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Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics

**Aung San Suu Kyi and the
National League for Democracy**

Gustaaf Houtman 1999

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Preface

This book deals with Burmese ideas about Buddhist mental culture (*samatha* meditation and *vipassana* contemplation) in the 1988 political crisis. It does so at three levels, including the general level of Burmese political terminology, and at the more specific levels of personal practice by Burma's leading politicians and their association with and patronage of particular traditions. It was written during a one-year stay as Visiting Professor at the Institute for the Study of the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, between 1 September 1997 and 30 August 1998. The research involved three separate visits to Burma between July 1997 and September 1998. It was finalised for press in London, January 1999.

The material presented here grew out of two prior research episodes. It originally flows from my PhD thesis 'Traditions of Buddhist practice in Burma' completed in 1990 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London (funded by a SOAS Postgraduate Governing Body Exhibition), for which I carried out fieldwork in Burma during the academic year 1981–82. My concern with this thesis was twofold. First, I aimed to survey various traditions of mental culture in Burma and how these practices fit in with other Buddhist practices. Second, I aimed to understand how mental culture fits into Burmese ideas about society, history, politics and perceptions of the world in general, and how it accomplishes various kinds of identity transformation.

Biographical summaries of about two dozen Burmese *vipassana* teachers were a major feature, and I analysed in detail the biographies of the Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–82) and Accountant-General U Ba Khin (1899–1971). These are two of the most internationalised of about two dozen nationally famous *vipassana* teachers, who played an important role under the patronage of ex-Prime Minister U Nu in his vision of politics and in his attempt to transform Burma's government.

The second research episode that underlies this book is the work I carried out under the Leach-RAI Post-doctoral Fellowship, of which I was a recipient in Manchester during the academic year 1991–92. Having become more aware of its evolving role in the politics of Burma since writing the thesis, at this time I stressed the political relevance of this material.¹ I began to look more specifically at the popularisation of the *vipassana* traditions in the Burmese palace after the Second Anglo-Burmese War as a response to colonialism. I perceived these as a Burmese vernacular parallel to the development of anthropology in the colonial countries of Europe. The increased popularity of *vipassana* in Burma occupies a very similar historical time period as anthropology in the United Kingdom; both seek to come to terms with uncertainty over human and cultural identity. Furthermore, they were part of a response to shifts in colonial boundaries, and both are instruments for coping with the limits of human existence, and recast cultural and even political identities to encompass the foreigner. While one can go too far in such analogy, there is much evidence that these traditions did serve overlapping functions. Indeed, the designation 'hermit country' may have applied to Burma during the time it was sealed off by the Ne Win regime from the outside world, but this did not apply to the *vipassana* traditions, for which Burma's boundaries were permeable, as *vipassana* teachers and their students were permitted to come and go virtually as they pleased. It was through the travelogues of Burmese *vipassana* teachers abroad that the Burmese kept in touch with and learnt about the outside world.

In the course of the second half of the 1990s, evidence emerged that all three senior leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD) – Tin U, Aung San Suu Kyi and U Kyi Maung – had indeed been practising the *vipassana* techniques originally taught by the two very same 'international' teachers whose biographies I had already extensively analysed in my thesis.² They did this during their various phases of imprisonment and house arrest. Indeed, as I describe in this book, many political prisoners are finding dignity, even today, in their prison experience through these practices. They are also, at the same time, accused by the regime of adopting 'foreign' ways.

¹ Gustaaf Houtman. 'Between ruler and contemplator: insight contemplation in colonial and postcolonial Burma'. In *Proceedings of the Conference on Religious Renewals in Asia* (ed. Shihegaru Tanabe), National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, 24–27 Nov 1992. (published by Kyoto University Press, 1995 – in Japanese).

² Chapter 7. 'Contemporary Burmese hagiography: the hagiographies of the Mahasi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin' in Houtman (1990:195–233). 'Beyond the cradle and past the grave: the biography of Burmese meditation master U Ba Khin' in Juliane Schober (ed.), *Buddhist sacred biography in South and Southeast Asia*. University of Hawai'i Press, 1997, pp 310–44.

