaw Sayadaw 1992: 162. Richard Gombrich (1995: 333–334) reports that as late as the 1960s, the majority of Buddhists in Sri Lanka held the view that liberation is impossible until the advent of Maitrī (Metteyya).

An elder monk named Waya-zawta, who lived in the village of Wat-chek, used to preach to followers of his doctrine that they had become *ariya sotāpannas*. Many monks and laymen became his disciples and soon they could be found in every town and village of Upper and Lower Burma declaring, ‘I have become a *sotāpanna*, I have become a *sakadāgāmi!*’ After Waya-zawta died, an investigation was held of monks dwelling at his place who continued to preach his doctrines. When these monks admitted to their teachings, the king had them defrocked and ordered them to shovel elephant and horse manure [in the royal stables].⁶

Nothing more is known of Waya-zawta’s movement or its doctrines, but one can speculate as to why it gained such wide popularity and why this in turn aroused hostility from the king. During the first half of the eighteenth century the then Burmese Nyaungyan Dynasty (1597–1752) was in precipitous decline. Historically, conditions of uncertainty and unrest have often prompted religious thinkers across cultures to reappraise their traditions in pursuit of truths and benefits more relevant for a world in crisis. The promise of immediate *ariya* attainment, the highest felicity of the Buddha’s dispensation, must have seemed especially attractive amidst the warfare and anarchy of the time. It is possible that the king’s suppression of Waya-zawta’s movement was carried out for purely doctrinal reasons, but it also may have been prompted by political considerations, if for example it were perceived ideologically as a kind of de-facto lese majeste. That the king, as a layman, is always inferior in religious status to monks is taken for granted in the Theravāda scheme of things and is not an issue.⁷ But if the king

⁶ Monywe Sayadaw, *Maha-yazawin-gyaw*, University of Michigan Library, microfiche reel 24, pp. 177–78. See also Lieberman 1984: 194–195.

⁷ On the intrinsic superiority of *saṃgha* members over laypersons regardless of the virtues, spiritual attainments or social rank of the latter see “Muni Sutta Vaṇṇanā” in *Suttanipāta Atthakathā (Paramatthajotikā)*, Yangon: Thathana-yay uzi htana pon-hneik taik, 1974: 261–262. As a consequence of their elevated status, monks strictly speaking were not subjects of the king. In contrast, any layperson not otherwise dedicated to a monastery or pagoda was regarded as the king’s property, his *kyun*, a term that means ‘subject,’ ‘servant’ or ‘slave’ depending on the context.

claimed himself to be a *bodhisatta*, which was a common royal assertion in Burma, it would mean that by Theravāda definition he was also a *puthujjana*, an ordinary unenlightened person, and hence religiously ‘inferior’ to any of his lay subjects who happened to be *ariyas*.⁸ Given that the charisma of Burmese kingship was defined in Buddhist terms, having lay subjects roam about the kingdom claiming to be *ariya sotāpannas* and *anāgāmīs* might have been perceived as a political threat – especially at a time when the Burmese monarchy was enfeebled and pressured from all sides.

3. The monk Medawi and Konbaung court patronage

Shortly after Waya-zawta’s movement was suppressed, during a civil war which saw the destruction of the Nyaung-yan Dynasty, a young scholar-monk named Medawi (1728–1816) began writing *vipassanā* manuals in the vernacular. Couched in the language of *abhidhamma*, these are the very earliest ‘how-to’ *vipassanā* books we possess from Burma. Medawi’s earliest manual was completed in 1754, just two years after a new Burmese dynasty, the Konbaung (1752–1885), was founded.⁹ Other works followed in quick succession. In the introduction to his *Nama-rupa-nibbinda Shu-bwe* completed in 1756, Medawi criticizes what he sees as the defeatist attitude of his contemporaries regarding the utility of meditation practice and the possibility of liberation in the present day. As part of his argument he significantly redefines what it means for the Buddha’s religion to go extinct.

Abandoning what should be abandoned, and practicing what should be practiced according to [the Buddha’s] instructions, [these two things together] is what is called completing the ‘religion of practice’ (*paṭipatti sāsana*). And it is only by completing the religion of practice that one completes the ‘religion of realization’ (*paṭivedha sāsana*),

Judson 1852: 190.

⁸ Unlike in the Mahāyāna, where *bodhisattvas* are defined as enlightened beings, the Theravāda claims they remain unenlightened *puthujjanas* until attaining buddhahood in their final existence. See Shwe Zan Aung and Rhys Davids 1969: 168.

⁹ Hte Hlaing 1973: 112–113.

which is [none other than] the path and fruit of liberation. [This being the case], should anyone ever believe, ‘I am unable to practice even so much as is necessary to attain the path and fruit of stream-entry!’ and [on the basis of this belief] only abandon what should be abandoned... and being content with the moral purity so attained, not engage in any further practice, then for that person it can be said that the religion of practice has gone extinct.¹⁰

We see in this passage that for Medawi the decline and disappearance of the Buddha’s religion is no longer an eschatological consequence of some cosmic devolution, but rather it occurs at the level of the individual, whenever anyone, out of complacency or a lack of confidence, chooses not to strive for enlightenment.

The core of Medawi’s meditation manual is a discourse on the three marks of existence: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*, as they pertain to the five aggregates. Following the standard outline for scholastic treatises of the period, he cites passages from authoritative Pāli sources, gives a word-by-word exegesis of these, and concludes each section with a summary in Burmese prose. Medawi wrote over thirty meditation manuals during his career and appears never to have been harassed by the Konbaung court. Indeed, during the reign of Bodaw-hpaya (r. 1782–1819), one of the dynasty’s most religiously active and innovative monarchs, he was granted a royal title and a monastic endowment for his work on *vipassanā*.¹¹

Perhaps because of the influence of Medawi’s meditation manuals, Konbaung-era monastic chronicles written from the perspective of the royally-backed Thudamma ecclesiastical council begin to reflect a gradual shift in opinion regarding the possibility of enlightenment in the present age. In the *Sāsanasuddhidīpaka* written in 1784, for example, there is no discussion of *vipassanā* practice or of *ariya* status per-se as playing a role in Burmese monastic history. Rather, the import and strategy of the text is to affirm the legitimacy of the Thudamma hierarchy by documenting its lineage through valid lines of ordination and by arguing for the correct-

¹⁰ Medawi 1968: 59.

¹¹ Hte Hlaing 1973: 113.

ness of its interpretation of monastic discipline.¹² In contrast, when we look at the *Vaṃsadīpanī*, a Thudamma chronicle composed a decade later (c.1797), *arahants* are made to play a major role in the founding of Burma's *saṃgha* lineages. Yet all of them are Buddhist saints of the past, with none flourishing later than the fourteenth century.¹³ Turning to the *Thathana-linkara Sadan* written in 1831, we find that the focus has shifted to the present with an assertion reminiscent of Medawī's stance that it is wrong to assume that enlightenment is not possible today. The text contains accounts of more recent saints than are listed in the earlier chronicles and reviews the theory of the *sāsana*'s 5000-year decline as given in the commentaries. It argues that the Buddha's religion remains strong and that the era of *ariya arahant* attainment will long endure in the Burmese kingdom.¹⁴ Finally in the *Sāsanavaṃsappadīpaka*, written in 1861, it is stated matter-of-factly that persons possessed of extraordinary meditative attainments flourish in the present age, and should anyone choose to take up the practice of *vipassanā*, it is surely possible that that person could attain *arahantship* in a single lifetime.¹⁵

It seems that, at least to a degree, the monastic establishment was moved in the direction of acknowledging contemporary *ariya*

¹² The *Sāsanasuddhidīpaka* is the earliest of several Thudamma (P. Sudhammā) chronicles written in the Konbaung period. It acknowledges the role of *arahants* in the convention of the first three Buddhist Synods in ancient India but makes no mention of *arahantship* beyond that. See Nandamala 1980: 23–24. Commenting on that text in 1796, the then *thathana-baīng* (patriarch of the order), Maungdaung Hsayadaw, stated emphatically that the existence of *ariyas* is inconsequential for the perpetuation of *saṃgha* lineage. See Nyanabhiwantha 1959: 588–591.

