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The Burmese Alms-Boycott:
Theory and Practice of the *Pattanikujjana*
in Buddhist Non-Violent Resistance

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The Burmese Alms-Boycott: Theory and Practice of the *Pattanikujjana* in Buddhist Non-Violent Resistance¹

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Abstract

This essay presents a general and critical historical survey of the Burmese Buddhist alms-boycott (*pattanikujjana*) between 1990 and 2007. It details the Pāli textual and ethical constitution of the boycott and its instantiation in modern Burmese history, particularly the Saffron Revolution of 2007. It also suggests a metaethical reading that considers Buddhist metaphysics as constitutive of that conflict. Non-violent resistance is contextualized as a soteriologically transcendent (“nibbanic”) project in the common life of believing Buddhists—even those who, military regime and martyred monastics alike, defend a fidelity to

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Theravāda Buddhism from dual divides of a political and humanistic fence.

Text and Theory

In 2001 the scholar of Engaged Buddhism Christopher Queen suggested that “most Buddhists today, including those who are socially and politically engaged, are loath to challenge leaders, governments, and institutions that have the power to inflict or relieve social suffering” (15). Where Queen emphasizes a political quietism that is still truer of the Buddhist *sangha*, as renunciants, only six years after his comment³ the world witnessed in the Saffron Revolution of Burma an example of Buddhist monastic defiance of power that must surely reconfigure Queen’s generally valid conclusion.

In the texts and traditions of Theravāda Buddhism, it is not often that the idea, and especially an act, of defiance is valorized as a worthy one. There is renunciation, repudiation and denial, but these are generally denials of *the self* from the pitfalls of samsaric attachment. They are not condemnations of those things per se, but a self-imposed removal from them. It could almost be said that Theravada Buddhism, in particular, grounds itself on a systematic series of such denials: of worldly life, of the entrapments of greed, desire, power, hatred, wealth, gain, blame. Then on a more subtle level, there is also a resistance to the reifying tendency of the mind to misconstrue the nature of the self as inherently existing.

The Buddhist adept chooses not to engage with these externalized forms of craving. The onus is always returned onto the

³ Published in 2003, Queen’s paper was first delivered in 2001.

responsibility, control and denial of the egoic self, not an elimination of its misleading worldly objects. By extension, the Theravāda *sangha* is disallowed any direct political actions or judgments. Buddhism is therefore (ostensibly) quietist: its judgments are made reflexively; it leaves the option of mutual coexistence on the existential table. Buddhism never had its Inquisition (so far as the written and other record allows us to believe). The Buddha's first concern was to understand and end suffering by interrogating deluded notions of the self, rather than the deluded structures of social organization that self gives rise to. The site for transformation, or even redemption, is "in here," rather than "out there."

Yet there are, striking for their comparative rarity, instances of the extension of self-denial, to a *denial of the other*. Yet just as strikingly, such denials maintain the quietism of the general relation to the civil polity by grounding themselves, almost always, in non-violence.⁴ Perhaps the most spectacular Buddhist example in recent times of such an extension into civil resistance can be seen in the so-called Saffron Revolution of August-September 2007.⁵

⁴ Juliane Schober's essay "Buddhism, Violence and the State in Burma (Myanmar) and Sri Lanka" (undated, see References, below) contests this received popular (and) Buddhist representation by detailing the historical divergences it has taken in South-East Asian Buddhist cultures, from both sides of a monastic and (quasi-)secular lay divide. The cases in which Buddhist legitimacy has been co-opted by repressive regimes (especially in Burma but also Sri Lanka) at the acquiescence of Buddhist clergy is no less a significant element of this general context. I offer the general doctrinal view above as one that clarifies and provides metaethical underpinning for the ways many Burmese Buddhists in the modern period have acted and how they have legitimated it in terms of Buddhist observances. Schober's qualifying emphases are however compelling and supplementary to this grounding view; both are indispensable for understanding the complexity of modern Burmese Buddhist engagement in its relation to violence in particular.

⁵ There is extensive historical precedent for the politicization of Burma's *sangha* in the colonial and modern period, but its manifestation in the form of an alms-boycott is not always a feature. Christina Fink writes that "at critical points in Burma's history, monks have felt compelled to venture farther into the realm of worldly affairs to protect their religion or to call attention to injustice. In the early 1900s, monks played a leading role

That it should, in addition, act against one of the most heinous totalitarian dictatorships of the last century is something contemporary Buddhist studies, and Buddhist identity more generally, has to come to grips with. It is a demonstration of ethical force that would seem to have all but disappeared in most forms of modern Buddhist self-representation. Considering this example in some depth will be the main focus of this paper.

It will also consider in more ethical-philosophical terms what such defiance amounts to. What I want to do initially is explore the origins and context of the act the Burmese monks actually carried out, designated with the Pali term *pattanikujjana kamma*⁶—the turning over the alms-bowl to refuse the food offerings, medicine, shelter or “noble rice” of a lay-benefactor, who is also denied the traditional ritual services of birth, death and marriage.⁷ The contemporary Burmese monk-scholar Ashin Nayaka defines it—the Burmese is *thabeik hmauk*—as “literally meaning ‘holding onto truth, self-reliance and self-mortification.’”⁸ The resonance with Gandhian *satyāgraha* is apparent here, even where it is fortuitous.

in organizing protests against the colonial government, particularly because they felt that Buddhism had been insulted [...] the lay community has often looked to the monks for leadership in their struggle against unjust governance” (226-227). Such leadership was also actively demonstrated in the major uprising of August 1988, where the Buddhist *sangha* were integral to providing communications, logistical and civil aid to the opposition movement generally. Religious status did not protect the *sangha* from retaliatory persecution including disrobings, arrests, torture and deaths in custody, yet an alms-boycott was not issued at this time.

⁶ The Burmese transliteration from the Pāli is *pahtani kozana-kan*.

⁷ The Pali Text Society translation of E.M. Hare has the *sutta* more actively recommending a turning-down of the offered lay-disciple’s bowl, rather than the monk’s own. Pali Text Society, 1965, p. 227.