More surprising perhaps, is that it is also the Mahasi Sayadaw methods in particular that are practised by several senior retired members of the military regime, including the infamous General Sein Lwin, known for his cruelty during the uprising as the Butcher of Rangoon. Other members and ex-members of the regime are also known to have interests in various other *vipassana* traditions, including the current strongman General Khin Nyunt, and even General Ne Win himself.

The attention paid to mental culture on both sides of the political divide is in part due to the importance of meditation and contemplation in Burmese political culture since the colonial period. However, in part, this is also a response to the isolation experienced. On the one hand, members of the NLD have experienced severe repression by the regime and were isolated from society by imprisonment and house arrest. Senior members of the NLD and senior monks have appealed to the regime's leaders to rehabilitate themselves through the practice of *vipassana*. On the other hand, the military experienced isolation and fear of mainstream society. To them, these practices represent the last possible instrument for the transformation of the military hierarchy. Contemporary patronage by the military of these traditions is certainly based on its awareness of the powers of these traditions in the creation and dissolution of boundaries and in the legitimisation of state. It is not clear, however, to what extent the practice and patronage of these techniques is the result of its desire to change.

While I was carrying out my research in Manchester, I was still predominantly focused on the past, as there was scant evidence publicly available of such an involvement in mental culture by the NLD and the contemporary military. Also, the regime at that time had not yet taken such a strong interest in propagating Buddhism as it has done since 1992. So it was not possible at that time to fully make sense of the situation in Burma. The evidence that has become public since that time, and in particular since 1997, however, has permitted me to recast my earlier research to address more specifically the issue of the relevance of Burmese traditions of mental culture to the current political crisis. This book, however, should be seen in the context of my earlier work as not primarily political in nature, but as attempting to highlight the significance of *vipassana* to Burmese society as a whole. My next book will be the volume *Contemplating insight*, in which I expect to provide a more detailed historical analysis of the *vipassana* traditions in Burma dating back to King Mindon in the 1850s until today, and in which I expect to answer the larger question as to how the *vipassana* traditions evolved during the colonial period.

The main subjects of this book, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD leaders, are in a much worse condition in January 1999 than when I began writing this book in autumn 1997. The NLD called for parliament to convene by 25 August, and if the regime was not to facilitate this, it stated it would convene its own. This resulted in a spate of repressive moves in which virtually all elected NLD members were arrested, and NLD offices of one township after another were dissolved in the final months of 1998 and January 1999.

In short, the regime does not tolerate any form of opposition and the prison experience sums up the state of democracy in Burma. Nevertheless, with the Asian financial crisis, the fall of Suharto, China's decision to disengage the army from direct involvement in business, with Thailand and the Philippines now advocating flexible engagement among the members of ASEAN towards Burma, and with the increasing internationalisation of legal procedures and the increasing relevance of the Internet, the political climate outside Burma has also changed much over the last academic year. For example, the application of international laws to violators of human rights, such as Pinochet, demonstrates that those who commit human rights abuses can no longer hide behind the excuse of governing by local laws and local traditions. The implications of this for Burma are now even recognized by Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, one of the prime supporters of the Burmese regime, who recently said in an interview with CNN, 'Let's put the matter brutally. They have seen what's happened to General Pinochet. Some of the things some generals have done in Burma (former name of Myanmar) may well put them into a similar predicament.'¹

The SPDC generals cannot swim against this tide of events in Asia and the international arena. Nor can they turn back the clock. Sooner or later they need to take steps to defuse this political crisis that has now lasted over a decade, or it will be done for them. A first step would be for the generals to understand the ambiguities inherent in the Burmese political vocabulary they are currently employing in their English press-materials. Instead of seeking 'reconsolidation' and 'national unity', the generals should consider seeking

¹ 'Singapore's Lee says Burmese generals face Pinochet-like situation'. AFP, 11.12.1998.

'reconciliation' and 'national harmony'; instead of emphasizing 'national independence' alone, there should also be emphasis on granting 'freedom'; instead of emphasizing 'duties' there should also be 'rights'. Other steps need to be taken to institute humane prisons, and to permit representation and visits to prisoners, including frequent visits from relatives and the International Red Cross. A further step would be to separate the judiciary from the arm of government and to stop treating the law as if it were a form of army discipline or as if it concerned promulgating 'royal orders' (*yaza-that*). Political prisoners should be released, and the generals should begin to work with the instruments of influence (*awza*) rather than authority (*ana*). On the basis of the goodwill thus generated, bi-lateral negotiations with ethnic minorities should be avoided in favour of setting in motion a broader-based nation-wide process of reconciliation in which the parameters should not be placed too narrowly, and during which the generals should indicate their own willingness to change.