¹³ The last named *arahant* in the *Vaṃsadīpanī* is Deibbasek who dies in 1337. Mehti Hsayadaw 1966: 93–98. It should be noted that the *Vaṃsadīpanī* is wrongly attributed to Mehti Hsayadaw by the editors of the 1966 published edition which I reference here. An examination of extant manuscripts shows that it was written by Mehti Sayadaw's contemporary Zinalinkayadaza. I wish to thank Alexey Kirichenko for bringing this important point to my attention.

¹⁴ Maha-damma-thingyan 1956: 108–117.

¹⁵ Paññāsāmī 1961: 70; Law 1986: 80.

attainment by the rise of reform factions within the *saṃgha* in the mid-nineteenth century, many of which promoted the practice of *vipassanā* to one degree or another as part of their reforms. The most radical of these was led by a monk known as Hngettwin Hsayadaw, the ‘Bird-cave Abbot,’ named after his monastery in the Sagaing Hills. Formerly a royal tutor of the queen at Mandalay, he famously rejected the worship of Buddha images, claiming that the customary food offerings attracted rats. A strict disciplinarian, Hngettwin Hsayadaw not only required his monks to be punctilious in their observance of Vinaya, but also to practice *vipassanā* meditation daily – perhaps a first in Theravāda monastic history.¹⁶ He even demanded that his lay supporters do the same. Over time Hngettwin Hsayadaw’s disciples coalesced into an autonomous monastic fraternity that continues to flourish today. Indicative of its original commitment to *vipassanā*, the official title of the Hngettwin fraternity in Pāli is Catubhummika Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Nikāya. Hngettwin Hsayadaw was not the only reformer to establish himself in Sagaing. By mid-century during the reign of Mindon (r. 1853–1878), the hills of Sagaing were honeycombed with meditation caves and dotted with forest monasteries.¹⁷

King Mindon himself enthusiastically promoted interest in *vipassanā* at the royal court and under his patronage several treatises on *vipassanā* were composed. Particularly significant were the works of Mindon’s royal minister U Hpo Hlaing (1830–1883) who was notable for his avid interest in western science and efforts to reconcile this new perspective with *abhidhamma*. This synthetic approach was passed on to his protégé, the scholar-monk, U Nyana, who later became famous as Ledi Hsayadaw, arguably the most significant promoter of *vipassanā* in the modern period.¹⁸

¹⁶ While the Vinaya places many obligations upon the monk, one thing it does not require is that he practice meditation. That has always been optional.

¹⁷ For a summary of nineteenth-century Burmese monastic history as it pertains to reformist factions and forest monks in Sagaing see Htin Aung 1966: 3–36.

¹⁸ See Braun 2008: 62–70.

4. Ledi Hsayadaw and the modern *vipassanā* movement

Ledi Hsayadaw (1846–1923) is regarded as the founder of the *vipassanā* movement as it is known today. This movement began to coalesce only after the British conquest of the Burmese kingdom in 1885. Ledi Hsayadaw wrote numerous vernacular manuals on *abhidhamma* and *vipassanā* beginning in the 1890s, and taking advantage of the printing press, he published widely to promote literacy in Buddhist doctrine and to propagate amongst the general populace what he believed to be the correct practice of *vipassanā* based on scriptural norms. His purpose in this work was not only to facilitate the spiritual progress of the Buddhist faithful, but to fortify Burmese culture against what he regarded as the corrupting influences of the new foreign regime and to defend Buddhism against the polemics of Christian missionaries.¹⁹

In outline and content, Ledi Hsayadaw's manuals are similar to those written one hundred and fifty years earlier by the monk Medawi. But unlike his Konbaung-era predecessor, Ledi Hsayadaw argued for the utility and necessity of *vipassanā* practice for everyone, even those who hoped for future liberation as disciples of Metteyya Buddha. In his *Bodhipakkhiya-dīpanī* written in 1905, Ledi Hsayadaw asserted that while the traditional path of merit making could result in an auspicious rebirth at the time of Metteyya, it could not by itself generate the perfections (*pāramī*) necessary to be able to attain liberation through Metteyya's teachings. Only merit making done in conjunction with *vipassanā* practice, undertaken in this life, could afford one that chance.²⁰

Even while Ledi Hsayadaw's interpretation of *vipassanā* and his efforts to popularize its practice were innovative in many ways, he remained largely traditional in his acceptance of most Burmese Buddhist customs and popular beliefs. Of particular significance here was Ledi Hsayadaw's defense of the Burmese notion that the corpses of deceased *arahants* remain immune to decay even though this idea is not attested in authoritative Pāli sources. In the

¹⁹ Braun, 2008: 179–181.

²⁰ Ledi Hsayadaw 1981: 170–171.

Uttamapurisa-dīpanī, a treatise on the attributes of *ariyas* written in 1900, he asserted,

... [B]efore attaining buddhahood the Blessed One's aggregates were tainted with the corruption of the *kilesas* and the grime of *kamma*. After attaining buddhahood no such corruption or grime remained... [It is for this reason that] the corpses of buddhas and *arahants* neither decay nor emit foul odor, instead they remain fresh just as when they were alive... Their mental aggregates are utterly purified and so generate physical bodies that are pure... [Therefore] do not listen to the heretical doctrine (*micchā-vāda*) that claims that only the enlightened mind is the Buddha and that the body is not the Buddha.²¹

Not surprisingly given the Burmese *saṃgha*'s devotion to Buddhist scholasticism, the lack of textual authority for this view-point gave reason to some scholar-monks to reject Ledi Hsayadaw's argument. In the *Yahanda Pyathana*, a treatise on contemporary *arahant*ship, the scholiast Thadammodaya Hsayadaw sharply criticized the belief that the corpses of *arahants* do not decay, noting that in scripture the Buddha himself declared his own body to be a mass of corruption even while he was alive.²² How then could the bodies of dead *arahants* not putrefy? In a footnote to the argument, the text's editor comments that the preservation of corpses nowadays is achieved through embalming, a practice he irreverently equates

²¹ Ledi Hsayadaw 2003: 494–495. Here Ledi may have been responding to a heterodox group of iconoclasts called derisively '*paramats*' that allegedly advocated the worship of the Buddha's enlightened mind (*nyandaw*) to the exclusion of all else. Scott 1963: 147–149. One of the possible inspirations for Ledi Hsayadaw's own views may have been the Alaungdaw Kathapa cave-shrine located northwest of Monywa. According to local legend the cave contains the incorruptible corpse of the Buddha's great disciple, Mahākassapa, which will reanimate at the time of Metteyya and auto-incinerate in the future Buddha's hand. Kawinda 1994: 19. The legend is not attested in Pāli sources and has its origins in the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition of north India. Strong 1991: 61–64.

²² The reference being made here is to the famous story of Vakkali Thera, a monk who was infatuated with the sight of the Buddha's physical form. In the story, the Buddha describes his own physical body as foul, and admonishes Vakkali to try to see the *dhamma* as his true body. Malalasekera 1974: 799–800.

with taxidermy.²³ In spite of occasional criticisms of this sort, Ledi Hsayadaw's opinion has prevailed and today represents the majority view of the *vipassanā* movement and of Burma's religious establishment.

