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Editorial

Loss of credibility

In matters of information, one event can cover another and this is even truer with international affairs. And yet, if an event ever stirred public opinion at the end of 2007, it would be the Burmese revolt against the despotic military regime and in particular the massive and unflinching participation of Buddhist monks in the popular uprising.

To better understand the implications of these recent events, in the struggle against the ruling Junta, the article presented here offers indispensable keys. In fact, we cannot force Western concepts on Burmese issues unless we want to limit ourselves to a superficial and deformed approach. The reality is more complex than it may seem at first view.

Still, with the « Saffron revolution » – referring to the monk's saffron robe – we must not forget the lay participation in the democratization movement, in particular the combat of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), which won the elections, rejected by the military, in 1990.

This woman Nobel peace prize winner, under house arrest for 17 years now, remains leader of the opposition to the Junta which finally agreed to allow her to speak on the state TV channels. A small victory which eloquently tells on the Junta's loss of credibility due to the repression of Buddhist monks and the democratic opposition.

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Burma The Flame of Revolt is not burnt out

The demonstrations in Burma, which held the whole world's attention in September 2007, showed the massive participation of Buddhist monks. How do we explain the monks' revolt against a military power which, in the past, had manifested leniency for them? To understand these recent and current events, it seems necessary to first of all delve into the mental world of Burmese Buddhism.

*by Claude Delachet-Guillon et Emmanuel Guillon**

Buddhism, in the ordinary sense, is not a religion which ties up the totality of phenomena and beings to a Faith. And yet, by virtue of its spirituality, it is considered one of the Great religions. There is no Buddhist theology. It is a doctrine of deliverance: deliverance from suffering, passion and enchainment. Speculating on Being or Non-Being is therefore a waste of time.

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This religion, which in the Fifth century was founded in India by the Buddha Sakyamuni (sage of the Shakyas), shares Hinduism's belief in Samsara: the indefinite cycle of re-births. In this cycle of transmigrations, destinies are not completed in only one lifetime; this depends on the karma ("action") of each person.

For all Buddhist schools, phenomena (and beings), everything that exists is conditioned. There is no such thing as human nature; men and animals are only "aggregates" of actions. These actions most often "exceed" a life-time and produce "fruits" after death. And thus, one endlessly reincarnates.

The doctrinal foundations are found in the famous Sermon of Benares:

1. All is suffering (*dukkha*: torment, problem of existence). Impermanence is in the nature of all the living. From this flows the universality of pain.
2. The cause of suffering is grasping desire (*trishna*: craving, unquenchable thirst), product of an enchainment, coming from a "produced dependence", out of ignorance, the origin of desire.
3. The cessation of suffering is possible. *Nirvana*, the extinction, non-being as well as non-void, is the final end.
4. There's a path to the cessation of suffering. It lies between asceticism and activism. This "voyage" involves 3 practices: morality, concentration, wisdom. Meditation is the preferred method.

Overcoming the impediment

In pronouncing these Four Great Truths, Buddha founded an order of mendicant monks who would try to find an end to suffering, starting with overcoming the impediments (the first of which is believing in a "permanent self"). Thus, the "venerables" are known as wisemen, learned and detached from the world. It is believed that they are endowed with supernatural powers which, with the veneration of Buddha images and the belief in hell, falls under what is known as "popular" Buddhism.

There are therefore two types of men: laymen and monks. These latter, as they put on their robes, pronounce the words: "*I take refuge in the dharma* (the right law of Buddhism), *I take refuge in the sangha* (community of monks), *I take refuge in the Buddha*". The refuge is mental but it is also the monastery which is inviolable, untouched by the world's cravings, in particular the world of power and the world of money.

Ethics situates the good and the bad in the *Samsara*: a person is product of the *karma* of his past lives, of which he is not responsible (thus a certain fatalism). On the other hand, we reincarnate according to our actions, good or bad, in our present life. Does a criminal arouse pity? If he is what he is, it is because of his bad karma. But, on the other hand, with his crime, he prepares a horrible rebirth for himself (in hell or in the form of a particularly revolting beast).

