

Sayadaw U Kovida is a highly respected senior monk who was born in Burma 81 years ago. Although he now lives in exile in New York, he was once the patron of Ma Soe Yein monastery, one of the oldest Buddhist schools in Burma.

In 2001, Sayadaw visited the U.S. and stayed at the Masoeyein Sasana Jotika Center; a New York monastery. Every year he went back to Burma, but since September 2007, he has not been able to return. Sayadaw is now the patron of Sasana Moli – the International Burmese Monks Organization – founded in October 2007. Sasana Moli (which translates to "crown jewel of the monastic community") is an alliance of more than 50 monks from the U.S., the U.K., Singapore, Canada, and Malaysia.

On December 15, 2007, BPF staff members Alan Senauke and Maia Duerr had the honor of a private audience with Sayadaw at the Mettananda Vihara in Fremont, California. The day before, Sayadaw was awarded an honorary degree from the University of San Francisco on behalf of all Buddhist monks in Burma. We met on the second floor of the vihara, with several members of the Burmese community joining us. Sayadaw welcomed us with a bow and a warm smile, and sat in a chair near the altar of the Buddha beautifully decorated with food offerings. Maung Yit served as our translator.

Maia: Please tell us about how you got involved in the movement for democracy in Burma in the 1990s, and what happened to you as a consequence.

Sayadaw: In 1988, there was a general uprising in Burma. I was not involved in that. In 1990, the army started shooting at people and shooting at monks. Some young monks came to me and showed me their bloody wounds. This is how I got involved. According to the *Vinaya* [Buddhist rules for the monastic community], the only way you should get involved in political matters is if the government starts hurting people. That was the first time that we overturned the alms bowls. We did this as a boycott because there were a lot of students who got shot and hurt.

The government tried to imprison me as the instigator of that boycott, and I was sentenced to three years with hard labor, even though they could find no evidence against me. I spent 22 months meditating in a Mandalay prison. In the beginning, I was allowed to wear robes, but then I was asked to take my robes off. But according to the *Vinaya*, this doesn't matter because a monk can never be disrobed as long as he keeps the precepts.

The jail was not like the jails here where you have bedding and mattresses. It had a concrete floor, no beds, and iron bars that gusty winds came through. All the restrooms were filthy. In the beginning, I was put in solitary confinement.

Every day we had rice to eat, but it wasn't really rice. You could see the corn husks in it. And they gave us a curry. It's lovely when you have curry with cauliflower and cabbage, but for this curry, they spliced and boiled all the stalks so that it was tasteless, and not nutritious. We have a Burmese saying: *Wet khaung khar*. This means that a pig shakes his head and refuses to eat when he sees what's coming – that's how bad the food was. Pigs are known to eat anything, but even pigs would stay away from this food! [Sayadaw laughs while telling us this.]

The worst thing I experienced was having to take off my robes and to adorn layman's robes. That is the worst thing that can ever happen to a monk. Because I was a high ranking abbot of a monastery, this was the kind of treatment that I received. If I were a young novice or a junior monk, I would have been sent to a prison labor camp

to be chained and shackled. The chances of returning from that kind of camp are very low because of malaria.

In those years, the monks were sent to prison camps and starved and died, and the world did not know about it. But this past September, the monks were murdered in front of the media and television. That is much worse than what happened in the 90s.

Alan: What happened after you were released?

Sayadaw: After the 22 months in prison, I went back to the Ma Soe Yein monastery and took up robes again. I returned to teaching.

In 2001, I came on a visitor's visa to the U.S. In 2002, the Buddhist Friendship Association invited me to do sasana work in the U.S. In 2003, a monastery was founded in New York and so that is where I settled. Every year, I went back to Burma. But since September of 2007, I cannot go there. If I go back, I will land in jail.

M: During September 2007, we heard stories about the monks who refused to receive alms from the soldiers. What was the significance of this action?

S: The monks are following the advice given by Buddha – if someone tries to suppress Buddhism, they should not fight back with arms but rather refuse to accept alms. That is in the Vinaya, so the monks are simply following the rules. It's not an uprising, but rather following the rules.

You have to have someone who commits a crime to start this boycott. There are some preconditions to overturn the boycott. Whoever has persecuted or hurt the monks has to admit that they have done heinous deeds and ask for forgiveness. Whoever committed the crimes has to say, "We are sorry." Then, according to ritual, they soak their heads and their clothes. Then they pray together as a whole family and come in front of the monks and say, "Please forgive us for having done bad deeds in the past."

A: Did the 1990 boycott ever end?

S: In 1991, it was overturned by a group of Sayadaws who were not originally in the boycott. They were asked by the government to overturn the boycott. But technically, that boycott never ended. The government ended it forcibly.

M: You have a long history of standing up for the monks of Burma. What inspires you to keep doing that, at the cost of your own wellbeing and safety?