Since Ledi Hsayadaw's time, many *vipassanā* organizations have been established, each promoting its own meditation techniques. These typically are based on interpretations of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the cultivation of mindfulness (*sati*). Most of the contemporary *vipassanā* methods entail the practice of mindfulness meditation exclusively while eschewing the cultivation of tranquility meditation (*samatha*) and the blissful states (*jhāna*) and supernormal powers (*iddhi*, *abhiññā*) associated with it.

5. The cult of living *arahants*

Almost all of the modern *vipassanā* groups were founded by charismatic monks,²⁴ and while there is no recorded instance where any of them declared themselves to be enlightened – this being prohibited by the monastic code – many were deemed by their disciples, and by the public at large, as having attained *arahantship*, or if not that, then nearly so.²⁵ The modern hagiographies that have grown up around these meditation masters often report not merely on their piety but also on their supernormal powers – to fly through the air, to appear in two places at once, to predict the future, etc.²⁶ – this in spite of the fact that the meditations these teachers prescribed and

²³ Thadammodaya Hsayadaw 1954: 49–50.

²⁴ The most well-known exception is the lay *vipassanā* lineage of Hsaya Thet-gyi (1873–1945), U Ba Khin (1899–1971), and S. N. Goenka (1924–).

²⁵ Mahasi Hsayadaw (1904–1982), for example, whose *vipassanā* organization is the largest and most influential in Burma, was believed by many to be an *anāgāmi*.

²⁶ Such claims are quite common in Burma. It is reported, for example, that the meditation master Thabeik Aing Hsayadaw (1893–1968) could be seen gathering alms in one place while appearing simultaneously someplace else. Thathanawithudi 1975: 315–316.

allegedly utilized were, by contemporary definition, not productive of such powers.

It would be wrong however to assume that the hagiographies of the alleged saints of the modern *vipassanā* movement are concerned chiefly with either the miraculous or with the charisma of the saints themselves. Instead, the principle focus of these stories is on the Buddhist doctrine (*taya*, P. *dhamma*) and the method of meditation (*shu-ni*) taught by these teachers. Sometimes presented in the form of pithy dialogues between master and disciple, these expositions are characterized, virtually without exception, by their close adherence to doctrinal norms laid out in Pāli scripture and commentary as interpreted by the Burmese Theravāda establishment. This emphasis on textual authority is in part a consequence of the fact that most of the prominent *vipassanā* teachers were themselves scholar-monks. It is also indicative of how, in the evolution of the modern *vipassanā* movement, the teacher became ancillary to the doctrines and method of meditation he taught. This was an important step in the institutionalization of *vipassanā* in the twentieth century.²⁷

Around each prominent teacher there arose a *wipathana yeiktha* or ‘*vipassanā* hermitage.’ This was an entirely new institution in the history of Burmese Buddhism devoted exclusively to the prac-

²⁷ Max Weber theorized that nascent religious (and political and military) movements routinize and institutionalize the charisma of their founders as a necessary stage in their evolution towards long-term stability. Movements that fail to do this typically do not long survive the demise of their founders. Eisenstadt 1968: 48–65. This sociological dictum is illustrated in the recent researches by Ingrid Jordt (2007: 15–34) on Mahasi Hsayadaw’s meditation hermitage, the Thathana Yeiktha, and by Keiko Tosa (2009: 239–264) on the pilgrimage center of Thamanya Hsayadaw. Jordt describes how emphasis on meditation technique and institutional discipline allowed the Thathana Yeiktha to flourish after Mahasi’s death in 1982, while Tosa shows how Thamanya Hsayadaw’s center declined rapidly following his demise in 2003 because it had remained exclusively focused on devotion to the *hsayadaw* himself. Juliane Schober (1988: 26–28) has argued that an inability to transition to new leadership following the passing of charismatic founders is characteristic of the *weikza-lam* in general and accounts for the ephemeral nature of most *weikza-lam* associations.

tice of meditation and designed to accommodate large numbers of mostly lay practitioners during retreats.²⁸ The teachings and method of the founding meditation master became the signature of each of these *wipathana yeikthas* and remained a constant whenever daughter centers were established. As the exposition of Buddhist doctrine by all of the teachers was virtually the same, it was the meditation method, the *shu-ni*, in particular that became the single most important criterion by which *vipassanā* groups distinguished themselves from one another – and argued over what constitutes correct practice.²⁹

The *vipassanā* movement during the first half of the twentieth century catered mostly to the urban middle-class which emerged during the British period. Now after a century of development the movement has spread among all social classes with *wipathana yeikthas* in almost every city and town, and even village monasteries hosting *vipassanā* retreats. The heyday of the associated cult of living *arahants* was really the mid-twentieth century, which witnessed many charismatic monks raised to national prominence for their aptitude in meditation and Buddhist scholarship. This cult of charisma was part and parcel of the optimistic fanfare surrounding newly won national independence in 1948, and the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's *parinibbāna* in 1956, which was celebrated in

²⁸ While the *wipathana yeiktha* was a new institution, its religious activity was modeled after the traditional lay practice of observing the fortnightly Buddhist Sabbath (*uposatha*). On the full and new moons, lay persons who wish to do so gather at monasteries or pagodas to pray and to temporarily take upon themselves additional precepts (*sīla*) beyond the normal five. These additional precepts, such as not eating after noon, not using perfumes and refraining from sexual activity, render their lives, for the duration of the Sabbath, akin to those of novice monks. Burmese *wipathana yeikthas* typically impose the same *uposatha* precepts on meditators for the duration of retreats.

²⁹ Braun (2008: 394–401) argues that the emphasis on meditation technique witnessed today emerged only after Ledi Hsayadaw, whose own writings focused on *abhidhamma* literacy. A question worth posing is whether, during the preceding Konbaung period, any such distinction between meditation technique and *abhidhamma* literacy was ever sharply drawn.

Rangoon with the convention of the Sixth Buddhist Synod.³⁰ It was believed by many Burmese Buddhists at that time that the world had entered upon a new ‘age of enlightenment,’ that at this halfway point of the *sāsana*’s decline there was a sudden upsurge in the capacity of individuals to attain liberation, and that all this was the fulfillment of an ancient prophesy.³¹ How else to account for this abundance of *arahants* in the land?³²

The archetypes of the modern Burmese *arahant* are first and foremost the *sāvaka* disciples of the Buddha described in the Pāli Tipiṭaka and commentaries, and of no less importance, native hero-saints whose legends are recorded in Burmese chronicles. Chief among the latter is Shin Arahan, the Mon saint who famously converted the Burmese king, Anawrahta, to Buddhism in the eleventh century and became the first Buddhist patriarch of the kingdom

³⁰ Among the most well-known meditation masters alleged to be *arahants* during this period were Sunlun Hsayadaw (1877–1952), Thaton Zetawun Hsayadaw (1868–1954), Mogok Hsayadaw (1899–1962), Mohnyin Hsayadaw (1874–1964), Webu Hsayadaw (1895–1977), and Taungpulu Hsayadaw (1896–1986). See Hte Hlaing 1973: 253ff.

³¹ This belief in the significance of the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s *parinibbāna* played an important role in *weikza-lam* circles as well, where it often took on millenarian connotations. Some believed, for example, that the contemporary acclaimed *weikza-do*, Bo Mīn Gaung (d. circa 1952), was prophesied to assume the role of a *dhammarājā* at this time. Paw U 1954: 77–80. On the scope of *weikza-lam* millenarian expectations during this period see Foxeus 2011: 58–75.