The doctrine is studied in the monastery, in the *jataka*, (tales edifying Buddha's past lives) and the « three baskets » (*tripitaka*): that of discipline (*vinaya*), rules of conduct among monks and nuns; that of Buddha's sermons (*sutta*); and that of philosophy (*abhidhamma*).

To free the monks of material contingences, laymen have to fully insure their subsistence. In exchange, they gain spiritual merits and access to teachings as well as a model to help develop their own spirituality. For centuries, this balance has been at the base of local economy and cultural identity in the Burmese Buddhist society, within the Theravada Buddhism.

However, if the principles and behaviour taught by Buddhism aim at a person's own liberation, the practice can have consequences far beyond the individual. For instance:

- The practice of respecting life (which englobes all the living) means not only refusing to kill, abort, or commit suicide, but also refusing to torture and condemn to death. Out of this comes respect for animals, which leads to vegetarianism and submission to nature.
- The practice of harmony brings peace, which leads to the search for national unity.
- The practise of right action and compassion results in questioning the exploitation of others in its various forms: slavery, degrading treatment, oppression of the weak by the

powerful. This can lead to questioning the established order and can be a stimulation for egalitarian demands.

Unstable relationships

Throughout Burmese history, monks have been opposing their kings, in the name of the Buddhist doctrine. These revolts had contrasting results. For instance, King Bayinnaung (1551-1581) had several thousands of rebels engaged, giving instructions not to feed them. But monks of several ethnic origins (Bama, Mon, Shan) came to feed them and finally obtained the king's permission to free their leaders. On the other hand, when Bama King Alaungpaya (1752-1760) attacked the city of Pegou, the 3000 monks who took the side of its Mon population were trampled by elephants, on the monarch's order¹. In this case, the fact of being Mon and in opposition to the hegemonic ambitions of the Bama king counted more than the spiritual power of the Monks.

From its very start, the Burmese State tried, several times, to organize the monastic community in a centralized way, with the support of some monks. Besides this, it has always allowed part of the Sangha to benefit from its royal generosity (in exchange for exceptional spiritual merits) and has built the most important temples in the land. The Sangha and the Burmese State have always been the two powers which structure society², but their relationship is unstable, most probably because of the very decentralized nature of the Burmese Sangha.

Today, in a population of 50 million, around 90% Buddhist, we can count more than 400,000 monks and 150,000 nuns. Faced with these figures, the military regime has slowly increased its army to count more than 400,000 soldiers...

Ignorance of the rapport between religious and political powers and, even more, their display of contempt for this religion would be fatal to the British colonizers (1886-1948). This attitude provoked the emergence of monks like U Ottama and U Wisara who played a decisive role in the birth of the anti-colonial movement. By invoking the principle of harmony, destroyed by the occupants, these monks became key figures in the movement to defend national identity. And for having suffered mistreatment (U Wisara died in prison after a 163-day hunger strike, in protest of the fact that monks were forbidden to wear the saffron robe in prison), they became symbols of the modern Burmese nation. A large part of the Sangha followed them, with the support of the people's monastic associations.

After independence, the Prime minister of the parliamentary period (1948-1962), U Nu, wanted to make Buddhism a state religion, provoking the revolt of non-Buddhist minorities. His government sought to insure the State's financial and material support for the Sangha and encouraged the monks to get organized in a centralized institution. This ended in failure: the Burmese Sangha remains attached to its decentralized structure.

The Social balance put to question

In 1962, the military dictatorship of General Ne Win was badly received by the Sangha which was hostile to a « socialist » regime which nationalized the whole economy. These moves to nationalize, to confiscate individual property, were, in the eyes of Buddhist morality, acts of robbery. Besides, by impoverishing the laity, they put to question the social balance, since lay persons would no longer be able to feed the monks correctly; these latter would be unable to consecrate themselves to their spirituality nor help the lay population improve their *karma*.