⁸ Online comment of October 31st, 2007, to a web-posting on *New Mandala*: <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2007/10/20/more-academic-commentary-on-burma/>

The *Pattanikujjana Sutta* appears in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, sutta 87:7 of the Eights, and in the Vinaya (in the *Cullavagga*, V, 20) where it is also framed as a legally-binding agreement that holds the consenting *sangha* to a collective action, until it might be revoked. The *sutta* itself is a pithy catalogue of what conditions in a lay merit-gatherer qualify their exclusion from the transaction of alms via the act of *pattanikujjana* (or simply, “alms boycott”):

*aṭṭhahi bhikkhave aṅgehi samannāgatassa upāsakassa patto
nikkujjitabbo:*

bhikkhūnaṃ alābhāya parisakkati, bhikkhūnaṃ anattāya

*parisakkati, bhikkhūnaṃ avāsāya parisakkati, bhikkhū akkosati
paribhāsati,*

*bhikkhū bhikkhūhi bhedeti, buddhassa avaṇṇaṃ bhāsati,
dhammassa*

avaṇṇaṃ bhāsati, saṃghassa avaṇṇaṃ bhāsati. anujānāmi

*bhikkhave imehi aṭṭhah’ aṅgehi samannāgatassa upāsakassa
pattaṃ nikkujjitum.*

(Vinaya II, p. 125)

Monks, the bowl should be turned upside down for the lay devotee who is endowed with eight qualities: (1) if he tries for non-gain of monks, (2) if he tries for ill-being of monks, (3) if he tries for non-residence of monks, (4) if he reviles and abuses monks, (5) if he causes monks to break away from (other) monks, (6) if he speaks ill of the Buddha, (7) if he speaks ill of the Dhamma, (8) if he speaks ill of the Saṅgha. I allow you, monks, to turn the bowl

upside down for the lay devotee who is endowed with these eight qualities. [Numerals added]

These eight conditions (*aṭṭhahaṅgehi*) are given as “trying for,” or actively influencing the bhikkhu community via acts of (1) “non-gain,” or preventing intended donations from being received by them (2) “ill-being,” physically harming or worsening their condition (3) “non-dwelling,” forcibly removing them from dwellings or leaving them destitute (4) scolding and abuse (5) disuniting them (6) blaming of the Buddha Sakyamuni (7) blaming the *buddhadhamma* and (8) blaming the *sangha* themselves.

All these conditions are possible, but not sufficient, causes for a rebirth in the hell-realm; the exception however is the fifth (*saṃghabhedakakamma*, disuniting the *sangha*), which is generally accepted as one of the *ānantarya*, or “five deadly sins” that lead to an irreversible hell rebirth in the immediately next life.⁹ The other conditions in tandem with it imply a radically weakened “kammic credit,” and as corroborated by Buddhaghosa in *Sārattha-pakāsinī* (Sp. VI, 1208) only one is required to invoke the boycott. When I interviewed the activist-monks King Zero and Ashin Kovida (Kovan, 2011), as well as one of the active leaders of the Rangoon marches, U Nay Meinda, all confirmed the same. The *sutta* concludes with a listing of these conditions as ones which, if actively reversed, qualify a lay-benefactor to have the alms-bowl turned right-side up again to receive their offering. However, the revoking of the boycott requires no less than all eight (Vin. II, 126) occurring together.

An interesting variation on the *pattanikujjana* proper, reported by a number of my respondents, was for monks to receive the alms given by

⁹ This is contested. In the orthodox context it is only a monk’s performance of this infraction that qualifies it as one of the “five deadly sins” as such. A lay performance of it accrues serious karmic debt without guaranteeing the same immediate result.

morally compromised benefactors, but to otherwise dispose of them afterwards. This was jokingly referred to among my monk-respondents as a “semi-*pattanikujjana*,” and insofar as the lay donor remains unaware of it, they implied it would not then function as a true boycott. However, the monastic subtext for this practice is not so much predicated on the boycott as a form of social reform vis-à-vis the lay-benefactor (*upāsaka*), as grounded in the age-old relations obtaining within the *sangha* itself.

Anything of dubious moral provenance or of a technically “illegal” nature (as defined in the Vinaya) donated or obtained by a monk of questionable moral standards, becomes an object of suspicion. While lacking circumstantial proof of their illegitimacy, a scrupulous monk would also lack the confidence in making use of such goods, so be impelled to accept but pass them on, in practice, to the lay servants or attendants of the temple. One might wonder however whether the *kammic* effect for the *sangha* in maintaining such a discretionary duplicity toward the donor, might be worse than for the donor themselves, who at least have the minimal virtue of making an offering at all. More relevant to the contemporary case, however, is how this type of duplicity might function to justify the passivity of that large body of monks who, while supporting the *pattanikujjana* in theory, decided to receive the alms offerings of the military regime out of a greater concern, or fear, to appease the religious conscience of giver and receiver alike.

What this also tends to confirm is the ethical nature of the boycott as a lever for and protection of internal monastic discipline and moral probity, before being an active tool for social, and thus political, censure. (When I suggested an alms-boycott could otherwise be an appropriate response, for example, to a greedy village landlord or businessman, or a stingy local employer, this was denied.) Though in practice the boycott clearly requires an individual case or more to

function, all the monks I interviewed also stressed that the *pattanikujjana* was directed against the Burmese regime as a collective body: names were not named, so to speak. The final decision for the *pattanikujjana* rests on the will of the *sangha*; they are not bound to these conditions to assert it unconditionally, and it finally requires a local consensus judgment of the case. The circumstance for the alms boycott would seem to be unusual enough to be offered more as an exception case of the Vinaya code, rather than a normative procedure the *sangha* should readily enact.

The structural tension between these two functions might be seen however as having manifested, in the Saffron Revolution especially, a privileging of this latter external and political dimension, over the first internal, self-regulatory one. While the object of the boycott is censured for compromising the integrity of the *sangha*, in more recent cases such arbitration can be seen to have over-stepped this rationale into a conscious political resistance designed to protect the (lay Buddhist and non-Buddhist) people as well as the *sangha*. In these latter cases the *sangha* felt compelled via the boycott to censure the government as *fellow Buddhists*. Those monks who did not observe the boycott were unable to morally include the power-hungry regime within the Buddhist moral economy, in which case any open disobedience would be interpreted as a form of irreligious, political defiance. This would put the safety, security and integrity of the *sangha*, as representatives of Buddhism, at risk and thereby defeat the original purpose of the *pattanikujjana*. Which of these wagers, both justified, proved the more accurate might be varyingly gauged from the tragic outcome of September 2007 itself.