³² The notion that the world was destined to enter an ‘age of enlightenment’ at the halfway point of the *sāsana*’s lifespan is not attested in Pāli scripture or commentary for which reason it was by no means universally accepted. The idea was taken up for consideration by the Sixth Buddhist Synod (1954–1956) which rejected it as contradictory and as lacking textual support. *Atthakatha-thangayana Pathama-thannipata Thangayana Si-sit-hkan*, Yangon: Naingan-daw boda-thathana a-hpwe, 1958: 139–147. Subsequent publications by the Ministry of Religious Affairs that discuss the *sāsana*’s lifespan omit reference to the theory. See e.g. Ledi Kelatha 1980: 7–15. It is perhaps for this reason that today only a minority of *vipassanā* groups advocate the view, most notably those following the teachings of S. N. Goenka.

of Pagan.³³ Equally prominent are Soṇa and Uttara, native sons according to Mon tradition, who missionized the Mon homeland of Rāmañña in Lower Burma in the third century BCE.³⁴ While endowed with supernormal powers, used always judiciously to overcome obstacles to their missions, these saints are chiefly remembered as propagators of the faith whose importance was that they introduced the Buddha's *sāsana* to a given place and inaugurated a valid line of ordination there. Having completed their tasks in the service of the religion, they quietly passed away in *nibbāna*.

There are other more marvelous paradigms of *arahant*ship available in Burmese legend and folklore from which the *vipassanā* movement could have drawn inspiration, such as the immortal *arahant*, Shin Upagot, a remover of obstacles who dwells in a brazened palace beneath the southern ocean.³⁵ But it is the less exuberant models mentioned above, revered not so much for their powers but for what they established that at least officially are the ones thus far preferred by the modern proponents of *vipassanā*.

6. The Buddhist wizard and the *weikza-lam*

The Burmese *weikza-do*, being a powerful Buddhist thaumaturge, cuts a very different figure. A master of esoteric arts and possessed of extraordinary magical potency, he makes full and flamboyant use of his powers to assist good people and defend the Buddha's

³³ The Burmese legend of Shin Arahan and King Anawrahta, in turn, is closely patterned after the story of Dhammāsoka found in the *Mahāvamsa*. See e.g. Pe Maung Tin and Gordon Luce 1923: 70–75; Geiger 1993: 28–49.

³⁴ Through this and related legends the Mons and the Burmese identify Lower Burma as *Suvaṇṇabhūmī*, the 'Golden Land.' The legend of Soṇa and Uttara, which first appears in the *Dīpavamsa*, was recast into its familiar Burmese form in the 15th-century *Kalyāṇī* inscriptions of King Dhammaceti. See Taw Sein Ko 1892: 48–49; Oldenberg 1992: 159–160.

³⁵ Shin Upagot dwells in his submarine palace awaiting the advent of Metteyya Buddha. The legend has its origins in Sanskrit Buddhist sources and makes its debut in Burma in the 11th-century *Lokapaññatti*. For a synopsis of the legend and cult of Shin Upagot in contemporary Burma see Strong 1991: 209–219.

sāsana. The *weikza-do* makes his debut as a Buddhist hero in early nineteenth-century Burmese folklore in the figure of a wizard named Bo Bo Aung. Bo Bo Aung is portrayed as a white-clad turbaned layman who leads a righteous army in the service of a *cakkavattī* king named Setkya-min. Setkya-min has as his task the defeat of evil and the ushering in of a Golden Age in preparation for the immanent advent of Metteya Buddha.³⁶ The notion that Metteyya will appear in the near future falls outside the parameters of normative Theravāda, but nevertheless the idea seems to have enjoyed considerable popularity among the general populace of the time.³⁷ Beginning in the nineteenth century, the Setkya-min myth inspired numerous pretenders to the throne to launch millenarian uprisings, first against the Burmese crown, and then against the British colonial government; the last and most famous of these being the Saya San rebellion of 1930–31.³⁸ After independence in 1948 under the government of U Nu, *weikza-lam* associations (*ga-ing*) that were millenarian in orientation were treated with suspicion and occasionally harassed.³⁹ And since the military coup of 1962, the public profession of millenarian Setkya-min ideology has

³⁶ The figure of Setkya-min is based on an historical namesake, the crown-prince Setkya (1812–1838). Prince Setkya was assassinated in 1838 by his uncle, Tharrawaddi, who usurped the Burmese throne. Being a royal, Setkya's blood could not be shed so he was drowned in a velvet sack in accordance with protocol. The legend arose that the prince did not die but was spirited away to heaven by the *weikza-do*, Bo Bo Aung. There he waits in occultation for the propitious time to return to the world. Sarkisyanz 1965: 154–155; Ferguson and Mendelson 1981: 67–68. On the evolution of the Setkya-min myth see Foxeus 2011: 51–58.

³⁷ Even King Bodaw-hpaya (r. 1782–1819) appears to have contemplated for a time that he himself might be an incarnation of Metteyya, although no official proclamation of such a claim was ever made. See Tun Aung Chain 2004: 186–211. Mendelson (1961b: 229–237) has shown how flexible conceptions about Metteyya can be at the level of popular belief.

³⁸ Sarkisyanz 1965: 155–165. For a recent reappraisal of the Saya San rebellion, however, see Aung-Thwin 2003.

³⁹ Personal communication with Niklas Foxeus, January 2009.

been effectively banned with no *weikza-lam* groups openly making such claims out of fear of reprisal.⁴⁰

Another, more popular *weikza-lam* orientation, however, holds to the normative Theravāda eschatology which asserts that the religion of Gotama Buddha will last for 5000 years, of which about 2500 remain. The disappearance of the religion will be followed by a period of several millions of years, only after which Metteyya will finally appear. *Weikza-lam* associations that accept this scenario devote their energies not to the ushering in of a Golden Age, but to the prolongation of the practitioner's longevity so that he might encounter Metteyya Buddha in a single lifetime. These non-millenarian, future oriented *weikza-lam* groups seem always to have been the majority, and they continue to flourish today.⁴¹ A common permutation on the above scenario has the *weikza-do* await the *parinibbāna* of Gotama Buddha's relics, an event that will occur at the end of the current 5000-year *sāsana*.⁴²

⁴⁰ In a 1979 address to the Central Committee of the Burma Socialist Program Party, General Ne Win singled out for condemnation the Shweyin-gyaw *weikza* association, comparing its alleged dangerous doctrines to those of the Rev. Jim Jones who ordered the mass suicide of his followers in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978. Ne Win 1985: 376–377; Foxeus 2011: 81. General Ne Win allegedly banned military personnel from joining *weikza-lam* associations on the grounds that such membership undermined the chain-of-command. Personal communication with U Myint Thein in Rangoon, 1987.

⁴¹ Melford Spiro (1982: 162–190) was the first to distinguish these two types of *weikza* practice which he deemed millennial Buddhism and eschatological Buddhism respectively. The two types of *weikza* orientation correspond to Jan Nattier's (1988: 25–32) Here/Now and Here/Later typology of Maitreya myth attested historically in Chinese Buddhism. On possible Chinese influences on the Burmese *weikza-lam* tradition see nn. 67–70 below.

⁴² The *weikza* association Manosetopad Gaing headquartered in Pegu, for example, has as its primary eschatological focus the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha's relics. Kan Sein c. 1987: 15; Pranke 1995: 358.