The General Ne Win based his legitimacy on the charisma acquired by the national army during the fight for independence and on his socialist project. Thinking he could do without the Buddhist institution, he was rather wary of it. Thus, in 1965, when the monks and monastic associations demonstrated their opposition, he countered with some arrests, prison and torture. Due to this, no monastic organization would support him.

¹ Harvey G. Eric, *History of Burma*, 1925, London, Longmans – pp. 77 and 235.

² Houtman Gustaaf, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, Tokyo, University of Foreign Studies, ILCAA, Monograph Series no. 33, 1999.

At the start of the 1980's, the socialist project having seemed to fail, Ne Win thought of using Buddhism to revive it and decided to get hold of the monastic institution. With the support of some monks desirous of the State's good graces, an enterprise of "purification" and organization of the community of monks was undertaken, heavy-handedly. National monastic justice courts had the task of sanctioning teachings, judged "*contrary to the Buddhist doctrine*" and community reorganization was put in place, according to the military model, to control the country's monasteries. Only nine of the several existing *Taik* (Buddhist schools) have been decreed religiously orthodox, all else being declared illegal.

In August 1988, during the mobilization of the people's revolt which the Military junta repressed in bloodshed, several monks participated in demonstrations and monastic associations reactivated. In two months, 600 monks were killed by the regime. In August 1990, thousands of monks marched in Mandalay, to commemorate the anniversary of the "8.88" massacre. Several Venerables called the Junta "*a dharma*" (outlaw Buddhist). Then, a group of 700 monks called the community to "*give back the begging bowl*", that is to refuse alms given by the military and their families.

In October, retaliating to this spiritual weapon (since it deprives the victims of the possibility to gain spiritual merits), the Junta declared all monastic associations illegal. The army raided 350 monasteries and arrested 3000 monks. Only the institutions created in 1980 and accredited associations were maintained. A decree provided that all monks participating in non-religious activities would be expelled from the monastic community.

The Important Role of Women

This politics clashed with the decentralized nature of the Burmese sangha – not to mention the role of saints (*Weiza*) who attract crowds of pilgrims to their place of meditation³. In fact, these groups, who do not always agree with each other, are supported by lay networks which see to their needs. Lay women play an important role in these networks for they feed the monks and care for the upkeep of monasteries. Besides this, they insure communication with the people by means of news transmission. And yet, few among them have positions in committees which take important decisions.

During the recent events, nuns were seen among the streams of demonstrators. This is something new. Despite the fact that Buddha recognized the capacity of women to attain Enlightenment, and therefore to practise monastic life as a means towards it, the mysogeny of his disciples managed to relegate them to a lower rank. Even to this day, some Burmese women still recite an ancient prayer essentially expressing: "*hope to incarnate as a man in my next life that I may reach Nirvana.*"

Despite the fact that nuns have always tried to attain Enlightenment without having to go through masculinity, a way of contesting this discrimination, their status remains inferior to that of the monks'. They still have to devote part of their time to the preparation of food for Buddha-altars and for monks of nearby monasteries. They all reserve time for prayer and meditation, but only few can devote themselves to religious studies. Some give care to the solitary elderly or orphans. Others go into teaching.

Primary education is in full expansion as much in female as in male monasteries, for it is encouraged by the Junta which finds in this a way to escape its responsibilities (more than 40% of the state budget goes to the military, less than 4% goes to education). The monks have always had an educational function, but limited to religious teaching and literacy. Only recently have the religious started to teach lay subjects which are in the national program. This development has contributed to strengthening their social role, as well as – and this the Junta did not foresee –, facilitating the diffusion of Buddhist ideas and practices which leads to protestations...