To ensure nation-wide co-operation of all Burmese citizens in the development and modernization of Burma, it is vital that mechanisms be instituted that permit informed criticism to be expressed of the regime's policies and actions for the benefit of the country. This should not be treated as 'confrontation'. The regime should not criminalise its critics but listen to them and act upon them for the benefit of the country as a whole. Also, the regime should reduce its military intelligence and its propaganda, and instead invest in education and in equipping people with skills. To do so effectively, it must invite independent civilian intellectuals to question current policies and seriously investigate and research all the problems that face Burma in the Twenty-First Century. For the regime to gain respect, it must be seen to act positively upon their recommendations.

The issue of Buddhism should be treated very carefully, and the turmoil resulting from U Nu's decision to make Buddhism the national religion should not be repeated. The authorities would do well to keep in mind Aung San's distinction between Buddhism as a religion ('Buddhendom', *bokda batha*), and Buddhism as an instrument for attaining to superior ethics in government ('Buddhism', *buddha sasana*); though the role for the latter may be expanded, the former should not become a template for the State.

If these are done then it is possible for 'disciplined democracy' still to evolve into internationally recognised 'democracy'. If, however, reforms are not forthcoming, and the current nation-wide impetus for peaceful resolution is not harvested, then, as one journalist pointed out, the analogy of Burma as 'the Yugoslavia of Asia' that some Burmese army officers sometimes proclaim, may well come true. Burma may yet unfold in the same way as Yugoslavia – into disintegration.¹ It is not too late for the younger generation of generals to salvage some good from the terrible reputation the army earned as the result of its counterproductive initiatives over the last decade. To do so it must engage the international community more constructively than has been done hitherto. Let us bear in mind Aung San's words, who was willing to engage the international community in a constructive way, saying 'let us ... join hands, Britons, Burmans[ese] and all nations alike, to build up an abiding fruitful peace over the foundations of the hard-won victory that all of us desiring progressive direction in our own affairs and in the world at large, have at long last snatched firmly and completely from the grabbing hands of Fascist barbarians, a peace ... not of the graveyard, but creative of freedom, progress and prosperity in the world'.²

Though I believe the most important Buddhist dimensions to democracy politics are covered in this book, the time limit on my stay at the ILCAA has not permitted me to cover all the relevant materials as exhaustively as I would have liked. Much material has emanated in terms of speeches and interviews, undoubtedly more than I have been able to cover. I anticipate that the new information and historical interpretations available on this period will at some point necessitate revision of ideas expressed here. For reasons of space, I have left out here chapters on the pursuit of magic by the generals, on the Buddhist dimensions to the concept of democracy and on the overlap between *samatha* and legal discourse in the *Manu-gye*.

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¹ Martin Smith. 'Playing the ethnic card: Burma at the cross-roads.' *Burma Debate*, Nov–Dec 1998, p 13.

² 'The resistance movement' (Aung San 1971:22).

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Introduction

The largest popular uprising in the post-colonial history of Burma began in 1988, within weeks of Ne Win's resignation from his position as chairman of the Burma Socialist Programme Party on 23 July that year. The hard-handed manner in which the regime responded to a conflict between students and the police in March of that year evolved into what retrospectively became known by the date when the major protests began, namely the 'Four Eights Affair' or simply '8-8-88'.¹ Army involvement in politics had produced no measurable benefits over a period of twenty-six years. Indeed, it had produced a serious economic decline, and had not prepared the country in terms of infrastructure, skills and resources to share in the economic growth experienced by most of its neighbours, including Thailand, Malaysia and China. From one of the wealthiest countries in Asia it had fallen to be classed by the United Nations in December 1987 among the ten Least Developed Countries (LDC) in the world. Martial law was declared 3 August 1988, but it was already becoming evident, to the great disappointment of the military, that the single party system Ne Win had built since the 1962 military coup was no more. The people knew that this was the case, and the army was not in a position to assert its authority until mid-1989, when it took the extreme measure of imprisoning and placing under house arrest the leaders of the democracy movement.