7. *Weikza-lam* theory and practice

The *weikza-lam* is an esoteric religious system that requires initiation under a master or *hsaya*,⁴³ and instruction in a repertoire of occult sciences whose mysteries may not be shared with outsiders. As such, the *weikza-lam* contrasts with normative Theravāda Buddhism which is exoteric in its teachings and observances. Apprenticeship in the *weikza-lam* entails training in any one or several of the following disciplines: the use of magical incantations and spells (*mandan*); alchemy (*aggiyat*), particularly those subtypes associated with the manipulation of mercury (*byada*) and iron (*than*); traditional medicine (*hsay*), which includes indigenous and Chinese pharmacopoeias and Indian Aryurveda, and importantly because of its efficacy, the casting of runes or magical diagrams (*in*, *aing*, *sama*). Runes are typically understood as devices for protection or healing and can be drawn on amulets that are either worn or inserted under the skin, or tattooed on the body. Alternatively they can be written on slips of paper which are then either rolled into pills or burnt into ash and swallowed as medicine.⁴⁴ In addition runes are used to demarcate boundaries on the ground, especially for rites of initiation and exorcism. All of these esoteric techniques are arranged under a classification system of ‘sciences’ (*weikza*, P. *vijjā*), the vocabulary of which is culled chiefly from Pāli sources.⁴⁵

While training in esoteric sciences is incumbent on disciples of the *weikza-lam*, normative Buddhist practices are not neglected

⁴³ *Hsaya* is the Burmese corruption of P. *ācariya* and generically means simply ‘teacher.’ Sometimes teachers in this tradition are referred to as *weikza-hsayas* ‘masters of esoteric knowledge’ or *hsay-hsayas* ‘masters of medicine’ to distinguish them from other teachers.

⁴⁴ For an account of the composition and use of *in* and *sama* see Thomas Patton, “In Pursuit of the Sorcerer’s Power: Sacred Diagrams as Technologies of Potency,” unpublished paper presented at the 2010 International Burma Studies Conference, Marseille.

⁴⁵ The broadest Pāli category under which these various sciences are arranged is *gandhārī-vijjā* (Burmese pronunciation *gandari-weikza*). Included under this term are also any extraordinary powers (*siddhi*) or meditative attainments (*abhiññā*) short of enlightenment. Kan Sein c.1987: 7. On the Pāli textual sources for this vocabulary see n. 71 below.

and indeed are typically emphasized as essential for any progress to be made. The most important of these are the observance of the five Buddhist precepts (*sīla*) and the cultivation of various meditations assimilated to the Theravāda category of *samatha* tranquility meditation. Lay *weikza-lam* practitioners will often take on the eight or ten precepts of the Buddhist Sabbath for extended periods of time as the added renunciation enhances their spiritual potency (*hpon*); while *samatha* in particular is considered efficacious for its capacity to deliver supernormal powers. Both the observance of precepts and tranquility meditation are viewed as necessary catalysts that actuate the other sciences.⁴⁶ Equally important, they equip the *weikza-lam* practitioner with the moral superiority and mental strength needed to exercise control over a host of spirits (*nat*) ranging from the demonic to the benign whose power must be tapped to unlock the secrets of critical herbs, potions and incantations.⁴⁷

At the level of everyday practice, *hsayas* of the *weikza-lam* act as healers, exorcists, purveyors of magical protection, and prognosticators for clients and the faithful. Ideally the *hsaya* will not charge a fee for his services, his generosity being part of his discipline and training. One such *hsaya* whose clinic I visited in Rangoon diagnosed patients according to the following procedure.⁴⁸ After inquiring about the patient's condition, he would prepare himself by calming his mind with a preliminary meditation. Then, once readied, he would extend his hands over the patient's body to sense an aura that indicated the etiology of the ailment and hence the remedy to be prescribed. According to the *hsaya*, illness arises from three general causes. Diseases such as measles or food poisoning, etc., are ordinary physical conditions treatable either with indigenous medicine or, if that proves ineffective, with western medicine or treatment. Or the malady could be caused by *payawga*, a malevolent influence of supernatural origin such as black magic or

⁴⁶ In his fieldwork in on *weikza* tradition Mendelson (1963: 786-807) confirmed the widespread belief in the efficacy of precepts as catalysts for the other sciences.

⁴⁷ Kan Sein c.1987: 8.

⁴⁸ From field notes taken in 1987 at the clinic of Hsaya U Htun Htun, a *weikza-lam* practitioner in Rangoon.

spirit attack. In such cases the *hsaya* would have to engage the dark forces in battle using all the occult instruments at his disposal. This carried with it some risk for the *hsaya*, as there was the possibility that he could be defeated and harmed, but if successful the patient would be returned to normalcy. On the other hand, the disorder might be diagnosed as an irreversible consequence of karma (*kam*), such as retribution for an unmeritorious deed (*akutho*), in which case there is no cure, and the patient would be advised to engage in religious devotion as a way to prepare for the inevitable.⁴⁹

8. The *weikza-do* as Buddhist immortal wizard

In keeping with the ultimate aim of the system, *weikza-lam* practitioners also work for their own physical perfection, applying the same sciences to their own bodies so as to render them invulnerable to injury or decay. The principal metaphor is alchemical, where the corruptible body is transformed into a stable substance, just as base metals which tarnish are transmuted into gold.⁵⁰ It is upon completing this transformation that the practitioner becomes a *weikza-do*, a ‘possessor of [esoteric] knowledge.’ Another term for such an accomplished one is *htwet-yat-pauk*, which literally means ‘exit place’ and signifies the adept’s own body as the point of exit whence he escapes the mortal plane.

In *weikza-lam* manuals the final stage of transition from mortal master to immortal wizard is portrayed in a variety of ways depending on the sectarian affiliation of the authors. In one of the more dramatic scenarios the *hsaya* has his disciples prepare for him a coffin in which he will lay unconscious. The coffin will be sealed and placed within a specially prepared chamber, perhaps an ordination hall because of its sanctity, or buried in the ground. At this time, the *hsaya* will be helpless against the forces of dark-

⁴⁹ In Buddhist causal theory, the specific type of karma being referred to here is called *aparāpariya vedanīya kamma*. Unlike other karmas whose consequences can be modified or obviated through appropriate action, the consequences of this type of karma are inevitable and cannot be avoided. See Bodhi 2000: 205.

⁵⁰ Kan Sein c.1987: 6; Spiro 1982: 165.

ness that will surely try to destroy him. To defend him disciples will draw protective diagrams, recite the appropriate incantations and arm themselves with alchemical stones (*dat-lon*) to hurl at evil forces as they try to enter the consecrated space. After a pre-determined lapse of time the coffin will be opened and if the disciples find it empty with only clothes left behind, they will know that their *hsaya* had successfully de-materialized his body and escaped as an immortal.⁵¹ A person who makes the transition in this manner is called an *ashin-htwet*, or one who ‘exits alive.’ A variation on this scenario has the successful practitioner leave behind an incorruptible body in the form of a mummy to serve as a kind of relic for veneration by the faithful. A *weikza-do* who departs in this way is called an *athay-htwet* or one who ‘exits through [apparent] death’ – apparent because although the body is dead, the mind of the practitioner did not itself die when exiting the body but ascended to the realm of the immortals perfectly alive.⁵² A third possibility, of course, is that upon opening the coffin the disciples find a rotting corpse, at which point they will realize that their *hsaya* had failed in his purpose and died a mortal death.

While *weikza-dos* are freed from the limitations of physicality, they continue to communicate with their mortal followers imparting instructions either in dreams or meditations, or in person. Sometimes they take over the body of a disciple for a period of time, or even reanimate the corpse of a recently deceased individual – whatever is necessary to accomplish some needful task in the world.⁵³ Regardless of the means, the communication *weikza-*

⁵¹ Kan Sein c.1987: 8; Spiro 1982: 170; Htin Aung 1962: 43.

⁵² According to Theravāda metaphysics, when mortals die their minds undergo a moment of ‘death consciousness’ (*cuti-citta*), which terminates the present life, followed immediately by a moment of ‘rebirth consciousness’ (*paṭisandhi-citta*), which initiates the next life. Bodhi 2000: 122–124. In *weikza-lam* theory, when a perfected *htwet-yat-pauk* exits the body his mind forgoes these two moments and simply continues uninterrupted in the same life. For a discussion of the destination of *htwet-yat-pauks* after their exit from the mortal plane see Foxeus 2011: 177–182.