The recent demonstrations have therefore not surged out of nowhere. Their mechanism is a repetition, in a more serious form, of what occurs every ten years since the installation of the military regime. Each time, an inept economic decision of the Junta (this time the drastic fuel price hike which, with its several repercussions, is pushing the population towards massive poverty) goes against Buddhist doctrine, particularly against Right action and the search for harmony. Besides, it endangers the

³ Rozenberg Guillaume, *Renoncement et puissance (Renouncement and Power)*, Editions Olizane, Genève, 2005.

economic and spiritual exchange which provides the base for social equilibrium.

Support for Burmese Monks

As guardians of the doctrine and representatives of the public conscience, the monks participate in people's protests or even precede them, the way they did in times of colonization or the Sept. 2007 revolt, and strengthen the aspiration for democracy. A minority of the Sangha does not share this point of view, either because they have sworn allegiance to the political power or because they do not wish to get involved in worldly matters. But, this time, the different schools of thought have dropped their traditional differences in order to take to the streets in reply to the call of the Alliance of Burmese Buddhist Monks, an organization whose leaders were unknown at the start of the events. Since then, four of them have been identified, like U Gambira who was arrested in November. He is 29 years old and risks death penalty since he has been accused of treason against the State. The others are in hiding.

In October 2007, Buddhist personalities like the Dalai Lama, Asian and Western Buddhist associations have offered support to the Burmese monks by calling on their faithful to pray en masse, that the Junta may agree to listen to their demands for better living conditions and for dialogue.

We know the Junta's reply: some hundred dead plus 1000 new prisoners and a number of monasteries emptied of their monks. For some days, the international community, headed by the UN Secretary General, seemed one in condemning the Junta. But this latter responded by expelling the UN local representative who had declared that the Burmese GNP was just about equal to half of the Bangladeshi. And since then, we've been back to zero: The US and the European Union speak out to condemn the violence and to call for democracy, whereas China, India and the ASEAN⁴ consider these recent events as internal affairs which should not affect their interests. These countries have a particular need for the important energy sources from Burma, for their development.

Calm has been restored in the country but certainly not in hearts, for military violence has violated all Buddhist precepts. Many Burmese probably think like this young monk⁵ who said: *"The next lives of the military will be very bad. They will not go to hell but even lower."* The idea that the present government will pay in the end must certainly help the Buddhist people to continue living. And it can once more motivate some monks and some lay people to rekindle the flames of resistance.

Counter-point

Justice versus banditry

Burma is not a democracy, not even an authoritarian one. This dictatorship, among the worst in Asia, is Myanmar (as re-named by the Junta in 1989), which a clique of plutocratic generals govern with an iron hand. More than 40% of the State budget is consecrated to arms expenditure, against hardly more than 3% for health and education.

Ending in a bloody crackdown last autumn, the "Saffron revolution" has been reduced to the silence of repression and quasi general international indifference. Even though, as the French sociologist Raphael Lioger* remarked, it provoked – and it's a first – the mobilization of Buddhists all over the world, including the West.

Still, as the authors of this article point out, the Saffron revolution continues to grow in the heart of the Burmese population and Buddhism, transcending much of its traditional divisions. Quite simply because the aspiration for liberty and justice is now universal.

That which many dictatorial regimes in the world don't want to hear, the German philosopher Fichte aptly said in the Age of Enlightenment: *"No, Prince, you are not our God. From Him we expect happiness, from you the protection of our rights. You musn't be nice to us, you must be just."*

⁴ Association of South-East Asian Nations

⁵ Quoted in *Irrawaddy*, Déc. 2007, p. 39.

* Author of: *Le bouddhisme mondialisé* (Globalized Buddhism), Ellipses 2004.

For, as Saint Augustin emphasized in his time: *"If justice is lacking; what are kingdoms but vast banditries"*. Such ethical principles as well as politics are what Buddhism is rediscovering today, in its own way, especially in Asia,. And which the West, more and more de-Christianized, tends to forget, in the context of a neo-liberal globalization represented by multinationals, like Total in Burma, which doesn't care, either, totally.

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