This phenomenal crisis the army hoped to resolve by promising (and indeed holding) the May 1990 elections, which it presented as a response to the demands in particular by Buddhist monks. However, the results were not what it hoped for. The elections demonstrated that the National Unity Party had openly supported was extremely unpopular, with only 10 seats against the overwhelming 392 seats for the National League for Democracy (NLD), or 82 per cent of all constituencies. In other words, the army could not rely on the popular vote to stay in power. Not only had the army-dominated political structure thus been dealt a blow, but the army that stood behind this, once popularly portrayed as heroes sacrificing their lives in the fight against colonialists and fascist oppressors, had also been given the thumbs down.

The army desperately held on for life, using martial law and extreme authoritarian measures. Soon after, it decided to reinvent the purpose of the elections, stalled the hand-over of power to the NLD, and referred to the need for a new constitution prior to transfer of power. It also announced the need for a National Convention at which hand-picked members would write the new constitution, a process from which the NLD was expelled by the regime in November 1995 after the NLD had decided to boycott the proceedings. The National Convention still remains to be completed.

In short, the four regimes (see Table 1) that followed Ne Win's resignation continue to be despised, both internationally and within Burma. However, this book, unlike so many recent documents on Burma, does not primarily serve to document the wrongs or the atrocities committed by the regime. Nor does it aim to give a blow by blow account of events. These have been amply documented in the many well-researched reports of organizations such as, among others, Amnesty International and the United Nations, and a number of recent academically inclined publications, such as the edited volumes *Burma: prospects for a democratic future* edited by Robert I. Rotberg (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1998) and *The challenge of change in a divided society* edited by Peter Carey (MacMillan Press, 1997), along with Mya Maung's latest book *The Burma road to capitalism: economic growth versus democracy* (Praeger, 1998) and in the Open Society Institute's journal *Burma Debate*. These are supplemented by the journalism of publications such as *The Nation*, *The Bangkok Post*, *Mainichi Daily News*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and other publications regularly posted on BurmaNet News. Furthermore, the regime's own versions of events are readily available from its publications, in particular, *The New Light of Myanmar (NLM)*, *Information Sheets (IS)* and *Myanmar Perspectives (MP)*, as well as *Myanmar Monitor* – all of which are posted on the Internet.

The influence of the media and the Internet

This book takes a particular dimension of the current political crisis as its starting point, namely its Buddhist aspects. I must stress that this is only one particular dimension of many. But it is one that has hardly made any headlines and that has been – given the important role of monks in the protests and in the

¹ Supposedly the protests began at 8:08 a.m. The significance of this lies in the magic of numerology, and as a response to the number 9 deemed lucky by the regime.

elections – one of the most ignored aspects of Burmese politics. I also cannot emphasize enough that I focus here primarily on the politics as practised in the areas controlled by the SLORC-SPDC regimes. To have a better view of what is going on elsewhere in Burma, I strongly advise readers to supplement this perspective with those from the point of view of the many other Burmese ethnic and religious groups.

Since the 1962 coup, the military have attempted to keep Burma isolated from the outside world. On the basis of this, Burma received the designation 'hermit state'. Up until 1988, this was based on total isolation of the country, but after 1989 the financial and political turmoil in Burma forced the doors open to businesses, tourists and to a limited number of non-government organisations (NGOs).

It was the conventional media that played a crucial role in waking Burma from its slumber. In particular, new forms of communication technology – including satellite communication and the Internet – have posed a most serious threat to the ways of the regime, since these permit no control.

The 1988 street battles were reported all over the world. Information was fed back to protesters via the Burmese language services of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Voice of America (VOA). Soon the Burmese military was acutely aware that the international media had considerably strengthened the resolve and efficacy of the protesters. Without the BBC and VOA reporting through 1988 and 1989, the protests and election campaigns would not have been as persistent and effective as they were, and without this media pressure it is possible that the authorities would have simply omitted the May 1990 elections.