S: A monk is essentially a dharma son of Buddha. If the government or anybody is oppressing the sasana, then I am just doing what Buddha wants me to do. The boycott says that if somebody doesn't treat the monks fairly, then you shouldn't take alms from them. So I am just being a loyal son of Buddha, just following what Buddha taught, nothing special.

M: Do you feel angry at the junta for all the harm they have caused the sasana and the Burmese people? How do you handle anger with your dharma practice?

S: At times I feel angry, just like other human beings. But being a son of Buddha, I follow what Buddha taught, and that means *metta* [loving kindness]. The reason something is happening is because of our bad karma in past lives. We should try to restrain our *dosa* [anger] by practicing metta instead. This doesn't mean we are not angry, but every time there is anger, we try to relinquish it by practicing metta.

At first, I didn't understand why I had to go to prison, because I thought that I had done good deeds all my life like teaching and building pagodas. Then I realized that because all human beings are born into *samsara* [rounds of rebirth], in some distant past we might have done something bad and this is just now showing up. So instead of forgetting that and getting angry, we can understand that this is what happened in our karma, and we go on with our lives. That was what helped me during those 22 months in prison. Otherwise I would have been angry and wouldn't have survived for long.

I taught for more than 50 years. When I learn about my former students who are being murdered and sent to prison camps, I feel much anguish and pain, because they are related to me.

If even people outside Burma, like the BPF members, feel a lot in their hearts, including anger, when they see what is happening in Burma, then you can imagine how the monks in Burma feel who have to directly face this. There is no way there will not be anger. The only thing is how to restrain anger and follow the teachings of Buddha.

M: I was inspired by your commencement talk at the University of San Francisco about the value of education. What role do you think education can play to support a peaceful transition to democracy in Burma?

S: I have always been a firm believer in education. The Buddha said:
If one studies diligently under a mentor, one gains *bahusuta* (general knowledge)

Bahusuta gives rise to wisdom and learning. Wisdom and learning enable one to reason, to differentiate the good and the bad, the right and the wrong. An educated mind, then, is able to do good things not only for one, but for others as well.

Unless you practice, you won't see the truth. As Buddhists, we know the importance of education. Burma once had a very good education system. It's been deliberately destroyed because the less people are educated, the easier they are to control.

The government of Burma seems not to be educated because they started shooting and killing monks. That shows a lack of education and lack of wisdom. Education is needed not just for the transition to democracy, but also for wise judgment in everyday life.

A: How do you see the transition to democracy happening inside Burma?

S: Right now, the monks outside Burma are directly or indirectly helping the needy monks inside Burma, but they are working at a grassroots level and not going through the government.

The monks inside Burma are trying to do what they can, according to the rules of Buddha. The sole purpose of Sasana Moli is to prevent danger to the sasana. We will attain democracy, freedom, and peace, if we follow the

Buddha way.

We want the world to know that it's *not* us against the government. The only reason that a senior monk who has taught for 50 years is doing what I am doing is because the government has crossed the lines of human rights. Some monks have been shot just because they were not taking alms from the junta or reciting the Metta Sutta. Those kinds of things should be a common right in any human society. All around the world, people want to know why these monks are being murdered when they are just doing things that any decent citizen of any country in the world should be able to do.

The junta says that the monks got support from outside the U.S. That's not true. They're trying to find scapegoats. We want to make sure people understand this in a true light.

A: Please tell us about Sasana Moli.

S: I have taught for more than 50 years and was never involved in politics or any organization. But after September, I felt that if I just kept teaching, that will not change the situation in Burma. So for three days, I thought of a good name and finally came up with Sasana Moli, which means crown jewel for the sasana. This way, we can provide help to those not only inside Burma but along the border. At the age of 81, I couldn't stand it any more and decided that it's time to get involved and to have a strong organization so that the world will know what's happening and people can help.

M: What is your vision for Burma in the future?

S: I am convinced that Burma will get democracy very soon and that this boycott will end successfully. The monks inside Burma want to remind us time and again that the boycott is still on. It does not matter that they are having food forced on them. What's more important is to realize that in their minds the struggle is still on. If they have the courage and vision to continue the fight, with support of the world, then Burma will see the light in the near future.

A: What is the most important thing that Americans and others in the world can do to support the cause of the people of Burma?

S: The short answer is to help in any way that you can. In essence, two kinds of help are needed. First, they need moral and spiritual help. The monks inside are fighting for a cause and they need the courage to survive. And second, they need some kind of physical help, whether it be monetary or anything else.

It's important to keep the pressure on. Even though I am 81 years old, I travel all over the country and give talks and interviews about this. If all the people in the world offer their help both spiritually and physically, in a few months I feel that Burma will be free from the worst danger.

Ref : - http://www.bpf.org/html/turning_wheel/archive/2008/kovida.html

