

S Ā S A N Ā is a Pali loan word used by the old Burmese for religion, especially that of the Buddha and for the year of the religion reckoned from the death of the Buddha. There are traces of many other religions besides Buddhism. Of the many types of Buddhism, which existed the type which modern Burmese called the pure *Theravāda*, was the most popular. As a matter of fact, Buddhism in those days was far from pure if we still insist on using the word 'pure'. Buddhism during Buddha's lifetime would be considered in a sense pure but as time went by it was modified to suit the time and place. Burma is no exception to this rule. I would like to add another statement: Buddhism during the period under survey was not different from the Buddhism of present day Burma. It was however much more tolerant as it allowed the presence of *Bhikkhuni* - female ascetics, in the Order. According to the *Sāsanavaṃsa* of *Paññāsāmi* written in 1861, it was Lower Burma known as *Rāmañña* which received the Religion first. Perhaps it dates back to the very lifetime of the Buddha. Then in A.B. 235, *Sona* and *Uttara* led a mission to *Rāmañña* known then as *Suvaṇṇabhūmi* which is partly on the southern edge of Mount *Kelāsa*.¹ Unfortunately the Rock Edicts of Asoka² do not mention this mission. Tradition, however, maintains that henceforth Thaton was the centre from which the Religion spread up country³.

The conquest of Thaton in 1057 by *Aniruddha* resulted, it is said, in the introduction of *Theravāda* Buddhism to Central Burma. Unfortunately there is no contemporary evidence to support this famous episode. The Siamese say that it was from Nakorn Pat'om (not from Thaton) that *Aniruddha* got his Buddhism⁴. Nevertheless the spread of the 'seals' of *Aniruddha* from Twante in the south to the Irrawaddy - Shweli junction in the north supports the fact that with the centre at Pagan, *Aniruddha* expanded north and south and in this general sweep Thaton was included. His attack on the southern lands was not motivated, as alleged, by religion alone. It was pure aggression. It is doubtful whether Thaton was the home of *Theravāda* Buddhism and whether it reached Pagan only after the aforesaid conquest. When the Burmese

* Read at the Kanthasanelai Group meeting on 13 VII 1958 with Professor G.H.Luce in the Chair

1. 97°6' E & 17°13' N

2. V and XIII

3. GPC, para. 131, p. 74

4. D.G.E. Hall: *A History of South-East Asia*, p. 124

came into the plains of Burma in the 9th century A.D. they first met the Mon who were Buddhists in Kyaukse district.⁵ It is not unlikely that they converted the Burmans to Buddhism. It is also possible that the Pyu were one of their early religious preceptors. Gold leaf manuscripts⁶ unearthed at or near the site of *Sriksetra* strongly suggest that the Pyu's knowledge of Buddhism was by no means slight.⁷ One might even assume that Pali Buddhism had thrived at *Sriksetra* and that after its fall towards the close of the 8th century the centre moved north to Halingyi which again fell early in the 9th century. Thus it was left to the Burmans to foster it a century or two later. It seems that the Pyu and the Burman mixed freely until the Pyu were absorbed. Excavations at the Petlaik Pagoda, which is generally attributed to *Aniruddha* revealed some mouldings of older structure beneath. It shows that Buddhist buildings existed at Pagan before *Aniruddha*⁸ and a considerable portion, if not all, of the Burmans were already Buddhists before the said conquest of Thaton. From the inscriptions of *Thiluin Man's* reign⁹ we know the extent to which Buddhism was modified to fulfil the requirements of the time and how tolerant it was of the existence of other beliefs and practices.

In the great Shwezigon inscription¹⁰ we have the eulogy of the king who shall rule Pagan after A.B. 1630 (A.D. 1086). According to it the principal religion then practised was Buddhism, but there are references to other religions as well. The king professed himself to be a Buddhist, but he allowed himself to be declared a reincarnation of Vishnu¹¹. Evidently this is due to the influence of Brahmanism. With the help of *Mahāthera Arahan*, the king tried to restore Buddhism to its original form, that is to say, to have it conform as much as possible to the scriptures.¹² The inscription says that Buddhism prospered¹³ but it is surprising to note that orthodoxy went side by side with religious toleration.¹⁴ To them 'heretical' did not mean non-Buddhistic as a modern Burman thinks, but it only means non-conformity with one's own scriptures, whether Buddhistic, Brahmanistic or otherwise. The king's religious zeal is also explained in another inscription¹⁵. He built a pagoda called *Jayabhūmi* to the northeast of Pagan, collected and made perfect the copies of the *Piṭaka*, sent men, money and material to effect repairs at Bodh Gaya, offered the four necessities to the monks often and converted a foreign prince (Coḷa) to Buddhism. In spite of his religious zeal shown above, his palace inscription of A.D. 1101-2¹⁶ shows a mixed

5. Pl. 38b⁶, Pl. 205¹²⁻¹⁷, Pl. 212⁴ and
Ep. Birm. III, i, pp. 70-3

6. *Ep. Ind.* V, 101-2; *ASB* 1938-9,
17-22

7. N. Ray: *Therāvada Buddhism in
Burma*, 84

8. *ASI*, 1906-7, 38-9

10. *Ep. Birm.* I, ii, pp 90-130

11. *Ibid.* A /46. 114

12. *Ibid.* 117

13. *Ibid.* 121

14. *Ibid.* 127

15. *Ibid.* 153-68

16. *Ep. Birm.* III, i, G/35,41,43