

**Buddhist Learning in Burmese Monastic Culture:
Traditions of the Ayakauk (analytic work) and the Abhidhamma Nya'Wa
(night-class)**

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In this paper, I shall examine a Buddhist approach to Abhidhamma study in the Burmese monastic context from the late Konbaung period to the present day, in particular looking at a genre in the vernacular Abhidhamma literature in Burma, namely, the ‘Ayakauk’ (analytic work) genre. I shall also reflect on the extent to which this genre has contributed to the development of a pedagogical tradition called *abi'da'ma nya'wa*, it literally means Abhidhamma night-class, which to my knowledge exists only in Burma. In doing so, I shall highlight the nature of the tradition of Abhidhamma night-class and assessing its roles in advanced study of Abhidhamma.

Before turning specifically to the tradition of *abi'da'ma nya'wa*, I shall briefly survey the Abhidhamma literature produced in Burma from the Pagan period (849-1298) to the present in order to highlight the extent of in-depth Abhidhamma studies undertaken by Burmese scholar-monks. We can be traced back the living tradition of Abhidhamma studies, at least, to the Pagan period. According to Burmese scholar-monks such as the Late Pahtan" Sayadaw Ven. Ashin Visuddhābhivaṃsa¹ and Nanadamālābhivaṃsa² writing on the history of Abhidhamma studies in Burma, the Abhidhamma study started to become popular during the Pagan period. Along with these two sources, Bode³ writing on the Pāli literature of Burma - on the basis of Burmese chronicles⁴ - suggests that Abhidhamma works by Burmese monks began to appear at the time of King Narapatisithu (1167-1202). A Burmese monk, Ven. Saddhammajotipāla, well known as Chappada, who returned from Ceylon after the higher ordination and a long-term study at the Mahā Vihāra, ‘The Great Monastery’,⁵ might have

¹ Visuddhābhivaṃsa et al. 1987: LXXXIX-XC.

² Nandamālābhivaṃsa 2005: 13-14.

³ Bode 1966: 18-19.

⁴ The *Sāsanavaṃsadīpa* and the *Pitakatthamaing*.

⁵ The Mahā Vihāra was donated to Mahinda, Asoka’s son, by the king of Ceylon, Devānaṃpiya Tissa. The Mahā Vihāra tradition “naturally presents itself as a guardian of orthodoxy” (Gombrich 2006: 149). It produced many authoritative literatures on the Theravada Buddhist scriptures and the history of Theravada Buddhism. For example, the

produced a couple of Abhidhamma works, namely, the Saṅkhepavaṇṇanā, a sub-commentary of the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, and the Nāmacāradīpaka, a Paṭṭhāna text. The Nāmacāradīpaka, according to Visuddhābhivaṃsa et. al., is a brief explanation of the 24 conditions of the Paṭṭhāna with reference to consciousness, Citta, mental concomitants, Cetasika, and matter, Rūpa, in order to understand the nature of conditional relations. This work, therefore, seems similar to Paṭṭhāna ayakauk (Explication of the Paṭṭhāna) produced in the later Burmese literature, and perhaps belongs to the Ayakauk genre, which we shall analyze below.

Turning to later periods, the Ava period (1364-1555) was well-known for its contribution to Abhidhamma studies, and most Abhidhamma commentaries produced in this period were in the Pāli language.⁶ In the early 17th century, the Pāli-Burmese Nissayas (support) - i.e. literal or interpretive translations of the Pāli into the Burmese⁷ - on the Abhidhamma texts began to appear, and the Konbaung period (1752-1885) was dominated by the growth of Pāli-Burmese nissayas on the Abhidhamma.

In Abhidhamma studies, according to Pitakatthamaing (History of the Tipiṭaka),⁸ ‘nissaya’ is also known as ‘ayakauk’ and that the authors of Paṭṭhāna Pāli Nissaya (Pahtan”palitaw nithaya), for example, used the word ‘nissaya’ instead of ‘ayakauk’ in the titles of their work.⁹ Lwin also identifies other synonyms of ‘nissaya’: ‘nik-tha-ye”” (supporter), ‘a-hmi’ (aid), ‘a-nak’ (meaning), ‘akauk’ or ‘ayakauk’ (abstract) in Burmese.¹⁰ In the earlier strand of Abhidhamma literature in Burmese, therefore, the words ‘nissaya’ and ‘ayakauk’ were used interchangeably.