The alms-boycott is then an act of both symbolic and literal power. The most harmful effect for the regime in Buddhist terms is its implied negative *kamma*, which in turn implies not merely the attenuation of merit, but more seriously the shame of compromised

rebirth. The scholar Ingrid Jordt suggests that with this “ultimate moral rebuke . . . by refusing to function as the “merit fields” in which the military can sow their future prosperity, the monks effectively removed the spiritual condition sustaining the regime’s power” (Human Rights Watch, “Resistance” 50).

It is easy for a non-Buddhist observer living outside the traditional context of Buddhist South-East Asia to underestimate the total, and totalizing, effect the defiance of the alms-boycott produces on the Buddhist psyche, however degraded it may have become. Schober makes the point (following Stanley Tambiah) that the relation that exists between the *sangha* and the governing body—where in this case the Burmese regime easily substitutes itself for the hegemony of a traditional Buddhist king¹⁰—is as deep and long-established as Buddhism itself. She writes that

Buddhist kings (*dhammaraja*) and lay people who aspired to political power or desired to attain a better rebirth participated in a ritual hegemony in which material support given to monks and religious causes was exchanged for spiritual returns in this and future lives . . . In his discussion of traditional Buddhist societies in Southeast Asia, Tambiah describes this exchange of material support for religious merit and social status as a total social fact, an all-encompassing cultural system, in which a cosmological world view encompasses politics, power, economics, history and culture. (3)

¹⁰ At least one monk in his testimony to Human Rights Watch in 2008 makes this substitution explicit, even referencing parallel events in the Buddha’s own biography to suggest its long precedence. See testimony from U Viccita (not his real name) in *Resistance*, 84.

It is no surprise, then, that from the side of the regime desperate for a seamless legitimation by inner and outer sources of esteem, not least by the *sangha* who most authoritatively deliver it, to have it curtailed or compromised is a threat to a grounding sense of self no less than its political supremacy.

Furthermore, in a country where acts of merit-making are perhaps the most conspicuous forms of Buddhist devotion, especially among the military, the *kammic* indignity of the *pattanikujjana* is more than one of religious reputation: it is a metaphysical stain that lasts. Those who suffer its effects have not merely their temporal enemies to answer to, but the impersonal workings of transworldly sin to metaphysically answer to. No amount of merit-making per se is able to reverse the results of acts of heinous abuse, though Generals Ne Win and after him Than Shwe's often excessive bursts of pagoda-building, relic-hunting and coveting, and other forms of Buddhist-ritualistic self-legitimation can be seen as efforts to bend the metaphysics of *kamma*, too, to their own will.

Unfortunately, a prestigious pedigree justifies them in their confidence here as well. Ian Harris observes that historically every victorious claimant to Buddhist kingship, with however much blood on his hands, could rationalize the stain and "envisage himself sitting firmly in the tradition of Asoka, the model of all subsequently righteous Theravāda rulers" (2). The military "kingships" of Ne Win and Than Shwe clearly sit in no less a self-righteous tradition.

Praxis: the boycotts of 1990 and 2007¹¹

Mandalay, August 1990

Following the national 1990 election that resulted in the overwhelming victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party, the regime's then-ruling body SLORC effectively dismissed the result with denial and delaying tactics. In response, monks and students (especially in Mandalay) began exerting different forms of civil disobedience in order to pressure the regime to recognize the election results.

Already pro-democratically active during the election itself, many monks in Mandalay supported a student-led commemoration of the martyrs of the 1988 uprising. In the days prior to the commemoration ceremony, monks of some large Mandalay temples had been visited by lay Buddhists affiliated with the opposition movement, inviting the *sangha* to accept alms-offerings from their community. Acting on intelligence, local authorities had quickly visited the same temples with a directive to the *sangha* not to accept any opposition-sponsored offerings. While senior monks relayed this order, numbers of junior monks disobeyed it.

Thousands of these monks gathered with tens of thousands of residents offering alms in remembrance of those killed in the infamous 8-8-88. When the military demanded that black mourning flags be lowered, a student resisted and was beaten. A monk appealed for peace but soldiers proceeded to beat the protesters, including monks, finally

¹¹ There have been two major collective acts of *pattanikujjana* in the last twenty or so years in Burma: the first in 1990, and the second during and subsequent to the Saffron Revolution of 2007. There have been other isolated cases in Burma (as well as in other countries such as among Burmese exile monks in India and Sri Lanka), but these two are the most significant in exhibiting the full extent of the boycott.

shooting into the resisting crowd; ten monks were shot, fourteen others were beaten, and at least five were arrested (*Resistance* 49).

The regime predictably blamed the “disturbance” on opposition (including monastic) aggression, and denied that any shots were fired, a patent lie designed to protect its integrity. The monks’ response was an immediate *pattanikujjana*, effective from August 27. Only once before in Burmese history had they done so, against the Burmese Communist Party in 1950 (*Resistance* 50). The alms of soldiers and their families were rejected, and for almost two months the boycott grew and deepened, spreading to other regional monastic centers across the country until on October 20th Mandalay authorities arrested and disrobed the most recalcitrant monks. Anti-government Buddhist organizations were disbanded, and the military raided over a hundred Mandalay monasteries.

Local military commanders were vested with the powers of martial law, enabling them to disrobe, imprison or execute monks at their own discretion.¹² The regime had effectively quashed the boycott, and the remaining monks were again forced into receiving alms. Yet, army members and their families had been “visibly upset” by the boycott. Fink writes that “Merit-making was an essential part of their lives. If monks were not present at funerals, for instance, it was believed that merit could not be made for the dead, and they would become ghosts rather than moving on to a higher form of existence” (68).

The Mandalay boycott against the government in 1990 was essentially a response to its abuse of junior monks, rather than a conscious affiliation with the opposition movement. Moreover, with the exception of Mandalay itself, its supporters represented a minority view.

¹² The Southeast Asian Information Network (SAIN) reported the deaths in custody of four senior monks, and death sentences issued to at least one other, U Kawiya from the Mahamuni Monastery in Mandalay. (See Schober, undated, p. 17.)

