

Towards the Unity of the Samgha in Myanmar: The Emergence of State Samgha Organization in 1980

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Abstract

For the first time in postwar history there emerged a single Samgha Organization called State Samgha Mahanayaka Committee, the supreme Samgha authority in Myanmar in 1980. This supreme Samgha Organization was born out of 'All Samgha Sects Congregation' in Yangon in 1980.

After the Second World War, the state or status of Myanmar Samgha was not in good shape. There were many problems within Samgha such as disunity of Samgha as a result of proliferation of Samgha sects, malfunctioning of Samgha tribunals which settled monk's disputes, preaching of heterodox doctrine by some monks contrary to Theravada Buddhism, and presence of un-ordained bogus monks. Both the Government and the Samgha leaders felt the need of strong Samgha Organization which could discipline and supervise the Samgha in accordance with Vinaya rules.

Elaborate steps were taken to convene All Samgha Sects Congregation in Yangon in 1980. Since Samgha affairs have to be taken care of the Samgha, the Minister of Religious Affairs supplicated the Samgha leaders from different sects to take the initiative to convene the congregation with government support. Sixty-six Wunsaung Sayadaws (Working Committee Members) were elected from different sects to handle the whole process of the meeting. 1226 Samgha representative were nominated from all Samgha throughout the country. After passing through expert hands final version for the establishment of Samgha organization and rules and regulation for settlement of monks' dispute and arrangement for monks' identity card according to Vinaya were adopted by the Congregation.

To achieve Samgha unity 1229 Baho Wunsaung Sayadaw (State Working Committee member, 27) State Mahanayaka Committee members and State Ovadacariya Sayadaw (State Advisors Committee) were elected from different sects to handle Samgha affairs of the country. At present, there is no rival Samgha Mahanayaka Committee with different levels of Samgha Organizations. Theoretically every Samgha is under the authority of State Samgha Organizations. Except the nine sects who are represented in State Samgha Organization, other sects are not allowed. The paper will elaborate success of State Mahanayaka Committee in carrying out the tasks of purification, perpetuation and promotion of Sasana during its thirty-one years of existence.

Since its formation in 1980, State *Samgha Mahānāyaka* Committee has consistently carried out its duties for the promotion of *Sāsana*. It celebrated its silver jubilee in 2005 and still exists as the most important *Samgha* Organization in Myanmar.

After gaining of its independence, the government of the Union of Myanmar enacted the Act of *Vinicchaya* Department in 1949 to settle monks' dispute in accordance with *Vinicchaya* rules. But as this act was not satisfactory to the *Samgha* in Myanmar, it was modified and enacted in the same year as *Vinicchaya* Department and *Vinicchaya* Tribunal Act. Again this act also was not effective in settling monks' disputes and supervising the monks to observe the *Vinaya* rules that the government abrogated this act in 1965.

In 1964, a conference of All *Samgha* Sects was held in *Hmawbi*, thirty miles away from Yangon. At this conference the *Samgha* drafted plans for formation of different levels of *Samgha* Organization, the settlement of monks' dispute in accordance with *Vinaya* and holding of monks' identity cards. These draft plans had not got the unanimous support of all *Samgha* in Myanmar and never go into effect only with the authority of the *Samgha*. Therefore, Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs laid down temporary plan by which monks' disputes were to be settled by four means.

In 1979, after consultation and setting advice from distinguished *Sayadaw*, Department of Religious Affairs submitted a draft plan for settlement of Monks' disputes in accordance with *Vinaya* rules to the Government. In reply the Government gave guidance to the Ministry which consisted of following points:

- Make rules for the settlement of monk's disputes by *Samgha* Tribunal
- In carrying out this plan the government should not act without the consent of the *Samgha*
- *Samgha* affairs should be handled by the *Samgha* themselves.

Therefore, Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs tried to call for a Conference of All *Samgha* Sects in Myanmar for the purification perpetuation and promotion of *Sāsana*. The conference was to be held at *Kabaaye* Hillock, Yangon, for three days starting from 25 May 1980. Preparation for convening the conference started from 22 September 1979.

At that time according to official statistics there were nine sects, 43677 monasteries and 109032 monks (excluding novices) in Myanmar.

In accordance with the principle that *Samgha* affairs must be handled by the *Samgha* officials from Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs supplicated the distinguished *Sayadaw* to select sixty-six *Wunsaung Sayadaw* (Working Committee Members) on the basis of the region and sect to prepare for the forthcoming conference of All *Samgha* Sects in Myanmar. Therefore respective *Sayadaw* elected Sixty-Six *Wunsaung Sayadaw* consisted of five representative *Sayadaw* from *Shwegyin Nikāya*, one representative *Sayadaw* from *Mula Dvāra* Sect, two representative *Sayadaw* from *Mahā Dvāra* Sect, five representative *Sayadaw* from *Ayeyarwaddy* Division, Six representative *Sayadaw* from Shan States, eight representative *Sayadaw* from Yangon Division, three representative *Sayadaw* from *Rakhine* State, two representative *Sayadaw* from Mon State, eight representative *Sayadaw* from *Magwe* Division, four representative *Sayadaw* from *Bago* Division, two representative *Sayadaw* from *Tanintharyi* Division, eight representative *Sayadaw* from *Sagaing* Division, one representative *Sayadaw* from *Chin Hill* Division, two representative *Sayadaw* from *Kayin* State, one representative *Sayadaw* from *Kayah* State, and two representative *Sayadaw* from *Kachin* State.