While this paper focuses only on ayakauk genre of the Abhidhamma literature, I should highlight that the word ayakauk, or akauk, is also used in the tradition of Buddhist hermeneutic that started perhaps before the Konbaung period. This ayakauk tradition, following hermeneutical methods developed in the Nettipakaraṇa, interprets mainly verbs (and other pāli words) found in the

famous 5th century commentator, Buddhaghosa, resided and wrote, according to the tradition, many commentaries on the Buddhist scriptures at the Mahā Vihāra.

⁶ See Bode 1966: 40-46; Visuddhābhivaṃsa et. al.1987: XCI-XCV; Nandamālābhivaṃsa 2005: 14-15 for attributing the Ava period during which *Abhidhamma* studies flourished.

⁷ See Lwin 1961: 3-11 for definitions of *nissaya* based on the Pāli and Sanskrit; and different styles of *nissayas* which are present in Burmese *Nissaya*. Also see Okell 1965 and 1967 for linguistic features of ‘*Nissaya* Burmese’.

⁸ Mahathirizeyyathu 1989.

⁹ Tilokābhivaṃsa 2009: i-ii.

¹⁰ Lwin 1961: 5.

Tipiṭaka from the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha viewpoint and that of the canonical Abhidhamma viewpoint.¹¹ By the Konbaung period, it is very likely that scholar-monks, the Taungbila Sayadaw Ashin Munidaghosa and the Htan"tapin Sayadaw Ashin Nandamedha for example, composed Abhidhamma ayakauk works based on the hermeneutic technique of the ayakauk traditions.

Focusing on the ayakauk genre, Visuddhābhivaṃsa et. al. define ayakauk works as follows.

“‘Ayakauk’ is a literary work written in Burmese and explicates the nature, characteristic and meaning of [dhammas in] the Abhidhammapiṭaka as if one can pick-up these aspects [of dhammas] with their own hands in order to fully comprehend the meaning [of the texts]”.¹²

(My translation)

Ayanak analyses the Abhidhamma texts in terms of cittas, cetasikas and rūpas in detail, unlocking the hidden meaning of the texts, and thus captures essence of the Buddhist philosophy as given in the Abhidhamma. Although Lwin renders ayakauk as ‘abstract’, I would be more inclined to agree with Shwe Zan Aung’s translation that ayakauks are ‘analytic works’¹³ because as we have seen above these ayakauks are in-depth analyses of the texts. In addition, I agree with his view that ayakauks are ‘used a substitutes for the translations’.¹⁴ Therefore, Shwe Zan Aung is taking ayakauks to be different from word-for-word translations, i.e. nissayas. Moreover, comparing two Paṭṭhâna Pâli Nissayas written by Burmese scholar-monks in the late 18th century, I have found that one of them is the word-for-word translation of the Paṭṭhâna, while the other is the analytic work on the Paṭṭhâna in terms of the ultimate realities. The latter is now known as Paṭṭhâna ayakauk. We, therefore, find that ayakauk has become a specialist term referring exclusively to Abhidhamma works. For example, ‘Paṭṭhâna Pâli Nissaya’ written by the Htan"tapin Sayadaw Ashin Nandamedha in 1770s is now known as ‘Paṭṭhâna ayakauk’, which is in the syllabus of the national monastic examination, i.e. the Pahtamapyan Examination.

In this Paṭṭhâna ayakauk, the conditional relations as described in the canonical Paṭṭhâna are analyzed and explained in terms of cittas, cetasikas and

¹¹ I thank Ven. Dr. Dhammasāmi for pointing out a link between the *Nettipakaraṇa* and the *ayakauk* tradition. Personal communication 07/04/2012.

¹² Visuddhābhivaṃsa et. al. 1987: XCIII.

¹³ Shwe Zan Aung 1910-12: 115.

¹⁴ Shwe Zan Aung 1910-12: 127.

rûpas in great detail.¹⁵ Ayakauks such as the Dhâtukathâ ayakauk, the Yamaka ayakauk and the Paṭṭhâna ayakauk become comprehensive manuals of the Abhidhamma texts. Therefore, these ayakauks, and ayakauk as a hermeneutic technique, are used pervasively by Abhidhamma teachers in the Abhidhamma nya'wa tradition.