Given its earlier policy of isolation, therefore, it is no surprise that the foreign media had been identified by the regime as one of the principal causes of the unrest in Burma. General Saw Maung repeatedly attributed blame at their door for the unrest in Burma.¹ Next to his dislike for party politics, General Saw Maung greatly disliked the 'journalistic technique', as 'all such writings are insidious propaganda'.² Saw Maung desired to dominate the agenda of the international media by conducting press-campaigns so that it might open the eyes of the world to the truth about Burma. The first press-campaign since 1962 was Saw Maung's briefing of journalists on 16 January 1989, and since then the regime has repeatedly organized press conferences to present its point of view. Though initially it thought this would change world opinion, it soon learnt that international media attention is a much more complex issue to manage, in which the possibilities for legitimizing authoritarian measures are very limited indeed. General Khin Nyunt has continued these press-campaigns, complaining that 'every time an anti-government movement occurs, the foreign news media take the opportunity to write and broadcast exaggerated versions of the events or outright lies and rumours of all kinds.'³

In the course of 1989, Burma lost much media attention in favour of greater international concerns. The world press diverted its attention to China between end April and June 1989 leading up to the Tiananmen Square incident. Michael Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) precipitated the spectacular fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, and culminated in the disintegration of the Soviet Union by the end of 1990. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991 were added elements competing with Burma for international attention.

Burma was resuscitated in the news when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Aung San Suu Kyi in July 1991. However, the Burmese cause was not advanced until 1994, when the political struggle moved from the jungle to the Internet, transforming the army of students into an army of cyber-activists.⁴ This opened up a completely new kind of boundary along which the regime had to defend itself from attack. Burma was the first Asian country for which the Internet made such a significant difference, at around the same time as it was being used in Mexico to wage 'Net-war'.⁵ It is upon BurmaNet that other country-focused Internet sites, including Singapore and Indonesia, were later modelled.

BurmaNet was founded in January 1994 by Doug Steele, a student who had just finished his

¹ Saw Maung (1990b:13,77,105,147,152,242,253).

² Saw Maung (1990b:259).

³ 'The clarification by Secretary-1 of the State Law and Order Restoration Council Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt at the special press conference held in the hall of the Ministry of Defence on 31 December 1996'. ရန်ကင်း၊ သတင်းနှင့်စာနယ်ဇင်းလုပ်ငန်း၊ 1997, p. 21.

⁴ Grant Peck. 'Internet used in fight for freedom'. Associated Press, 23.04.1995; Philip Shenon. '2-edged sword: Asian regimes on the Internet'. *New York Times* 29.05.1995; Nigel Holloway. 'Caught in the Net'. *Far East Economic Review*, 28.11.1996; 'Myanmar rebels armed with Net'. CNET News (Reuters), 11.03.1998; Peter Eng. 'On-line activists step up fight', *Bangkok Post* 29.04.1998; Win Htein. 'Burma: from bomb sites to websites, the struggle for democracy. Burma discovers modern communications technology.' *The Bangkok Post*, 29.11.1998. See also Alden M. Hayashi. 'The Net effect'. *Scientific American*, January 1999.

⁵ 'Netwar could make Mexico ungovernable.' Pacific Rim News Service, 04.04.1995.

undergraduate philosophy degree at Georgetown University, and who had arrived in Thailand in October the previous year. In January, he was hired by Maureen Aung Thwin from the Open Society Institute (OSI), a foundation created by the financier George Soros that aims to prise open centrally planned societies. Initially, he was hired to train people to use modems so that communication costs among Burmese exiles abroad could be cut. However, as part of this he felt he needed to give an incentive for the Burmese community to have a reason to log on. He therefore began to spend time reporting information relayed by the refugees on the border with Burma from Bangkok on an almost daily basis, under the Strider synonym and under the banner 'Appropriate Information Technologies, Practical Strategies'.¹ This evolved into a comprehensive news service, containing eventually not only published materials from newspapers, magazines and newsletters, but also reports from wire services and much unpublished material, including sometimes intelligence reports. BurmaNet collected in one place all possible facts and opinions about the situation in Burma. It expanded its readership so that not only activists read it, but diplomats, journalists, academics and, indeed, members of the regime.²

One journalist put it that 'in just a couple of years, Internet activists have turned an obscure, backwater conflict into an international issue and helped make Rangoon one of the world's most vilified regimes.'³ The Internet put a world-wide community of political refugees and exiled students world-wide in search for political causes in touch, and it resulted in enormous pressures on companies, politicians and humanitarian organizations. Campaigns led to consumer pressure on consumer brands, shareholder pressure on companies, and voter pressure on governments. Within two years, these led to major consumer companies ceasing or withdrawing investment in Burma and the placing of Burma high on the political agenda of governments around the world, leading to the European and American boycotts of Burma.