⁵³ Mendelson (1961a: 560–580) reported a variety of differing interpretations among *weikza* associations regarding the manner in which *htwet-yat-pauks* communicate with disciples. The Ariyā-weizzā associa-

dos maintain with human beings is understood as a sign of their altruism, since contact with mortal flesh is believed to be repulsive to their refined sensibilities. Because they are ever present in the world and are devout Buddhists, *weikza-dos* can be supplicated for protection, for spiritual advice, and for mundane boons as well.

In popular religious art *weikza-dos* have been aggregated into a shifting pantheon of some twenty individuals, comprised of both historical and legendary figures. Among them are laymen such as Bo Bo Aung, typically clad in white, Buddhist hermits (*yathay*) wearing monk-like robes and conical hats, and Buddhist monks. The most popular *weikza-do* today is the layman Bo Min Gaung who is believed to have shed his mortal body in 1952.⁵⁴ *Hsayas* of *weikza-lam* associations often claim to be in communication with one or several of these figures, and invariably trace their own lineage of masters, real and apocryphal, back to individuals included on the list. Variations in the standard pantheon – marked in lithographs by who has been painted in and who has been painted out – are most often traceable to rival *weikza* associations and reflect their own sectarian interpretations of *weikza-lam* history.

In *weikza-lam* theory, the acquisition of supernormal powers and extraordinary long-life are in and of themselves *lokiya* or ‘mundane worldly’ attainments. But the *weikza-lam* also presents itself as a fully developed *lokuttara* ‘supra-mundane’ salvation system; one that it sees as wholly in keeping with Theravāda orthodoxy, while at the same time offering an alternative to the standard soteriology recognized by the religious establishment. Taking for granted the normative eschatology that places Metteyya’s advent in the far distant future, the *weikza-lam* argues that its esoteric practices are a more assured way of encountering the future Buddha than mere merit-making. The superiority of the *weikza-lam* derives from its unique approach to the task. First, by removing the inevitability of death, the *weikza-do* avoids the vagaries of the rebirth process

tion described by Foxeus (2011: 180-183) asserts that *weikza-dos* generate bodies that are stored in hidden grottos which they can enter and exit at will. These bodies are used when acting in the human world.

⁵⁴ Mendelson 1963: 798–804.

that can cast even a virtuous person into hell as the consequence of some long forgotten misdeed performed in a previous life. This is of critical importance because once fallen into that woeful state the duration of one's torment there will be so long that all chance of encountering Metteyya Buddha will be lost. Second, advocates will point out that the motivation for taking up the *weikza-lam* is intrinsically meritorious because by definition perfected wizards use their esoteric knowledge to protect the Buddha's religion from the forces of evil. Hence the advantages of becoming a *weikza-do*: having made himself immune to death he is guaranteed to encounter Metteyya in this very life, and having equipped himself with magical powers so that he might defend the Buddha's religion, he is well positioned to earn the merit necessary to be liberated by Metteyya's salvific teachings.

But the *weikza-do* is not compelled to attain *nibbāna* at that time as an *arahant* disciple of Metteyya. Instead, like Gotama, he may choose to strive for full buddhahood himself, in which case he would extend his sojourn in *samsāra* for a myriad of lifetimes more. Or, he may choose to remain as he is, a Buddhist wizard, combating evil and doing good ... indefinitely.

The *weikza-lam*'s attitude toward the modern *vipassanā* movement is one of polite reservation. While generally acknowledging that liberation is possible in the present age through insight meditation, votaries of the *weikza-lam* sometimes question whether it is as easy to attain as claimed by some contemporary teachers of *vipassanā*.⁵⁵ At the same time *weikza-lam* practitioners often eschew *vipassanā* practice themselves out of fear that they might attain *nibbāna* too quickly, thus depriving Buddhism and the world of their magical protection.

⁵⁵ The Manosetopad Gaing, for example, holds that in the present decadent age *samatha* and *vipassanā* lack real efficacy unless the body is first fortified through cultivating the esoteric sciences it prescribes. Kan Sein c. 1987: 5–6; Pranke 1995: 347–348.

9. Ambiguous and variegated origins of the *weikza-lam*

The history of the *weikza-lam* is obscure. The term *weikza-do* is a Burmese corruption of the Pāli, *vijjā-dhara*, a word that appears already in the Jātakas where it simply refers to a magician or wonder-worker with no soteriological significance.⁵⁶ In Burmese literature also, the term only began to take on its present religious connotations in the nineteenth century with the figure of Bo Bo Aung. Prior to that the *weikza-do* was a stock character in Burmese legend and drama assimilated to the *zawgyi* or Burmese alchemist, a romantic figure who, because of the acuity of his sense of smell, was often portrayed farcically as having to resort to ‘fruit maidens’ plucked from trees to satisfy his sexual needs.⁵⁷ As a mere *zawgyi*, the *weikza-do* was not nearly as powerful or long-lived as he was to become in later *weikza-lam* literature. Nor did he yet possess any gravitas – quite the contrary he was even portrayed as something good to eat, since consuming the flesh of a *zawgyi* was believed to give one superhuman strength.⁵⁸

But in his transformed guise as a heroic Buddhist wizard the *weikza-do* shows remarkable similarity to the awe-inspiring *mahāsiddha*, the ‘great accomplished one,’ of medieval Buddhist tantra from Bengal. Several of the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas* of that tradition are portrayed as having attained immortality through alchemy and meditation, and as serving as protectors of the Buddha’s religion till the coming of Maitreya.⁵⁹ A common epithet of the

⁵⁶ The equivalent Sanskrit term, *vidyā-dhara*, occurs with similar meanings in Hindu literature. Monier Williams 1976: 964. *Vidyā-dhara* takes on more specific connotations akin to what is found in the *weikza-lam* in Buddhist and Hindu tantra. See note 60 below.

⁵⁷ Htin Aung 1966: 45.

⁵⁸ A paradigm for this belief is the famous legend in the *Maha-yazawingyi* (c. 1724) of two temple boys who gain supernormal strength by eating the body of an alchemist. So strong did they become that the kings of Thaton and Pagan grew fearful and had them murdered. The term used for alchemist in the story is the compound *weikza-do zawgyi*. Kala 1934: 186–188.

⁵⁹ The most famous *mahāsiddha* who waits for Maitreya is the alchemist and philosopher Nāgārjuna. See Dowman 1985: 112–122. The

mahāsiddha in tantric literature is *vidyā-dhara*.⁶⁰ The Tibetan historian Tāranātha (1575–1634) claimed that *mahāsiddhas* had transmitted Buddhist tantra to Burma in ancient times,⁶¹ the possibility of which is suggested by Mahāyāna and tantric imagery found at Minnanthu, a twelfth-century temple complex located on the outskirts of Pagan.⁶² And as late as the fifteenth century, inscrip-

paradigm of the *mahāsiddha* is itself patterned after an earlier Indian Buddhist archetype of the long-lived/immortal *arhat* who awaits the coming of Maitreya. In one of the Sanskrit permutations on the Mahākassapa legend mentioned above the saint does not die but remains alive in a meditative trance. The *arhat* Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja likewise waits in the world for Maitreya, in his case as punishment for his greed. Over time the list expanded to include four, eight and sixteen *arhats*. These became known in China as the sixteen *luohans*. See Lamotte 1988: 690–694. Similarly, in Burma there is the popular belief in eight *arahant* world-protectors known as the ‘four dead and four living lords’ (*thay-lay-pa shin-lay-pa*). The list includes Mahākassapa among the dead lords and Shin Upagot among the living lords. All await the advent of Metteyya Buddha. Kawinda 1994: 148.