Its nationwide reception among the *sangha*, including prominent and influential monks, remained divided. Its supporters found their rationale in the eight conditions for the *pattanikujjana*: by ordering *sangha* to refuse food (from the opposition sponsors) the regime breached the first act of “no gain”; mistreating and arresting them breached the second act of “ill-being”; incarcerating them breached the third act of “non-dwelling”; and disseminating false accounts of the actions of the arrested monks transgressed the fourth condition of “abusing” the *sangha*. For the minority view, these clearly were adequate reasons to declare the boycott.

On the other hand, a larger group of *sangha* (outside Mandalay) reasoned that the first given reason was unfounded insofar as the authorities had limited its refusal of alms to the opposition sponsors alone; because other benefactors were able to offer alms as normal, they offset the claim of “no gain.” Secondly, they felt that the disobedience of the junior monks was a provocation; by siding with the opposition movement in an only ostensibly religious display of loyalty, they were directly defying the government, which, if brutal, had been given cause to act. Finally, for them the shooting, beating and arrests of monks were indefensible, demonstrating the power-hunger and irreligiosity of the ruling regime. Any use of the Buddhist alms-boycott against such an intransigent aggressor could only be seen by them as a political threat, and ultimately reflect badly on the religious institution in its duty as the bastion of those values to be kept uncompromised by political motive. Is it possible to overestimate the force of the alms-boycott in this case?

The real fear of the regime at this point was a potential repetition of August 1988, a large-scale movement in which monastic and lay alike might gather for religious purposes but which might extend into the kind of public demonstrations that had occurred two years earlier. The religious boycott was a comparatively specialized, contained and

containable defiance, limited to a minority monastic group, who in any case did not challenge the majority of *sangha* who continued to receive military alms-offerings and deferred to the political authority. Unsurprisingly then, the regime effectively ignored the boycott through September and into late-October, 1990.

It then appears that a source within the opposition movement was able to deliver a video record of the original August events in Mandalay, via a senior disciple, to the Venerable Vicittasārābhivamsa,¹³ the General Secretary of the Sangha Mahanayaka Council. Having seen this footage of the brutality meted out to junior monks in Mandalay, the General Secretary refused to receive the Senior General Saw Maung for a lunch offered by him to the Council. (Indeed Saw Maung made open reference to this refusal in a speech published in state media.) It appears that this sequence of events was the catalyst for the regime's crackdown in late-October.¹⁴

Far from being moved by the defiance of the *pattanikujjana*, it might be seen that the regime was responding to the transgression of an age-old division of powers between the Buddhist order, the State Sangha Mahanayaka Council (hereafter SSMC), and the political authority, formed over decades of successive governments. By respecting a code of non-interference, the Buddhist institution was able to sustain an unusual autonomy. While unable to vote, work for a wage, maintain business or enroll in secular education programs, the *sangha* was absolved from paying taxes, free of police or secular judicial control, and self-

¹³ The Secretary General, as the head of the State Sangha Mahanayaka Council, was distinguished in specifically Buddhist ways: as the first ever *Tipiṭakhadara* (or “one who has memorized the entire Canon”), a former leader of the Sixth Buddhist Council, and the founder of the State Pariyatti Sasana Universities. As the national representative of the Order for the public as much as the regime, his religious eminence played all the more into his repudiation of General Saw Maung and the regime.

¹⁴ Venerable Pandita is gratefully acknowledged as the source for this information.

determined in terms of all educational and legal questions by virtue of the internal Vinaya code and its own forms of self-regulation.

The SSMC therefore serves as the regulative point between the secular-political and religious bodies, and was expected to maintain the distinction between them without fail, keeping its own order over a large, powerful Order that the regime would be little able to understand or control on its own terms. It is this element of control that might have worked to the benefit of the regime if they had claimed the August conflict in Mandalay the result of an unruly over-reaction of young soldiers, just as the junior monks were disobeying their religious elders, rather than lying so blatantly as to deny the fact of shots having been fired. It was this last false self-defense that angered the general monastic body still more, and bolstered the outrage issuing in the boycott.

Finally, the defiance of the Venerable Vicittasārābhivamsa as the figurehead of the SSMC would have signaled the key suspicion that the regime was threatened not merely by a disobedient *sangha*, but by its ostensible leadership as well. The affront here was political; the alms-boycott was perhaps mainly a means to consolidate that suspicion. The SSMC itself appears to have understood the regime in these terms; its Secretary General even reversed his former disdain for the regime, earning him among some junior monks the epithet “General Tipiṭaka.” Nevertheless, the seeds for further revolt had now been planted for the more extensive boycott of September 2007.

Saffron Revolution, August-September, 2007

One of the immediate effects of the Mandalay events was the realization among the senior *sangha* that their priority would henceforth be to successfully co-exist with and survive the regime, if not to reform it: hence the reversal of the General Secretary of the SSMC, as well as the

conspicuous absence of many of the most prominent monastic figures of the 1990 boycott from that of 2007, which leadership was left to relatively untried monks such as Ashin Issariya and Ashin Gambira, among others. The crucial difference between the older cohort of leading monks and these younger leaders was the essentially political stance of the latter. The relation between religion and political action implicit in their view can be summarized by a statement of Penang Sayadaw:

What is politics? The matters concerning with the nation. How can the religion be prosperous if the nation is in a poor state? A nation is like a house while the religion is like a resident in that house. If the house is in ruins and inhabitable, how can the resident move around and survive in it?¹⁵

It is clear that the ill-treatment of the monks in Mandalay and the ensuing boycott had galvanized not just greater monastic awareness of national conditions with regard to the Order, but in terms of the suffering of the people generally, but the building awareness was not immediate. The next, smaller alms-boycott to occur, in Mandalay in October 2003, followed unrest between the Muslim and Buddhist communities in Kyaukse (this itself followed previous violent clashes in Mandalay between Muslims and Buddhists, as well as *sangha*, in 1997). Altogether, six monks were arrested, five of them receiving quarter-century sentences. A 600-strong monastic demonstration in response to these arrests was fired upon; three monks died immediately. Subsequent arrests and a growing monastic opposition resulted in another call for

¹⁵*An Interview with Penang Sayadaw*, 2007, p. 23. Penang Sayadaw is a Burmese monk who left Burma in 1957 to pursue missionary work, founding several Burmese temples around the world. He was also the most famous monk to publicly support the 2007 uprising, after which he founded the “SasanaMoli: International Burmese Monks Organization” to care for Burmese monks suffering inside Burma or in exile. (This source and translation courtesy of an Venerable Pandita.)

pattanikujjana, less widespread than that of 1990, or of the massive revolt that followed four years later.

