

The Most Venerable Vicittasārābhivaṃsa and His Contributions to the
Pariyatti Sāsana: A Brief Study of the Emergence of the Traditional
Tipiṭakadhara Examinations and Two Modern Sāsana Universities in
Post Independent Myanmar

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Since the Bagan period in Myanmar history (11th to 13rd Century) monasteries have been the centers of scriptural learning. Successive Myanmar Kings, as promoter of Buddhism, held Pāḷi examinations that there appeared generation of Buddhist monk scholars up to present time. Because of the strong Pāḷi scholarship, Myanmar was able to produce Tipiṭakadhara title holder who could commit the whole Tipiṭaka text to their memories. Without the Tipiṭaka title holder Myanmar would not be able to convene the Fifth Buddhist Council (1871) and the Sixth Buddhist Council (1954). The story of Tipiṭaka examinations should be explained in the context of Pariyatti Sāsana in Myanmar.

Despite the thriving of Buddha Sāsana under Myanmar kings, it suffered a setback under British colonialism. In response to British colonialism, both monks and laymen kept the Pariyatti Sāsana alive by holding private Pāḷi examinations throughout the country. Without the effective support of government authority Sāsana could not prosper. Purity of Saṃgha and Tipiṭaka texts is also impossible.

After gaining independence from the British in 1948, Myanmar government tried to revive Buddha Sāsana by holding Pāḷi examinations. Buddha Sāsana Council to hold the Pāḷi Examination on government behalf. In order to show that the government is the patron of Buddhism and the country became stable after long year of colonialism and civil war Myanmar Government planned to hold Sixth Buddhist Council in 1952. Convening of Saṃgāyanā (Buddhist Council) required Tipiṭakadhara Sayadaw who played a vital role in purifying and editing the Tipiṭaka texts. Hence Buddha Sāsana Council held the Tipiṭakadhara examination in order to produce one Tipiṭakadhara title holder who is going to lead the Buddhist Council.

The aims and objectives of the Tipiṭakadhara Selection Examination are as follows:

- (1) To have genius persons with great wisdom appear in the Buddha Sāsana;
- (2) To support the Pariyatti Sāsana with highest honor; and
- (3) To have Tipiṭakadharas title holders who can memorize the whole Pāḷi

Piṭaka Texts. ¹

A candidate for the Tipiṭakadhara Examination must have the following qualifications:-

Shall be a monastic, bhikkhu or samaṇera, but not a lay person.

Shall have passed Pali Pathamapyan (Pathmagyi) or Cetiyaṅgaṇa student-course or Sakyasiha student-course shall be endowed with respectable personality, pasādika guṇa and Shall abide by the rules and regulations prescribed by Tipiṭakadhara Ovacariya Committee.²

The Tipiṭaka Examination usually lasts 33 days of oral and written testing, perhaps the longest event of an examination in the world. Every day a candidate is required to recite from memory the text contained about 150 pages in good diction without any prompts from his personal examiner.³ A full-fledged Tipiṭakadhara title holder must be able to recite by heart the following prescribed number of pages from the Tipiṭaka texts:

Two Vinaya Pāḷi texts	-	851 pages,
Three Vinaya Pāḷi texts	-	1409 pages
Three Suttanta Pāḷi texts	-	779 pages
Five Abhidhamma Pāḷi texts	-	1390 pages
Two Abhidhamma Pāḷi texts	-	3597 pages
Total	-	8026 pages

The above-mentioned 5 parts may be tried, each in one year, with the requirement that sitting for written examination will be allowed only after the recitation from memory concerned has been successful, and tackling one part shall follow the success in the former part. Trying the parts at random is not allowed.