All the elected Sixty-six *Wunsaung Sayadaw* arrived at *Jambudipa* Hall of Residence in *Kabaaye* Pagoda Compound on 31 March 1980.

Minister of Home and Religious Affairs supplicated the Sixty-six *Wunsaung Sayadaw* to prepare for successful convening of Conference of All *Samgha* Sects in *Myoma* in order to get confirmation of the plans dealing with four subjects at the conference. The four subjects were:-

1. To draw constitution which will pave the way for formation of different levels of *Samgha* Organization which will supervise the *Samgha* to live in accordance with *Vinaya* rules?
2. To write ways and means to settle monks' disputes in accordance with *Vinaya* rules.
3. To draw plans for holding *Samgha* identification card in order to remove bogus monks who enter monkhood without proper ordination.

4. To draw plans for fulfillment of fundamental requirements recommended by the conference.

To help *Wunsaung Sayadaw* to carry out the mission relating to purification, perpetuation and promotion of *Sāsana* without worry and hardship the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs formed nine supportive lay committees. Out of Sixty-six *Wunsaung Sayadaw*, *Bago Myoma Sayadaw* as elected as the President, *Pyapou Taikthit Sayadaw* and *Shwegyin Visudayon Sayadaw* as Vice-Presidents *Taungthamantaik Sayadaw* as Secretary, *Bonbyan Sayadaw* and *Ledi Sayadaw* as Joint Secretaries. Advisory committee consisted of *Three Tipitakadhara Baṇḍagārika* (monks who can memories the whole *Tipitaka* Texts) was formed. *Wunsaung Sayadaw* formed Sub-Committees and wrote fundamental Principle governing the *Samgha* Councils, procedure for settlement of monks' disputes in accordance with *Vinaya*. For guiding the conference, sub-committee for Reviewing the Representatives, Sub-committee for co-ordination for Co-ordination and Sub-committee for Arranging Programs and Documentation, and Sub-Committee for Reviewing the motions (Proposals).

One thousand, two hundred and thirty-five (1235) monks representatives from whole of Myanmar arrived at Pabbavideha Hall of Residence, Kabaaye, Yangon, on 22 May 1980 to attend the conference on Sasana Purification, Perpetuation and Promotion. The First Conference on All Samgha Sects of Myanmar for purification, Perpetuation and Promotion of Sasana was held inside Mahapasana Cave where Sixth Buddhist Council was held. Out of 1235 eligible Samgha representative 1226 members attended the conference. At the meeting, Shwehintha Sayadaw, Abhidajamaharathaguru, gave the opening speech. In his speech he expressed his wish that those monk representatives who attended the conference on behalf of more than one thousand Samgha bhikkhu in Myanmar should be able to point out the ways to make Sasana thriving in Myanmar.

Then the Chairman of the Conference, Bago Myoma Sayadaw delivered his speech. In his speech he said that this was unprecedented moment in the history of Sasana since independence when monk representatives from all sects in Myanmar united in their objectives for purification, perpetuation and promotion of Sasana. He was delighted for this unity of purpose. He also said that this conference of all sects of Samgha in Myanmar was held with the consent of all Samgha in Myanmar. The Participants must discuss and coordinate ways and means to carry out purification, perpetuation and promotion Sasana with good intention for flourishing of Buddha Sasana.

In the afternoon session Bhanddhanta Vannasiri from Thanthyin proposed his motion for fundamental principles of Samgha Organization in the Union of Myanmar. In the motion he stated that all Theravada Bhikkhu Samgha in Myanmar accepted Tipitaka revised and purified by Six Buddhist Councils and they were the genuine sons of the Buddha and observe the same Vinaya rules. Although Samgha was united by nature because of lack of support by temporal authority many sects came into existence. As a result of proliferation of sects supervision and control of Samgha became and there appeared monks who were beyond the control of *Mahā Theras*. They were like *Sabbatta Bhikkhu* who claimed freedom of action from *Vinaya* rule after seven days of the demise of the Buddha and there appeared monks who claimed the independence of their monasteries without regard to any authority. There were also monks who entered monkhood without proper ordination. Therefore a command and control system was needed in order to remove the erratic monks and to discipline those monks who did not live in accordance with *Vinaya*. Throughout Myanmar (Pre-colonial) history the monks adopted the system of control by *Thathanabaing* (Primate), *Gaingchok*, *Gasngoak* and *Gainghtauk* in harmony with the ruler. Now *Samgha Wunsaung Aptwe* appointed by the *Samgha* of the whole

country has laid down the system of different levels of *Samgha* Organization in harmony with the administration of the country.