The Free Burma Coalition played an important role in raising international awareness. Founded in September 1995 by Zarni, a Burmese activist studying at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, this organised one of the first political cyber-campaigns focusing on any one particular country. It rapidly became one of the world's largest international on-line human rights campaigns covering more than 150 university campuses. It delivered some remarkably speedy results. Using the lessons learnt from the South Africa boycott, with the added benefit of the Internet, student campus activities were organized throughout the United States. Their activities contributed within months to Berkeley passing a resolution in that year prohibiting business with Burma.⁴ Boycotts by different states were called, culminating eventually in the April 1997 ban of all new American investments in Burma by Bill Clinton. In March 1997, the former EEC suspended Burma's privileged trade relationships.

What this development meant was that not only had the Internet contributed a forum in which some form of dialogue could emerge between various interest groups in full public view, but it had contributed to facilitating the damaging blow to the regime's hopes for foreign investments and to its international standing. The regime monitored the Internet campaign with some trepidation. It was a thorn in its side from the very beginning.⁵ Indeed, ASEAN member governments – and in particular those seeking to keep a local sense of Asian values (in particular Singapore) – are watching developments on the Internet in relation to Burma with great worry.⁶ General Khin Nyunt was to later complain that 'some major Western nations

¹ At that time there were already Burma-related Bulletin Boards in operation (soc.culture.burma), but BurmaNet permitted anonymity of subscription as long as one did not post a message for others to see. It also prevented junk mail as the recipients are not known outside the listserv itself. This received a more versatile permanent gopher and ftp site in early 1995 by means of a donation by Sun Microsystems of a Sun Site at the University of North Carolina. In April 1995 a separate news service (BurmaNews-L) was split off from the discussion group (BurmaNet-L). A full www service was set up under the umbrella of the Free Burma Coalition founded by Zarni at the University of Wisconsin. The mailing list is operated and maintained by the Institute for Global Communication (IGC).

² I am grateful to Doug Steele for much of this information.

³ Peter Eng. 'On-line activists step up fight'. *Bangkok Post*, 29.04.1998

⁴ Ann Scott Tyson. 'Political activism on campus takes on a cyberspace twist.' *Christian Science Monitor*, 31.10.1995; Joe Urschel. 'Internet links campuses in 90's-style protest, college cry: Free Burma'. *USA Today*, 29.04.1996; T. T. Nhu. 'Web clout: online networking helps unite pro-democracy efforts.' *San Jose Mercury News* (California), 06.01.1997.

⁵ 'Clarification on how the NLD Party in the country has been conspiring with Myanmar Expatriate Groups and some international organizations to destabilize the situation and incite anarchy and uprising within Myanmar'. (<http://www.myanmar.com>)

⁶ During a meeting between Southeast Asian officials and broadcasters it was decided that the Internet needed policing, and it 'affirmed the importance of having safeguards against easy access to sites which ran counter to our cherished values, traditions and culture. ASEAN would encourage other nations, especially the West to understand its concern.' 'ASEAN Forum agrees to police the Net'. Reuters, 04.09.1996.

are attempting to destabilize the political situation, creating financial problems and difficulties for the ruling governments in the developing nations', and that they 'have the use of the Internet at their disposal to have any desired impact around the world within seconds'. His view was that instead, 'the use of the Internet should conform to the political, economic and social policies being followed in the country and serve national interest' and should be used to 'prevent the penetration of decadent culture, enticements to copy the Western traditions and styles and unchecked inflow of information'.¹ Furthermore, the Burmese ambassador to America said that 'allegations abound mainly because of the fodder fed into the Internet by armed expatriate groups and those who have an axe to grind. But those who know Myanmar well and are not gullible, will find that the allegations of widespread human rights abuse have never been substantiated.'² Though Zarni assures me that the Free Burma Coalition is an entirely independent initiative, the regime traces their woes ultimately back to Maureen Aung Thwin, Director of the Open Institute's Burma Project, as the one causing the greatest damage in terms of opposition funding.³

The regime simply had to respond. It was within months of the launch of the Free Burma campaign, namely on 8 October 1995, that the regime formally launched its own Internet site. Though this was presented as preparation for the new tourism campaign 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996', it was clearly intended as their Internet corrective to international criticism. Three media features were part of this site, namely the regime's *Information Sheets*, *the New Light of Myanmar* and *Myanmar Perspectives*. The *NLM* is available online also in French and German.