The life of Tipiṭakadhara, Ven. Vicittsarābhivaṃsa cannot be separated with the appearance of Tipiṭakadhara Examination. Ven. Vicittsarābhivaṃsa was the first promising candidate for Tipiṭakadhara title. Born in Upper Myanmar in 1911, he passed the different levels of Pāḷi examinations with flying colors, especially the Pāḷi Dhammacariya examination of Sakyasiha Association, very prestigious and difficult examination in Myanmar. He passed both the oral and written examination of Tipiṭakadhara in Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidhamma with distinctions. It took him four years to pass the Tipiṭakadhara examination stage by stage committing 8,026 pages to his memory. He also passed the written examination with distinctions. His successful completion of the Tipiṭakadhara examination paved the way for successful convening of the

¹ The History of Buddha Sāsānānuggha Association, 1958. p. 61.

² U Aung Thein Nyunt, A Study of Tipitakadhara Selection Examination in Myanmar (1948- 2007), 2007, p. 146.

³ Ibid.

Sixth Buddhist Council. Even before the Sixth Buddhist Council the Most Ven. Vicittasarābhivaṃsa purified the Tipiṭaka texts comparing with different versions. He also edited commentaries and sub-commentaries with his remarks and gave them to State Buddha Sāsana Council which was preparing for the holding of the Sixth Buddhist Council.⁴

When the Sixth Buddhist Council was held the Most Ven. Vicittasarābhivaṃsa became an important member of Chaṭṭha Saṃgāyanā Visodhaka (Saṃgha Editorial Board).⁵ He tried to settle differences between Myanmar monks and Sri Lanka Monks on doctrinal points in Tipiṭaka texts. As Saṃgāyanā is the unanimous recitation of Tipiṭaka texts by all the participating monks each text has to be purified and edited before the recitation. The monks had to verify which text was preached by the Buddha and when it was preached and why. Only when consensus was reached among the monks, the texts were recited. In such process two persons played a vital role. One person was the questioner and the other person was answerer. The questioner asked the question by heart, so did the answerer in the midst of Saṃgha audience.⁶

After the Sixth Buddhist Council, Tipiṭaka examination are continued to be held by the Ministry of Religious Affair under the guidance of the State Mahānayaka Committee up to present day. Despite the high dropout rate, Myanmar monks are enthusiastic to sit for the Tipiṭaka Examination. Within more than fifty years only 12 monks passed both oral and written examinations and hold the Tipiṭakadhara titles. They are-

Ven. Vicittasarabhivaṃsa (1950-1953)

Ven. Neminda (1954-1959)

Ven. Kosalla (Pyay)(1955-1963)

Ven. Sumangalaṅkara (Yangon) (1968-1973)

Ven. Sirindabhivaṃsa (Yaw) (1970-1984)

Ven. Varamindabhivamsa (Yesagyo)(1980-1994)

Ven. Silankhandabhivaṃsa (Mawlamyaingkyun) (1985-1999)

Ven. Vamsapalalaṅkara (Myinmu) (1985- 1999)

Ven. Gandamalalaṅkara (Myingyan) (1987-2000)

Ven. Sundara (Myaning) (1984-2003)

Ven. Indapala (Yanbye) (1983-2003)

Ven. Abhijatabhivamsa (Sagaing) (1995-2011)⁷

The government and the laity greatly honored and venerated these brilliant and learned monks. Myanmar is the only Theravada Buddhist country which still

⁴ Dr. Toe Hla, Hnahse-yarzu-ei-maha-luthar (The Superman of 20th Century) (in Myanmar), Universities Historical Research Department, 2004. P 136.

⁵ Dr. Myat Myat Htun, The Study of Sixth Buddhist Council, 2006. p 123.

⁶ Ibid. p. 131.

⁷ Dr. Tin Aung Aye. Tipitakadhara Sasanavamsa, University Press, 2006. P. 236.

holds the tradition of oral recitation of Tipiṭaka texts by heart. At his Narada Monastery in Mingun, in Upper Myanmar, the Most Ven. Vicittasarābhivaṃsa trained the prospective younger generation of the Tipiṭakadhara title holders.

The Most Ven. Vicittasarābhivaṃsa's effort for promotion of Pariyatti Sāsana did not end with the training of future Tipiṭakadhara title holders. He made tireless efforts to establish two Pariyatti Sāsana Universities, one in Yangon and one in Mandalay, with the 500 monk students in each University. All Saṃgha Sects Congregation in Yangon in 1980 laid down the guide lines for two newly established Sasana Universities.⁸ There are:

To carry out on a grand scale the work of purifying, perpetuating and propagating the Teachings of the Buddha in accordance with the wishes of over one thousand bhikkhu representatives of all gaṇas.