⁶⁰ The *vidyā-dhara* (Tib. *rig ’dzin*) is a stock figure across all Indian and Tibetan tantric traditions and is typically associated with alchemy, particularly the manipulation of mercury. David White (1996: 55–57) describes a late (14th century) Indian tantric practice he calls ‘Siddha alchemy’ that is similar in its techniques to methods found in the *weikza-lam*. In both systems mercurial alchemy is combined with yogic techniques for the transformation of the body and attainment of immortality. In the case of Burmese alchemy, iron competes with mercury as the metal of choice. Htin Aung 1962: 47. It should be noted that in *weikza-lam* praxis, the manipulation and consumption of runes (*in, aing, sama*) often displaces literal alchemy to achieve the same transformation. See Kan Sein c. 1987: 14–15. A similar science of ‘edible letters’ (*za yig*) is attested in the Tibetan ‘treasure text’ (*gter ma*) tradition. Characters are written on slips of paper which are then consumed for medicinal, protective or soteriological ends. Garrett 2009: 87–91.

⁶¹ Tāranātha asserts that during the Indian Pāla Dynasty (8th–12th cent. CE), Mahāyāna and Mantrayāna flourished in Burma and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and that after a period of decline, the tantric *Guhya-mantra* was reintroduced into the region by disciples of the Tamil *mahāsiddha* Śāntigupta. Chattopadhyaya 1980: 330–331.

⁶² See Strachan 1989: 129–131. Strachan, however, denies that the imagery at Minnanthu implies the presence of Mahāyāna or tantric prac-

tions record that tantric texts, along with Theravāda scriptures, were donated to monasteries in Upper Burma.⁶³ Modern critics of *weikza-lam* practice have used this historical information to link the *weikza-lam* to a sect of allegedly heretical monks at ancient Pagan known as the Ari, who are reviled in Burmese chronicles for their moral corruption and addiction to magic and spirit worship.⁶⁴

Another possible source of influence can be traced to the reign of the Konbaung king, Bodaw-hpaya (r. 1782–1819) who, in the early nineteenth century imported from north India numerous treatises on Hindu calendrics, numerology, medicine and alchemy. These were translated from Sanskrit and Bengali into Burmese.⁶⁵ That there is some historical connection between this and the emergence of the *weikza-lam* is suggested by the fact that the figure of King Bodaw-hpaya plays a major role in the legend of Bo Bo Aung.⁶⁶

tices.

⁶³ These included the *Mahākālacakka* and its *ṭīkā*, and the *Mṛtyu-vañcana*, lit. “Cheating Death” possibly a text devoted to life extending practices. Bode 1965: 108. Tāranātha claims the *Kālacakra* remained extant in Burma throughout its history. Chattopadhyaya 1980: 331.

⁶⁴ See e.g. Zotipala 1983: 269–270. While the Ari monks of Pagan have been held up as the epitome of religious decadence in Burmese chronicles for centuries, little is known about their actual practices or sectarian affiliations. Kala 1934: 181–182. Charles Duroiselle (1915–16: 79–93) among others maintained that they were Mahāyāna tantrikas influenced by the Buddhism of Bengal. Than Tun (1959: 99–118), in contrast, rejected this identification arguing they were instead a long-established monastic fraternity at Pagan that had simply remained aloof from reformist trends introduced from Sri Lanka beginning in the 12th century. In any case, it was through western scholarship that the terms ‘Mahāyāna,’ ‘tantra’ and ‘Hīnayāna’ etc., first entered the Burmese lexicon in the early twentieth century whence they have become grist for sectarian polemics.

⁶⁵ Nyanabhiwantha 1959: 520–524.

⁶⁶ According to the legend Bo Bo Aung and Bodaw-hpaya were childhood friends. When they grew up Bo Bo Aung became a monk in Sagaing while Bodaw-hpaya became king and built his new capital across the river. One day Bo Bo Aung discovered a manuscript with instructions on how to make magical diagrams (*in*). He mastered this science and returned to lay life whereupon Bodaw-hpaya tried to kill him out of fear and jealousy. The confrontation ends when Bo Bo Aung humbles the king with

On the other hand, when we look at specific *weikza-lam* techniques for achieving physical invulnerability and descriptions of the *weikza-do*'s 'exit' from the mortal plane, we find close parallels with Chinese Daoist procedures for attaining immortality through 'corpse deliverance' (*shijie*) in which the physical body is shed like a cicada husk and the immortal spirit is set free.⁶⁷ Of the many scenarios for transition envisioned in Daoist sources, leaving behind an incorruptible body and leaving behind little or nothing at all, match closely the two Burmese categories of *athay-htwet* 'exit through [apparent] death' and *ashin-htwet* 'exit alive' that mark the apotheosis of the *weikza-lam* practitioner.⁶⁸ Yet not all of the similarities with Chinese concepts appear to be Daoist in derivation. Daoism, for example, does not ascribe any particular meaning or value to mummies. In Chinese Buddhism, however, the mummified remains of Buddhist masters are typically viewed as relics imbued with power, and hence treated as icons for veneration.⁶⁹ This approximates the Burmese treatment of such bodies, be they the remains of alleged *arahants* or of *htwet-yat-pauks*.⁷⁰

his magic. Hpay Hkin 1949: 54–57; Ferguson and Mendelson 1981: 67.

⁶⁷ See Cedzich 2001: 11.

⁶⁸ Needham 1974: 301ff. Chinese techniques of exorcising tombs to protect corpses from demon attack are also similar to the strategies used by disciples of the would-be *htwet-yat-pauk* to protect him while he lay helpless in his coffin. See Bokenkamp 1999: 239–242. On Chinese Buddhist permutations on these Daoist beliefs see Sharf 1992: 1–31; Ritzinger and Bingenheimer 2006: 37–94.

⁶⁹ Blum 2004: 208. The most well-known example of this is the mummified and lacquered body of the sixth Ch'an patriarch, Hui-neng (638–713) enshrined in the Ts'ao-hsi Temple in Hsin-chou. Keown 2003: 114–115. Robert Sharf (1992: 9) makes the following observation regarding beliefs underlying the veneration of mummified masters in the Ch'an tradition, "...the purity of mind simultaneously effects the purity of the physical body and the elimination of the defilements that lead to decomposition after death. The bodies of Buddhist masters who resisted decay after death were accordingly worshiped as reservoirs of meritorious karma and spiritual power." This assessment is strikingly similar to Ledi Hsayadaw's remarks regarding the incorruptibility of the corpses of *arahants*.

⁷⁰ The use of runes (*in*, *aing*, *sama*) as medicines and devices for pro-

While possible Indian and Chinese influences on the Burmese *weikza* tradition could go back centuries, it was not until the turn of the twentieth century that the *weikza-lam* received what may be regarded as its capstone, and this through the writings of none other than Ledi Hsayadaw. Of particular importance was his *Vijjāmagga-dīpanī* composed in 1898. In that work, Ledi Hsayadaw set out to define all of the various knowledges and sciences (*weikza*; P. *vijjā*) then current in the Burmese religious landscape and arrange them into a hierarchy along the *lokiya-lokuttara* axis. While his intention was to show how supra-mundane ‘*lokuttara*’ *vipassanā* is superior to all other sciences and the only one able to deliver liberation, Ledi Hsayadaw also presented an explication of mundane ‘*lokiya*’ *weikza-lam* praxis in the idiom of *abhidhamma*.⁷¹ This was to provide later generations of *weikza-lam* apologists with an authoritative vocabulary and theoretical structure with which to articulate their system and defend it against criticism.⁷²

tection likewise has close parallels in Daoist and Chinese Buddhist practices. Strickmann 2002: 123–132, 170–179; Bokenkamp 1997: 253 n. 20. Frances Garrett (2009: 107–108) posits a Chinese origin for the similar ‘edible letter’ (*za yig*) tradition found in Tibetan Buddhism. Chinese immigration into Burma’s heartland increased significantly during the Konbaung Dynasty and this may have contributed to the emergence of *weikza-lam* practices at that time. Thant Myint-U 2001: 55–56. Following the trauma of the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824–26), it may also have been a factor in the creation of the Setkya-min myth. Maitreyan millenarianism had played a role in Chinese history for centuries, and the nineteenth century witnessed a resurgence of Maitreya-inspired uprisings in Manchu China. DuBois 2004.