The change of battlefield from jungle to Internet also meant a change in the departments attaining power and the qualifications needed for promotion to high office. The ascendance of the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS) and of men such as the Internet savvy Colonel Kyaw Win, also indicate a major change of direction for the regime.

Unocal which has a billion-dollar natural gas pipeline investment in Burma, largely financed the Washington-based Burma/Myanmar Forum, a non-profit organization set up in 1996 aimed at 'educating the press, Congress and the public about American foreign-policy issues'. It paid for high-ranking American government and ex-government officials to visit Burma.⁴ This had collapsed by October 1998 because of the regime's hard-line treatment of the democracy movement.

In 1998, the regime made an attempt to redress the negative international image of Burma. Military leaders eventually decided to give interviews from April 1998 onwards, immediately prior to the NLD's announced celebration of their electoral victory.⁵ Furthermore, through its commercial front in the United States, the regime hired Jefferson Waterman International, an expensive American public relations company. Apparently this company was preferred because Ann Wroblewski was associated with it, a former Assistant Secretary of State for Narcotics control, just as narcotics exports from Burma had seen a major increase.⁶ Jefferson Waterman began, among other campaigns, to publish *Myanmar Monitor* on 13 May 1998, providing up-beat commentary on the potential of investment in Burma. The first paragraphs of the first issue said that 'recently-imposed US investment sanctions on Myanmar (Burma) are based on politics and are short-sighted with only short-run benefits, according to some in Myanmar itself'. The second paragraph says that Myanmar leaders have been quoted as

'feeling sorry' for US companies, which will lose out on future returns from investments, soon to be prohibited by US President Bill Clinton's decision to punish Myanmar for alleged abuses in human rights and lack of co-operation in narcotics enforcement. These men are frustrated because they say they have worked hard to steer their country towards being attractive

¹ 'Burma: Khin Nyunt: West uses Internet to destabilize countries'. Rangoon TV Myanmar Network, 30.06.1998.

² 'Open letter from Myanmar Embassy in Washington, D.C., to Mr Derek Fatchett, MP, Foreign Office Minister of State of Britain', 16.10.1998. Published in *IS*, 19.10.1998.

³ Byatti. 'A wrong move and one could lose the game.' *NLM*, 14.10.1996.

⁴ 'Former U.S. officials discuss investment in Myanmar'. Kyodo News, 10.10.1997; 'Oil and politics'. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30.10.1997.

⁵ Interviews with General Khin Nyunt, Ohn Gyaw and Brigadier General Able were published in April-June 1998 issue of *Leaders Magazine* Vols. 21, No. 2 (republished as 'The facts as we see them'. *IS*, 22.05.1998 and *MP*, May 1998; 'Myanmar's Foreign Affairs: an interview with His Excellency U Ohn Gyaw, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Union of Myanmar', *IS* 23.05.1998; 'Investment opportunities: an interview with His Excellency Brigadier-General D.O. Abel, Minister, State Peace and Development Council, Union of Myanmar'. *IS*, 24.05.1998; 'Report on exclusive Than Shwe interview.' *NLM*, 14.06.1998). Excerpts from these were republished: 'On-the-record with Myanmar's leaders'. *Myanmar Monitor*, Vol. 2.14-2.16, 26.06-24.07.1998. For General Than Shwe this was the first time he addressed the press.