The immediate cause of the 2007 uprising was the unannounced policy in mid-August of the then-ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to remove fuel subsidies. The cost of petrol and diesel rose by 100%, and that of compressed natural gas (used for buses) increased fivefold in less than a week. Most monk leaders claimed that “low living standards of the people affect the monks because we depend on the people to support us” (*Resistance* 66). Buddhist monks from monasteries in Pakokku came out into the streets in protest, chanting the *Metta Sutta*, as they would throughout the duration of the ongoing protest. They joined the student and lay political opposition only after the government response proved harshly punitive with multiple arrests and detentions.

The monastic order was resisting this latest indignity as much on behalf of the people as for themselves, effectively extending the eight conditions for the *pattanikujjana* to encompass a larger social conscience. The focus for their resistance was the well-being of the people as a whole, irrespective of their religious affiliation: Christians, Muslims and others were included in their concern.

The police response on September 5 in Pakokku was to fire warning shots and beat and forcibly disrobe three monks. A newly-formed All Burma Monk’s Alliance (ABMA) made up of some half-dozen young monks under the coordination of U Gambira and Ashin Issariya had been meeting regularly since the beginning of 2007. They issued a first statement to the SPDC on September 9 asking the junta to address four separate demands by September 17 or risk immediate boycott. These four were to (1) offer an apology to the monks for the persecution against the *sangha* in Pakokku, (2) effect an immediate reduction in commodity prices including fuel, rice, and cooking oil prices, (3) release

all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi and those detained during the current protests, and (4) begin immediate dialogue with the “democratic forces” in order “to resolve the crises and difficulties facing and suffering by the people” (Human Rights Watch, “Crackdown” 30).

The SPDC rejected all four demands and even accused the protest organizers, thus the *sangha*, of terrorist affiliations and training in bomb-production under the auspices of an unnamed U.S. organization. Senior *sangha* members largely rejected the bribery attempts of financial gifts offered by the SPDC to individual monasteries. The telecommunications networks of opposition and media offices, including those of the NLD, were dismantled, and key activists were arrested and sentenced on spurious charges. The response from the ABMA on September 14 was decisive, the call for a nationwide *pattanikujjana* issued in the following form:

Reverend clergy, may you listen to my words. The violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless kings [military leaders]—the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury—have killed a monk at Pakkoku, and also arrested reverend clergymen by trussing them up with rope. They beat and tortured, verbally abused and threatened them. The clergy who are replete with the Four Attributes [worthy of offerings, hospitality, gifts and salutation] must boycott the violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless soldier kings, the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury. The clergy also must refuse donations (of four types) and preaching. This is to inform, advise and propose.

Reverend clergy, may you listen to my words. The violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless soldier kings—the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury—

have killed a monk at Pakkoku, and also arrested reverend clergymen by trussing them up with rope. They beat and tortured, verbally abused and threatened them. Clergy replete with the Four Attributes—boycott the violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless kings, the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury. Clergy—also refuse donations and preaching. If the reverends consent and are pleased at the boycott and refusal of donations and preaching, please stay silent; if not in consent and displeased, please voice objections.

[Silence]

The clergy boycotts the violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless kings, the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury. The clergy hereby also refuses donations and preaching.. (National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma 43)

After the formal commencement of the boycott on September 17, the ABMA issued another statement on the 21st confirming the original declaration in which a Buddhist-archaic rhetoric and justified righteousness are curiously at odds with the redeeming skillful means of character reformation. It denounces the “evil, sadistic, pitiless and immensely thieving military rulers,” by intending to “banish the common enemy evil regime from Burmese soil forever” (*Crackdown* 32). This text thus implies that the *pattanikujjana* is to be open-ended and the *sangha* itself unforgiving.

Amid heavy monsoon downpours, the protests grew stronger each day, spreading across Burma, from Yangon, Sittwe, Mandalay and Sagaing all the way to Myitkyina and Bhamo in Kachin State. More than 100,000 people demonstrated in Rangoon alone, making it the largest

anti-government protest since 1988. The ABMA were central to the multiplying numbers, urging fellow *sangha* to join the resistance. U Gambira gave numerous speeches, radio interviews and spoke with the BBC. Perhaps in response to the formal alms-boycott, the authorities actually allowed the *sangha* marches to proceed almost without interference for the first few days following its announcement. The SPDC was possibly taken by surprise, reluctant to use violence against monks after the reaction in Pakokku. This, however, was short-lived, especially after massive lay-participation became evident. For about a week tens of thousands of members of the *sangha*, including nuns, joined, led, and even dominated the non-violent national protests until a decisive crackdown set in by September 26.

Ashin Issariya (aka King Zero, his pseudonym), a key leader among the ABMA relates that

On September 26 the military started shooting and beating people in the streets. Every night they entered monasteries, destroyed everything, beat the monks wildly and deported many to jail. Nobody knew which monastery would be next. No monastery was safe. (Best Friend 17)

Regime security forces began raiding monasteries at night across the country, arresting and beating monks and even shooting monks and lay people on the streets. Many monks faced little choice but to disrobe and flee for their lives. Reports stated that up to 10,000 people, among them the monks who led the protests, had been “rounded up for interrogation.” By September 28, Rangoon was under heavy curfew and was virtually deserted. The next day the internet was cut, cell-phone access nearly so, and the last marches were dying out. The crackdown continued by segregating and isolating suspect monks and groups, even dividing or disbanding whole monasteries.

In a *Washington Post* article published the same day as his arrest, November 4, U Gambira confirmed that “thousands of clergy have disappeared. Our sacred monasteries have been looted and destroyed. As darkness falls each night, intelligence units try to round up political and religious leaders” (U Gambira, 2007). Bertil Lintner and Human Rights Watch suggest that

the events of September 2007 were worse than anything that happened to the *sangha* during the British colonial period [and subsequently] . . . these events also discredited the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, the official leadership body of the *Sangha*, which lined up in support of the military government. (*Resistance* 9)

Like many other dissident monks, U Kosalla condemns the actions of the SSMC during the demonstrations and in the aftermath:

When monks were killed in 2007, they kept silent. They should have issued a statement saying that it’s unacceptable to kill or hurt monks. But they did nothing. When they at last said something on the radio and TV, they said we should not oppose the junta . . . They [the members of the SSMC] are just puppets of the regime. Even if they know something about old scriptures they haven’t got a clue how people live. They know nothing about the country in which they live (*Resistance* 90).