We shall now consider the nature of the nya'wa tradition and the extent to which the ayakauk tradition has contributed to the development of the nya'wa tradition based on available Burmese sources and my own observation of Abhidhamma night-classes in contemporary Burma.¹⁶ Visuddhâbhivaṃsa et. al. explain the role of ayakauks in Abhidhamma studies, viz., the nya'wa tradition in Burma since perhaps the Konbaung period as follows.

“Using the method described in Abhidhamma ayakauks, both teachers and students recite and discuss the topic without looking at manuscripts or books at night. This is called nya'wa (night-class). This technique enhances Buddhist philosophical thinking and profound understanding of the Buddha's teaching”.¹⁷
(My translation)

We know from this brief description that the term nya'wa refers not only to Abhidhamma classes held at night time and also to the pedagogical technique used during these classes (see below). In addition, to these two aspects, based on my fieldwork, the term nya'wa is also used to refer to the Abhidhamma texts taught during the night-classes - namely, the Mâtikâ, the Dhâtukathâ, the Yamaka and the Paṭṭhâna. These are called nya'wa subjects, which are on the Pahtamapyan Examinations syllabus. Therefore, the nya'wa tradition can be defined in a broader context referring three aspects, namely, the Abhidhamma classes at night, the nya'wa Abhidhamma subjects and the pedagogical technique used during these classes.

Based on my observation of a Paṭṭhâna nya'wa at a teaching monastery in Monywa, namely - the Saddhamma Pajjotârâma Sathintike, I shall now describe general atmosphere of the nya'wa and the pedagogical technique of nya'wa tradition. I had to visit Monywa in upper Burma particularly to attend the nya'wa because the practice of nya'wa is in decline at present and only several teaching monasteries now offer Abhidhamma nya'wa. The night-class at this

¹⁵ In 1979 and 1986, the Mula Pahtan Sayadaw U Nārada of Burma published two books, based on the *Paṭṭhâna ayakauk* by the Htantapin Sayadaw, in English. Although the presentation of the materials in these books is different from that of the *Paṭṭhâna ayakauk*, the underlying hermeneutic technique is the same as that of the *Paṭṭhâna ayakauk*.

¹⁶ During my fieldwork in Burma from September 2012 to March 2012, I participated in several night-classes on the *Paṭṭhâna*.

¹⁷ Visuddhâbhivaṃsa et. al. 1987: XCIV.

monastery began at seven o'clock in the evening after the evening chanting. When I arrived at the teaching hall rows of forty student-monks were already seated on their own mats laid on unpolished wooden floor. The first thing I noticed was the hall was extremely dim and one could not possibly see any words without much concentration. The student-monks were facing the altar with a couple of Buddha images on it, and in front of the altar was a chair presumably for the teacher-monk. During the class, the teacher did not sit down; he in fact walked back and forth behind the rows of students. Thus, the students sat facing their backs to the teacher. I guess classroom layout would differ from monastery to monastery and teacher to teacher. However, it is very typical to have night-classes in a dark or much dimmed hall/room because both teacher and students do not look at any texts during the class, as we will see below.

The class began with the recitation of a section of the Paṭṭhâna ayakauk by the students from memory. The teacher then gave detail explanations of the topic highlighting hidden meanings of the text, and analyzing it from the Abhidhamma viewpoint without looking at any texts. Indeed, he analyzed mind and matter, and their condition relations as given in the Paṭṭhâna in many different ways describing their nature, characteristics and philosophical meanings. Occasionally, the teacher would ask the students to recite some texts from the Paṭṭhâna ayakauk or to repeat some Abhidhammic words and ayakauk texts out loud in order to help with the memorization of what had been said. The pedagogical technique of the nya'wa tradition, therefore, requires both teacher and student to work from the Abhidhamma and ayakauk texts committed to their memory. Moreover, for students, it is designed to help with the revision of the texts already committed to memory, and the deepening one's understanding of Abhidhamma and analytical aspects associated with Abhidhamma.