⁷¹ Technical terms were adopted principally from the *Abhidhamma Vibhaṅga* and from the *Paṭisambhidamagga* of the Khuddaka Nikāya. Categories included *beda-weikza* (P. *veda-vijjā*), *manta-weikza* (P. *manta-vijjā*), *gandari-weikza* (P. *gandhāri-vijjā*), *lokiya-weikza* (P. *lokiya-vijjā*), *ariya-weikza* (P. *ariya-vijjā*), *sintamaya-eiddhi* (P. *cintamaya-iddhi*), and *weikzamaya-eiddhi* (P. *vijjāmaya-iddhi*). Ledi Hsayadaw’s list of terms and definitions are met with frequently in *weikza-lam* manuals. See Ledi Hsayadaw 1985: 291–293; Kan Sein c. 1987: 2–7.

⁷² Pranke 1995: 348.

10. Sectarian polemics and *weikza-lam* apologetics

While the general public and the *saṃgha* at large remain for the most part neutral towards the *weikza-lam*, fairly strident objections to its practice are on occasion made by lay practitioners of *vipassanā*. Besides accusations that *weikza-lam* practice can lead to insanity or is just quackery, critics charge that its infatuation with immortality is tantamount to a rejection of the Buddhist doctrine of non-self, which states that there is no abiding eternal soul to be found. *Weikza-lam* advocates respond by referencing *abhidhamma* à la Ledi Hsayadaw, where they point out that the mind and body of a *weikza-do* is no more possessed of a self or soul than the mind and body of an ordinary mortal. Appealing to the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, they note that the Buddha himself could have lived for an entire eon had he been asked to do so. To the criticism that the desire for extraordinary long life betrays an attachment to existence and a fear of death – mental defects that a true Buddhist saint transcends – they respond that it is out of compassion that the Buddhist wizard prolongs his life, sticking around in crummy *saṃsāra* for the sake of others.⁷³

11. The saint and the wizard

According to a popular collection of hagiographies published in 1973, more than a dozen *arahants* and lesser *ariyas* have appeared in Burma since the turn of the twentieth century, all associated with the burgeoning *vipassanā* movement.⁷⁴ Of the saints on that list, the last to pass away was Taungpulu Hsayadaw in 1986. The public devotion shown to the more famous of the acclaimed *arahants* surpassed that given to any other national figures. Besides miracles reported by disciples, and occasional queries posed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to check for orthodoxy,⁷⁵ confirma-

⁷³ A synopsis of remarks made by Hsaya U Htun Htun taken from interviews in 1987.

⁷⁴ Hte Hlaing 1973, matika.

⁷⁵ Sunlun Hsayadaw, who was illiterate, was famously questioned by scholar-monks on his understanding of *dhamma*. His responses were

tion of a revered meditation master's attainment was sought after his death in the ashes of his funeral pyre. If he left relics (*dat-daw*, P. *dhātu*), usually in the form of crystallized pellets, his *arahant*-ship was confirmed, if not, it was still a maybe.⁷⁶ Funerals of these saints were attended by tens of thousands after which their relics were enshrined in pagodas or kept in their home monasteries. Yet, unlike Buddha relics, which are national palladiums venerated by every Buddhist in the country, the cremated relics of Burma's modern *arahants* are relatively neglected.⁷⁷

But as we have seen, according to Burmese belief, *arahants* can also leave behind incorruptible bodies, and these seem always to have elicited greater interest on the part of the wider Buddhist community. Perhaps this is because there is more ambiguity as to what they represent, for both saints and wizards are capable of the same attainment,⁷⁸ and there are well-attended shrines in Upper and Lower Burma dedicated to the remains of both types of religious hero. Housed in impressive halls and often covered in gold-leaf,

judged to be wholly consistent with scripture. Hte Hlaing 1973: 528ff.

⁷⁶ Only *arahants* can leave such relics, but then only if they have made a resolution to do so. The failure of a cremation to produce relics, therefore, does not necessarily prove the deceased was not an *arahant*.

⁷⁷ Rozenberg 2011: 92. Illustrative of this indifference are the relics from the cremation of the acclaimed *arahant* Mogok Hsayadaw, which are interred in a rarely visited pagoda situated along the road leading from Amarapura to Sagaing. Relics of cremated *arahants* are, in fact, quite common in Burma and typically not held in sufficient esteem to be enshrined. The Kyaikkasan Pagoda in Rangoon, for example, possesses a large collection of relics of alleged Pagan-era *arahants*, not as part of its reliquary cache but kept on display in a glass jar in its museum. The museum attached to the Myathalun Pagoda in Magwe has in its collection the relics of no less an eminence than Mahāmoggalāna, one of the Buddha's two chief disciples. These are kept in a nondescript wooden and glass display case. I wish to thank Donald Stadtner for this information on the Kyaikkasan and Myathalun Pagodas.

⁷⁸ The status of a charismatic teacher can be ambiguous even while he is alive. Keiko Tosa (2009: 240) and Guillaume Rozenberg (2011: 110) both describe how prior to his death the famous monk Thamanya Hsayadaw (1912–2003) was regarded by some votaries as an *arahant* and by others as a *htwet-yat-pauk*.

these mummified bodies attract thousands of pilgrims a year.⁷⁹ The veneration shown to the preserved remains of acclaimed *arahants* and of *weikza-dos* is identical – mimicking that shown to Buddhist relics – prostrating, circumambulating and reciting prayers; and the wishes made by votaries: for health, for prosperity, and for happy rebirth, and so on, are likewise the same. So in the end, while the respective traditions which they represent remain at odds, these two ideals of human perfection – the *arahant* worshipped because he has died his final death, and the *weikza-do* because he will live on forever – find a kind of resolution and a common meaning in the eyes of the Buddhist faithful in the bodies they leave behind.

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⁷⁹ The most famous mummy of an acclaimed *arahant* is that of Sunlun Hsayadaw, which is preserved at Sunlun-gu Monastery in Myingyan in Upper Burma. It is displayed in an ornate gilt and glass sarcophagus surrounded by a circumambulatory walkway. Other notable full-body relics of acclaimed *arahants* include the gilded mummy of U Pyinnya (1864–1961) at Shwe-pauk-pin Monastery in Dala and the body of Zalun Hsayadaw, U Thuzata (1904–1984) kept at a modest shrine at Ngapali. A video of the latter can be found on YouTube “Myanmar Rakhine Monk Undecomposed Body.” The body of the *htwet-yat-pauk*, Dipa Aye-mya Hsayadaw, U Nandathiri (1910–1985), is enshrined at the Shin-hpyu Shin-hla Pagoda in Sagaing. The most impressive shrine to a *weikza-do* is the Maha Hsay Wingaba Pagoda in Insein Township, Rangoon. Built in 1958 as an elaborate Buddhist theme-park, it houses the gilt body of the Karen *htwet-yat-pauk*, U Thuriya. It should be noted that, just as in the case of *arahants*, the *htwet-yat-pauks* whose bodies are venerated in this way are invariably monks.

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