Another view of the SSMC would, however, emphasize its consistency in seeking to successfully survive the depredations of the regime, even where this might have meant neglecting the needs of the national population. This priority among the senior monks indeed explains their ongoing appeasement of the regime even into 2012 (with

penalties exacted against dissident monks such as Shwe Nya War Sayardaw, below).

The dissident monks clearly chose to contest this policy of appeasement, yet it is important to clarify the reasoning of the SSMC. Despite the current appearance of an opening of freedom in the country, they take a cautionary stance towards its possible future failure. In that case, the independent strength of the Buddhist institution would still override purely political considerations. Still more, the (for them karmic) involvement of Buddhist concerns with political ones could result in further compromising their own priorities, already curtailed and controlled under the military regime of Than Shwe. Monastic engagement in 2007 damaged the purity and autonomy of the Order, and for them further engagement might only make the damage worse.

It is not surprising then that during the past four years since late-2007 monks have had severe travel restrictions placed on them, and even their movement inside Burma has been monitored and controlled. The so-called election of November 2010 has brought no overt measure of liberty to the *sangha's* freedom of expression or assembly. They have tried to resist the government's attempts to use them as its ideological mouthpiece. This is a constant among the forces of state control that they must negotiate. Monks I spoke with during 2010-2011 in Burma and Thailand all reported that covert resistance inside the *sangha* is strong (if not widespread), but the time not clear for a new revolt.

Since early 2012 King Zero (Ashin Issariya) has been living in uncertain, but very productive exile in the Thai border town of Mae Sot, still looking to a much larger-scale monastic and lay uprising (Kovan "Pen"). Other members of the former ABMA are scattered from India to Switzerland to the U.S. and beyond. Despite positive signs of reform following an amnesty of some two hundred political prisoners in October 2011, two months later in December the small-scale protests of a group

of monks in Mandalay resulted in their removal to a form of remote “village arrest” without recognition of their concerns. Because senior abbot Shwe Nya War Sayardaw met with U. S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, endorsed a 20th anniversary celebration of Aung San Suu Kyi’s Nobel Peace Prize award, and spoke publicly, disobeying an order to cease all pro-democratic advocacy, he has been formally censured by the SSMC, expelled from his own Sardu Monastery in Rangoon, and faces possible defrocking (Ba Kaung 2011).

U Gambira critically languished until mid-January 2012 in the remote Burmese prison of Kalay, where he had been staging a hunger-strike against the prisoner amnesty given by the new civilian president Thein Sein. U Gambira’s sentence of 63 years was commuted in this amnesty by only one year. Of the roughly 2,100 political prisoners in Burma in December 2011, about 255 of them were monks and nuns.¹⁶ A number of these were among a group also staging a hunger-strike against conditions in Rangoon’s Insein Prison.

It is unlikely whether a *pattanikujjana* staged in prison, even one made during a fast, would be noted by prison guards and authorities, especially insofar as monastic status (even the saffron robes themselves) are denied these prisoners. It is also telling that when asked whether or not they felt it had succeeded, and in what ways, many Burmese monks proved uncertain about self-reflexively engaging the question and evaded it. On the other hand, another monk, U Sunanda, related in 2008:

The problem last September was that not enough laymen
marched together with us [but] something was

¹⁶ A further amnesty on January 13, 2012, resulted in the release of 651 prisoners; Human Rights Watch claims at least 287 of them were political prisoners, including student and monastic leaders, and journalists (HRW: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/01/23/burma-promises-change-abuses-continue>). The Thailand-based AAPP(B) exile organization claims that at least 1,500 political prisoners remain incarcerated inside Burma as of February 1, 2012.

achieved . . . a whole new generation of monks has been politicized. We're educating them. We're still boycotting the military. (*Resistance* 86)

The question of what drove the intransigence, and finally extreme violence, of the SPDC regime of Than Shwe in 2007 (and at other times in general) would require an in-depth enquiry, beyond the parameters of this general survey of the Buddhist alms-boycott. It is, however, highly significant insofar as the Burmese regime identifies as Buddhist; yet their position (however dubious) in the larger Buddhist context is rarely if ever considered as such, or worse, is demonized or ignored.

Yet a response to the question: *How does an ostensibly Buddhist leadership and its army come to murder its own clergy?* requires attention from Burmese Buddhist studies scholarship as much as does the actions of the Buddhist *sangha*. King, for example, reports (with many commentators on the Saffron Revolution) that "Ultimately, of course, the regime chose to attack the monastics" (126) without suggesting why it made that culturally and religiously deeply irrational choice. We've seen that given its own priorities the regime simply reverted to familiar military terms to answer to its own pathological exigencies of power and authority. While politically explicable, this does not finally answer to the deep irrationality that characterizes the event, especially given its Buddhist context. Is the transgressive violence at issue here merely one of degree, and so conformable to a conventionally rational discourse? Or is its extremity, as transgression, indicative of an "ethical stretch" that requires a similarly stretched hermeneutic? The following summary provides a basis to suggest one response these questions.

Conclusions and a Coda

I suggested earlier that the *pattanikujjana* has both literal and symbolic power. Literally it is a refusal of life-giving nourishment, but its symbolic deprivations against the giver are far worse. These are both this-worldly and metaphysical. Firstly, benefactors who are refused the opportunity for generosity, in the Buddhist context, are subjectively and objectively denied both the deeply-rooted and valorized identity of the lay-gatherer of merit as well as recognized inclusion in the greater Buddhist family and social grouping. NLD party leader U Win Tin remarked in 2010 that “When you are under a *pattanikkujjana*, you are no longer a Buddhist. [Against] the government it is very effective. They are Buddhist . . . and the *pattanikkujjana* has a very bad effect on them” (U Win Tin, 2010).

