CHAPTE R XII

BUDDHIST ETHICS AGAINST THE PRAGMATISM OF POWER UNDER THE BURMESE KINGS

But the Buddhist heritage of the Pagan Dynasty survived. Its Buddhist ethos remained for its successors a source of inspiration. Even the declining Burma of the later Konbaung Kings (who fell in 1885) continued to aspire towards that spirit of renunciation overflowing in the dedication of the Buddhist works of Merit. Thus an official of the harsh and arbitrary king Pagan Min (1846–1853) starts his dedication of a bell for a pagoda with vanities of his exalted office and concludes with yearning that, together with his Beloved, he may find the release from the bounds of the transitory: "... My wife, my life's breath ..., like to the pollen of a lily, from whom I will not be separated in all the existences to come, out of which we hope soon to escape, ... we adore before the lord Buddha that we may embark on the golden raft of the noble path which will conduct us towards the final plunge into Nirvana; we two ... have given this bell as an offering." 1

In nineteenth century Burma, personages who could be kings – in court drama, if not in actual history – renounced worldly power, withdrawing into the wilderness 2 where princes would become hermits. 3 The ethos of Gautama Buddha's renunciation of kingship remained symbolically perpetuated in the "Shin Pyu" Novitiation Ceremony in which the prospective monk was paraded with the symbols of regal splendor like Wishing-Trees (Padeytha Pin – cf. p. 88f) before renouncing Family, Property and Desire. 4 In this situation, the parents bowed before their sons in the otherwise age hierarchy-

1 Shway Yoe, The Burman, his life and notions, pp. 206f.
3 U: Kyin U-i, Deywagonban-pyă za’ hní Hantawadi U: Ba Yin-ıy ahpyeı soun (Rangoon, no date), pp. 271f.
conscious Burmese society. Without exception, the mighty of this world were and still are expected to incline themselves before the monk – as a symbol of the Nirvana-pursuit being above all worldly power.

Ideally and theoretically the king – beginning with Anawrahta of Pagan (cf. p. 6) – was in relation to the monastic order only a lay worshipper.¹ Such theoretical subordination of royalty to the monastic order derived from the Buddhist rationale of kingship and mitigated Burmese autocracy. Sometimes the monkhood tried to temper violence against dynastic rivals.² Thus the Primate Panthagu could reproach forcefully, though vainly, the fratricide king Narathu of Pagan (1167), builder of the Damayangyi Pagoda,³ gloomily shaped like a yearning of despair and the caverns of a conscience (Gordon Luce’s formulation). Rajadirit (Yazadirit), of the Shan dynasty ruling Pegu, was (in 1401) persuaded to recall his forces approaching the Burmese capital Ava, when a monk sent by his adversary explained to him the implications of destroying human life as a great obstacle to rebirth as a human being.⁴ While such arguments could not have had any effect without the Buddhist ideals of kingship, they may have also served to save face in embarrassing military situations. But when a military setback induced the Burmese conqueror king Buyin Naung (cf. p. 7) to “lock up into heat ... in order to burn to death” his defeated commander and his men, “the totality of Burmese, Mon and outside [yun:] abbots exaltedly deigned to unite ... Extinguishing the fire, [they] released ... the lord and the totality [of his] soldiers from the heat,” escorting them into the safety of their monasteries (1567?), ⁵ just as they had persuaded this Burmese king not to burn alive all the participants of a Mon uprising in Pegu (1564).⁶ Again and again the Buddhist monkhood of Burma intervened to save lives from despotism and even from penal law. And if the arbitrary brutality of power in Burma went further in cruelty than in the pre-totalitarian Occident, Burma’s Buddhist monkhood went also further in the protection of human life than did the historical Churches of Christendom who have hardly resisted and on the whole tacitly recognized the claims of temporal powers to inflict death.

¹ Paññasāmi, Śāsanavamsa, VI, 58: transl. B. C. Law, p. 65.
⁴ Ibid., Duti-twe (Mandalay, 1319/1957), p. 17.
⁵ Ibid., Duti-twe, p. 404.
⁶ Ibid., Duti-twe, p. 404.