To help develop the following qualities for bhikkhus stipulated by the first All-Gaṇa Saṃgha Convention:

High moral standard;

A wide knowledge of the Piṭaka Texts;

Proficiency in Pāḷi, and Good skill in written Myanmar.

To turn out a generation of bhikkhus capable of doing Buddhist missionary work both at home and abroad and particularly to cultivate in them the kind of missionary spirit that enables them to endure hardships in any urban or rural communities among people, rich or poor.

To make the Teachings of the Buddha accessible to all mankind for relief and cure of their physical and mental pains, unhappiness and worries.

In order to promote Pariyatti Education State Mahānayaka Committee which was formed by 1980 All Saṃgha Sects Congregation formed Pariyatti Education Project (University) Committee. The Committee consisted of learned Mahā Theras. Reviewing the experience of Sāsana Universities in other Theravada countries, the Committee drew a plan for establishing Sāsana Universities in order to purify perpetuate and promote Theravada Buddhism inside the country and aboard. Faculty members, mostly monks were carefully recruited and trained in Tipiṭaka texts and other related secular subjects for general knowledge. The core subjects namely Vinaya, Suttanta and Abhidhamma were taught both in traditional and modern methods.

Modern method of teaching Pāḷi language is quite different from the traditional one used at the monasteries. It is easy and the student can pick up the language quickly. This method is also used at the Oriental Department of the Yangon University and it is based on linguistics. Because of both methods, monk-students at Sāsana Universities enhance the knowledge about the Buddhist

⁸ Ven. Dr. Paṇḍitavarābhivaṃsa, A Brief History of the Establishment of State Pariyatti Sāsana University, 2007. 59-60.

scriptures.

So as to enable the student monks to study Buddhism from critical and analytical point of view as in world-class university the curriculums were carefully drawn by learned Mahāthera and scholars to fulfill the requirements of a qualified lecturer. The curriculums were heavily concentrated on canonical texts and also include modern subjects and English. The post graduate curriculum aims at further deepening of Pāḷi Tipiṭaka texts and research in Buddhist studies.

In addition to Tipiṭaka texts, monk-students at Sāsana Universities have to learn Pāḷi, Myanmar language, English and Missionary methods. As far as Myanmar Language was concerned monk-students study also Myanmar literature, namely, poems, verses and epigraphy. Sanskrit is also taught to help better understanding of Pāḷi. The language study at the university fulfills one of the requirements for excellence in Myanmar language.

University Act was drawn and recognized by the State Saṃgha Mahānayaka Committee. The two governing bodies namely University Central Administrative Board and Central Education Board were formed by the State Saṃgha Mahānayaka Committee in accordance with the University Act. Those student monks the Pāḷi Examination (Grade-III) can join as the first year student and it took four years to complete Dhammacariya, lectureship examination equivalent to B.A. If he is qualified he can proceed to Mahādhammacariya (M.A) which is a research degree. Both undergraduate and graduate monks have to go to the border areas to do missionary works before they are conferred their degrees. In order to get meditation practice (Paṭipatti) the monk students have to practice meditation at Mahasi Meditation Centre. Once a student is graduated from State Sāsana University he is qualified to teach at the monasteries or to do missionary works both inside and outside the country. Since the two Sāsana Universities are residential Universities, the student monks stay at their halls of residence. They do not have to go for alms round in the morning so that they get more time to concentrate on their studies. The funding comes mainly from the Government and the donors.

The two State Sāsana Universities has already celebrated their Silver Jubilee on (15.8.2011). During its twenty-five-year existence (1302) monks got their Dhammacariya (B.A.), (270) monks got their Mahādhammacariya (M.A.) and (3) monks got his Ph.D. With strong Faculty member, excellent curriculum and good facilities, the two Universities are on their way to become world-class Universities.

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