These rejected benefactors become (again non-violently, and ironically) non-entities in the Buddhist chain of being, cast outside the social and karmic economy of the path to enlightenment. The irony here is that the refused benefactors already are, in Buddhist terms, ultimately *anattā*, or empty of self, and it is thus in one sense an act of non-violent mercy on the part of the *sangha* to “assert” this, as a form of psychological, if compassionate, shock. Former Senior General Than Shwe was reportedly “very disappointed” about his non-reception from Burmese monks while visiting Sri Lanka and India in 2009 (Min Lwin).

Secondly, while the act is overtly non-violent it also carries a deeply wounding, even ethically aggressive, covert element of social dis-identification. It makes for a very rare moment of Buddhist pariah-hood (where even a psychopathic killer like Angulimāla is ultimately accepted into the Buddhist fold). The act of *pattanikujjana* is not intended as a form of punishment (even though karmically it could be interpreted as having that effect) but rather as an incentive to reverse subjective and objective injustice; ultimately, it is an ethical tool or skillful means, much as

Gandhi's *satyāgraha* was, for the begetting of greater insight, even wisdom, into self and others.

This is the aspect of the boycott that is dominant in dissident Burmese Buddhist self-representation. During the worst days of September 2007, U Gambira repeatedly asserted that the monastic resistance did not seek its own power but rather the kindling of conscience in the governing body, whose illegitimate rule was otherwise actively tolerated. Yet we can also see, above, that the formal declaration of the boycott also included explicit reference to the eternal banishment and defeat of an "evil common enemy" which presumably will never reap the moral rewards of reform and reconciliation in the Buddhist homeland.

The third dimension to consider is clearly political. Unlike their Theravādan brethren in Sri Lanka, Burmese monks are unable to vote in any political process. However, the boycott is a clear thwarting of the authority of the rejected party, especially if that party holds some socially recognized power. Furthermore, the *sangha* imposing a *pattanikujjana* will see it as an expression of strength. The view of power changes depending on which side of the boycott, so to speak, is experienced. At the same time the boycott is a direct expression of solidarity with the people rather than their rulers, which again has some potential political force if such solidarity, directly or indirectly, aligns with existing opposition forces, as in 2007 it clearly did with Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD (National League for Democracy) party, among others.

The ambiguity of the boycott in doctrinal terms, however, is significant: while the monastic order sees it as a form of Buddhist moral inculcation to maintain the integrity of the institution (and only indirectly to reform behavior), in 2007 it was directed exclusively towards the government *en masse* (rather than as individuals) with the

hope of reforming governance generally. U Win Tin (in remarks from 2010) emphasizes this ambiguity:

Although they are not a political organization . . . [the monks] do visit maybe 4 or 20 houses every day, because they have to collect their meals . . . and they talk to the people . . . In that way they are more political than us, because . . . They are in close[r] contact with the people and can exchange ideas and opinions.

The consensus among the *sangha* itself is divided but not unclear: some, like U Manita, claim that “To be honest, it was a political rather than a religious gesture to protest in that way. But it was right to do it!” (*Resistance* 76). Another, older, monk from Rangoon, who only passively supported the protests, summarizes a more general representative position:

Some argue that monks should concern themselves only with religion and not get involved in politics. That’s correct, in a way. At the same time, it is the duty of monks to help the people whenever they can. There’s no contradiction here. To go out in the streets and recite the Metta Sutta, or to boycott the regime, is not politics. Politics is to overthrow the government, and that was not what we were trying to do. We can only meditate, pray and make appeals. That’s the way of religion. We boycott the regime and don’t accept offerings from them. But we can’t do more than that. (*Resistance* 78)

Burmese monastic self-representation as exclusively religious does not thereby diminish the *sangha*’s very real political function in the dissemination and promulgation of democratic values throughout Burmese society in a form the remote governance of the regime, even

through its military agency, cannot easily challenge. If anything the saffron robe cloaks a far more pervasive social-democratic solidarity, clearly one feared by the military junta itself.

Still more, the ethical “roles” of military and senior monks are already uncomfortably enmeshed: just as the SSMC has been seen to be complicit in the killing of its fellow *sangha* members, it appears likely that sectors of the SPDC leadership opposed lethal aggression, an intention ultimately overridden by the smaller core of generals. A Wikileaks exposure of U.S. diplomatic cables revealed in early 2011 that Senior General Than Shwe and his second in command Maung Aye were responsible for issuing the order to fire on the *sangha*. The third in command ex-General Shwe Mann disagreed with the decision but faithfully carried out Than Shwe’s orders (Wai Moe).

I have suggested elsewhere in the Burmese Buddhist context (“Violence”) that the metaethical constitution of acts of violence (particularly *qua* Buddhist-contextual phenomena) might profitably be considered via the interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and selflessness (*anattā*) of their respective ethical antagonists. For Buddhism, ethical events are finally constituted by selfless karmic dynamics that require their respective protagonists to enact of necessity a karmic state of affairs.

From a non-dual perspective the “irrationality” identified in the regime’s response literally manifests a socio-pathological “shadow” karmically mutually-constituted with the *nibbānic* high moral ground of monastic religious agency (tragically ironic insofar as the regime itself has so persistently identified historically with the ethical purity of Buddhist precepts, merit accumulation and relic devotionism). Each ethical pole is in a dynamic symbiosis where the human-existential stakes of its resolution could not be higher: for the integrity of a

religious identity, a bid for moral force or power, the dignity of an entire nation.

But who “wins” such a radical engagement, and how is victory or defeat in such a case to be understood? To analytically bisect the polarities of such a moral-causal relation omits a crucial, if less obvious, dimension of their existence as such. Buddhist soteriology infers a view of irrational or aporetic violence as a phenomenon that implicates *nibbānic* reality-claims in its very problematization. Such violence, of which the Saffron Revolution is so shockingly paradigmatic, demands the kind of human-ethical resolution that, for Buddhism, only *dhammic* transcendence can finally provide. It offers an ethical paradox of a blackly ironic kind: if such events were not so ethically problematic, they would not require the absolute analysis Buddhism performs on the unsatisfactory (*duḥkha*) phenomena of *saṃsāra*, and thus serve as an existential spur to Buddhist salvation.