The next motion was proposed by *Bhamo Sayadaw* from Mandalay concerning procedure for settlement of monks' disputes in accordance with the *Vinaya*. Then *Bhaddanta Nyanavamsa* proposed the motion relating to monks' identity card. Monk representatives from different regions discussed and supported the fundamental principles governing *Samgha* Organization in Myanmar.

The All *Samgha* Sects conference for the purification, Perpetuation and promotion of *Sāsana* continued its second day on 25 May 1980. Monk Representatives from different regions continued the discussion on fundamental principles governing the formation of different levels of *Samgha* organization. Eight *Sayadaw* from different sects and fourteen *Sayadaw* from different regions supported the motion and the conference passed the motion.

Then in accordance with the fundamental principle for *Samgha* Organization in Myanmar *Samgha Wunsaung Sayadaw* elected 299 State *Baho Wunsaung Aphwa* (Central Working Committee similar to Member of Parliament).

The third day session of the First Conference of All *Samgha* Sects continued on 26 May 1980 attended by 1218 *Samgha* representatives. The Conference was chaired by *Paikkyone Sayadaw* and *Mahā Dvāra* Sect leader *Bhaddanta Khemāwuda* acted as secretary. The Conference confirmed the list of State *Baho Wunsaung Sayadaw* who were selected on the basis of sect, region and division. The conference adjourned owing to holding of the first State *Baho Wunsaung* Committee.

The first State *Baho Wunsaung* Committee meeting was held in the morning of the same day. It was chaired by *Shwehintha Sayadaw* of *Sagaing (Abhidajamharatthaguru)* and was attended by 299 State *Baho Wunsaung* Committee members. In his address the Chairman said that the members attending this meeting were carefully selected from different levels of *Samgha* organizations and they had to implement practically the plan for purification perpetuation and promotion of *Sāsana*. He earnestly requested that like great missionary *Mahakasatha* the State Central Working Committee member must play an important role in the history of *Sāsana* to preserve *Sāsana* in its pristine purity regardless of self-interest and personal hardship.

Then *Bago Myoma Sayadaw* was elected as the Chairman of the State Central working Committee and *Shwehintha Tawya Sayadaw* and *Taungthamantaik Pathein Sayadaw* were elected as Vice-Chairmen. *Mingon Sayadaw Vicittasārābhivamsa (Tipitakadharadhamma-bhaṇḍāgārika)* was chosen as Secretary. *Bhaddanta Khumaruda* and *Bhaddanta Vaṇṇasiri* were elected as Joint Secretaries. In accordance with the fundamental principles of *Samgha* Organization one Chairman *Sayadaw*, two Vice-Chairman *Sayadaw*, one Secretary *Sayadaw*, two Joint Secretary *Sayadaw* of the State Central Working Committee automatically held the same positions in state *Samgha Mahānāyaka* Committee (committee somewhat similar to the cabinet). Then twenty-seven members *Sayadaw* were elected from *Baho Wunsaung* Committee members as members of the State *Samgha Mahānāyaka* Committee.

On the same day the first meeting of State *Samgha Mahānāyaka* Committee was held in the meeting room of *Jambudipa* Hall of Residence in *Kabaaye* Pagoda Compound. This meeting in turn elected State *Ovadacariya Sayadaw* (Advisory and Guiding Committee of *Mahā Theras*) which consisted of 81 members *Sayadaw*. In order to carry out the full time duties of State Central Working Committee, members of the State *Samgha Mahānāyaka* were divided into three groups, each group of eleven members worked for four months. Each group has to report what they had done to 33 member State *Samgha Mahānāyaka* Committee meeting in every four months.

and get confirmation of their decisions. Later the member of members of State *Samgha Mahānāyaka* Committee was expanded to 47 members.

As a result of Conference of All *Samgha* Sects of Myanmar in 1980, three major *Samgha* Organizations came into existence to take care of *Samgha* affairs and to carry out the task of purification, perpetuation and promotion of *Sāsana*. Those three *Samgha* Organizations are:-

1. State *Ovadacariya* Committee (81 Members)
2. State *Baho Wunsaung* Committee (299 members)
3. State *Samgha Mahānāyaka* Committee (47 members)

Here are some of the achievements of *Samgha* Organizations for the purification, perpetuation and promotion of *Sāsana*:-

- Supervision of *Samgha* to live in accordance with *Vinaya* rules
- Settlement of monks' disputes in accordance with *Vinaya* rules
- Punishment of those monks and layman who hold heterodox doctrine against Theravada *Tipitaka* texts.
- Suppression of bogus monks and erratic monks
- Putting every monks under the authority of *Samgha* organization
- Holding of *Samgha* identity cards by every monk
- Holding of *Tipitakadhara* examination and *Pāḷi* examinations
- Establishment of two State *Pariyatti Sāsana* Universities
- Establishment of missionary monasteries in border regions
- Establishment of International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University
- Holding of World Buddhist Summit in 2004
- Compilation of *Pāḷi*-Myanmar dictionary (24 Volumes)

At present the member of monks grows to more than 500,000 including novices. Despite the growing members *Samgha* affairs are well taken care of *Samgha* Organizations with the support of government authority. With the generous material support of laity and government, State and *Samgha* relations are complementary to each other and are functioning well in Myanmar.