Although Visuddhâbhivaṃsa et al. writing in the 1980s describe that teacher and students 'discuss the topic' during the night-class, I did not observe any 'interactive discussion' between teacher and students, apart from occasional question and answer between the teacher and students. It could be suggested that the nature of nya'wa might have been different. For example, according to the Paṭṭhâna nun-teacher at the Sakyadhâtâ Thilashin Sarthintike of Sagaing, Sayagi Daw Kusalavati, students were allowed to ask questions when she had her Abhidhamma nya'wa in the early 1980s, though it was rare that anyone would raise questions. She also added that there were fewer students in the class, and that she even had one-to-one classes on the Yamaka text, the sixth text in the Abhidhamma-piṭaka, with her Abhidhamma nun-teacher.¹⁸ Smaller classes in those days might have made it possible to build a close relationship

¹⁸ Interview with Daw Kusalavati on 04/03/2012.

with the teacher, and perhaps such close relationship might have encouraged teacher and students to ‘discuss the topic’.

Alternatively, we may have interpreted the words ‘discuss the topic’ out of context. In other words, one should not think of ‘discussion’ in Burmese monastic context, viz., the nya’wa tradition as an open, interactive discussion like in modern western pedagogies. For Burmese monastic, it is perhaps more like a simple question and answer section rather than a dialogue between teacher and students. This is because a strong culture of hierarchical teacher-student relationship in Buddhist monasticism may limit the extent to which one can question one’s teacher. Moreover, in the Abhidhamma nya’wa context, according to the Innsein Sayadaw Ven. U Tilokâbhivaṃsa, an expert in the Abhidhamma - i.e. an âbhidhammika, Burmese monastics are studying the Dhamma, including the Abhidhamma, that is complete in its entity, i.e. kevalaparipuṇṇa, with the aim for transmission of the Buddha’s Dhamma and ultimately preservation of the Buddha’s Sâsana.¹⁹ Therefore, their main concern is to have accurately memorized the texts, both canonical and commentarial - including the ayakauks, and thus, they are able to retrieve relevant information and give a more or less standardized answers within the framework of the (Burmese interpretation of) Abhidhamma at fitting moments. Therefore, the pedagogical technique of the nya’wa tradition - namely, teacher-centered learning with a focus on enhancing memorization of the texts - reflects the aims to preserve the Burmese Buddhist traditions, including the whole corpus of Buddhist literature in Burma.

In conclusions, we have seen that, in Burmese monastic culture, Buddhist learning of the canonical texts and commentarial texts have developed into a complex system. In particular, the study of the canonical Abhidhamma and its commentaries has evolved into interrelated and dynamic traditions, namely, the ayakauk tradition and the nya’wa tradition.

The ayakauk tradition can be seen as consisting two aspects: the ayakauk as a hermeneutical technique in which the canonical texts are analyzed in terms of cittas, cetasikas and rûpas, and the ayakauk as a genre referring to analytic works such as the ayakauk books on the Abhidhamma texts. These ayakauks then become comprehensive manuals for the Abhidhamma nya’wa.

Like the ayakauk tradition, the nya’wa tradition is also dynamic in the sense that it encompasses three aspects. For me, the nya’wa refers to Abhidhamma classes held at night, and the Abhidhamma nya’wa subjects. In addition, the nya’wa can be seen as a pedagogical technique, i.e. the teacher-centered learning with a focus on memorization and oral transmission of the

¹⁹ Interview with the Innsein Sayadaw on 06/03/2012.

canonical texts and ayakauk texts. Moreover, the nya'wa provides an effective way of revising materials that have been committed to memory. Through questioning and answering of the texts, one deepens one's understanding of Abhidhamma and develops a skill to analyze the texts from Abhidhamma viewpoint. In addition, if the class size of nya'wa is small, then it may help establishing and strengthening relationship between teachers and students. However, as we have seen, the class size of nya'wa at present is relatively big. This implies that there is low teacher to student ratio, and thus it is difficult to pay close attention to the students. Another aspect is that in the curricula across formal monastic exams for students are too much, and thus they have very little time to memories, do revision and study the subjects in depth like in old days. One of the consequences of this is that the practice of Abhidhamma night-classes has declined over the years. Therefore, preservation of the long tradition of nya'wa faces tough challenges ahead.