Such a view does not explain (let alone justify) such acts of violence, but in reconfiguring their status as human problems beyond a relative ethical dualism, it tries to arrive at some deep-causal understanding for the ongoing Burmese struggle which exceeds (as it did before 2007) cultural, political or descriptive explanation alone. It is not merely ironic to transpose from the socio-historical to the metaphysical level Harris’s claim that “it is perhaps not too much of an exaggeration to suggest that a healthily functioning Buddhist polity is one in which the respective powers of king and *sangha* are held in a state of antagonistic symbiosis” (3). It is a claim that begs philosophical explanation as well.

Beyond this difficult question, however, the *pattanikujjana* in these most recent manifestations has proven, even and perhaps especially in its panicked repression, the power of Buddhist-ethical agency over again, as it did for colonial-era Burma, for a new generation

and for a concerned global audience: a rare thing by any contemporary reckoning (though the more recent, popular and largely non-violent revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 in some sense also affirm the Buddhist case in no small secular terms). The executive council of Than Shwe's SPDC responded in September 2007 as paranoically and brutally as its army did, because it accurately registered a powerfully authentic threat to its supposed but illusory legitimacy. But the key concept here is not so much its legitimacy as its *illusoriness*, and the threat can be seen as much a metaphysical as a political one. (There is, surprisingly enough, such a thing as wholesome [*kusala*] legitimacy, as Emperor Aśoka, or in 1950s Burma, Prime Minister U Nu, was determined to demonstrate.) The regime was trying to annul a threat to its very ontology *qua* omnipotent and metaphysically invulnerable master. For Buddhism, any pretender to such an identity can only suffer the intrinsic hubris entailed in ontological denial. The reason why the regime, despite its half-a-million strong army, proved so radically vulnerable in the face of an unarmed, peaceful but vast opposition was as much due to a deeply fragile self-identity founded in delusion (*moha*) as an apparent fear of a political agency it would be unable to control.¹⁷

That exposure alone, as much a spiritual as a political one, might be seen as a moral and popular victory for the Buddhist peoples of Burma, and those who supported them. Yet it can more prosaically be said that the alms boycott has, since 1990, repeatedly failed in its hope to inspire a compassionate response from the tyranny it has compassionately confronted. Presumably any multiply-repeated intervention of the *pattanikujana* risks diminishing its force as a form of ethical leverage merely through over-use; thus, its timing but also

¹⁷ Essentially the same claim could be made with reference to the obdurate demise of the recent Egyptian, Libyan and (possibly) Syrian demagogic regimes.

frequency are crucial for its efficacy.¹⁸ (Of course its orthopraxis as primarily a protection of the Buddhist Order largely discounts that usage.) All four of the demands for reform issued by the ABMA at the outset of the uprising went entirely ignored during and subsequent to the protests and their final suppression. The initial violence meted upon the Pakokku monks was in fact increased in later crackdowns as a means to repress such claims. Since 2007 the regime has continued to demonstrate an unwillingness to address, or even acknowledge, the root causes of the protests, or to engage in any substantive effort at national reconciliation.¹⁹

Other commentators report that the Saffron Revolution “failed” due to a lack of strategic organization. Assessing such conclusions²⁰ has not been my concern here, even where analysis of the sequence of events and their causal relations might logistically support such a view. Analyses that ground themselves in a weighing of the pros and cons of power-stakes between the leadership of the SPDC, the army and its apparent internal schisms, and the popular and monastic pro-democratic opposition, seem finally unable to account for the full ethical constitution of the event itself. To identify the crackdown more generally as evidence of political or Buddhist-ethical “failure” is

¹⁸ This potential aspect of the boycott as a political tool is not raised (to my knowledge) in any interviews or public statements by Burmese *sangha*, or other commentators.

¹⁹ Despite prisoner amnesties in late-2011 and early-2012, and a major ceasefire agreement with the Karen National Union, little or no progress has been made in addressing the constitutional or legal reforms that would institute formal democratic values. Military combat and grave human rights abuses continue in the northern states of Burma, and the continued persecution of dissident journalists and monks belie the authenticity of these changes.

²⁰ King, following Gene Sharp, suggests of a professed Buddhist clerical a-politicism (also surveyed above) in the Saffron Revolution that “perhaps [this attitude] prevent[ed] them from looking at the power issues that they need to examine in order to succeed” (2009: 132). King’s analysis does not point specifically at strategical weakness in the *sangha*’s direction of the August revolt, but is valuable for delineating both sides of a socio-political, and religiously, determined critique of the efficacy of Buddhist non-violent activism.

similarly to misunderstand what Buddhist civil disobedience was able to achieve in its bearing witness to injustice, as well as its introduction of a transcendent symbolic into the *samsaric* economy of state power.²¹

What was, in one sense at least, ultimately at stake in the Saffron Revolution was the claims of the Buddhist religion as such, which held its ground and did not shirk its broadest duties to a suffering humanity, irrespective of the extreme consequences. What is still more remarkable was that an otherwise Mahāyānist sense of universal religious responsibility (*bodhicitta*) was demonstrated so confidently by the Theravādan sangha and laypeople of the Burmese nation. Perhaps unwittingly, these Burmese exemplars of the contemporary Theravāda were performing one of the most valuable services to religious pluralism, identity, and syncretism that the modern Buddhist world has seen. The effects of those were even able, I would claim, to reach into a larger global identity and generally inspire the non-violent resistance movements of the non-Buddhist (and secular) world as well.

It could even be said, in a terrible paradox, that a more politically successful resistance, especially one without loss of life, would be unable to so powerfully demonstrate the ethical depth in the force of sacrifice of the Buddhist faithful—monk, nun and layperson alike—evident in the Saffron Revolution. What is beyond doubt is that the effects of the *pattanikujjana* in the *sangha*, in the Burmese national consciousness and beyond, endure, and that the ostensibly new civilian government fears

²¹ This theme would require further discussion lying outside the limits of the present survey. The *pattanikujjana* as an original counsel of Sakyamuni Buddha clearly has more than purely sociological provenance in Buddhist culture. Its application at critical points of the monastic conscience implies the social assertion of values that transcend matters of state and the maintenance of temporal power. They signify the introjection of *nibbānic* claims into the *kammic* concerns of this-worldly salvation; which of these (if not entirely why) were more highly-valued by the SPDC regime seems circumstantially clear by its actions of September 2007.

any repetition of a major Buddhist boycott as it tries to establish international credibility into 2012.

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