⁶ 'Burma's image problem is a moneymaker for U.S. lobbyists.' *Washington Post*, 24.02.1998. On the drug issue see Leslie Kean & Dennis Bernstein. 'The Burma-Singapore Axis: globalizing the heroin trade'. *Covert Action Quarterly*, Spring 1998.

to foreign investors. They say they have a long-range plan which encompasses a strong economic development program as a foundation to democratic political reforms, planned to follow the unification of some 16 Myanmar ethnic states.¹

By the end of 1998, Jefferson Waterman International increasingly faced the impossible task of defending a regime that was gradually being abandoned by companies world-wide. Not only American and European finances were withdrawing, but Asian companies were also leaving as the result of the Asian crisis.² In January 1999, in a desperate bid to reverse the tide of world-opinion, the regime announced it was receiving the editors of *Leaders Magazine*.³ It believed this magazine would influence leaders and opinion-makers world-wide, for the magazine is 'circulated to distinguished leaders of the world', circulation 'is strictly limited', and to receive it, 'one must be the leader of a nation, an international company, a world religion, an international institute of learning or an international labour organization, or a chief financial officer, a major investor on behalf of labour or corporate pension funds, a chief information officer, a Nobel Laureate, or a leader in science or the arts.'⁴ The regime's understanding of Western media is evidently extremely limited, for this magazine has no impact on Western opinion makers.

Internet limits and local debates

There are several points to note about Internet development in relation to Burma *vis-à-vis* countries such as Indonesia. In Indonesia the process of encouraging foreign businesses to establish in the country had been much more gradual, taking place over a longer period. However, Burma was opened up to foreign business suddenly only in 1989, and it has a very rudimentary communication infrastructure. When the 1997 Indonesian protests precipitated the downfall of Suharto, large numbers of people within the country already had access to the Internet and participated in e-mail lists in the Indonesian vernacular, so that information was freely distributed there. By contrast, though BurmaNet is known to be smuggled into Burma in encrypted form, and though some are surprisingly able to receive an Internet connection at a price,⁵ the Internet had not significantly penetrated into the country. Second, unlike the Indonesian Roman script, Burmese script has not been sufficiently standardised on the computer to permit easy communication in Burmese. Keyboard and character identity assignments are incompatible.

In sum, the Internet has undoubtedly created extraordinary channels of communication and has permitted discussions to take place on the situation in Burma beyond expectation. It has changed the way we think about Burma and I am myself deeply indebted to those who have contributed to this development, and I know that most scholars of Burma feel the same way. Also, the Burmese people will eventually be able to communicate their ideas more effectively on the Internet, and I am waiting for the time that there will be a cross-over between Burmese and 'foreign' debates.

However, as for the period up until now, developments on the Internet so far hardly penetrated this barrier – Burmese vernacular ideas are not picked up, thus leaving the 'hermit' country separation intact. This divide plays into the regime's hand, for it proclaims to represent the internationally 'misunderstood' forces of tradition, portraying the NLD as co-equivalent with foreign interests. The regime repeatedly appeals to local customs and traditions as justification for its rule, and since it criticises foreign reports about the situation in Burma as ill-informed, it is extremely important for any analysis of Burma, if it is to have any effect *within* Burma, and if it is to fill out gaps in the debates *outside* the country, to deliver as much information about local debates as possible. This is vital to advance our understanding of Burmese politics and to address the fundamental underlying cultural and religious perceptions of this political crisis.

The aim of this book is twofold. On the one hand, it is to inform a non-Burmese readership about some of the local cultural debates that underlie the stand-off between the two, which are about local concepts and local practices that have a long local historical tradition. However, the aim is also to address the regime and to try to make them understand that emphasis on local values is not a substitute for a rational government. This local historical tradition is more complex than the regime's depiction of 'Myanmar civilization' in the singular, and the army has no monopoly over it. In this respect at least, the NLD is no less 'Myanmar' and no more 'foreign' than the army itself, which has not been beyond using outdated language, expressions and

¹ *Myanmar Monitor*, Vol. 1.01, 13.05.1997.

² 'Hard to spin this one'. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15.10.1998.

³ 'Secretary-I receives *Leaders Magazine* Chief Editor' *NLM*, 08.01.1999; 'Chairman of State Peace and Development Council Senior General Than Shwe receives Chief Editor of *Leaders Magazine*'. *NLM*, 09.01.1998.

⁴ 'Interview with Gen. Than Shwe.' *NLM*, 14.06.1998.

⁵ Matthew McAllester. 'A whisper from Burma ...'. *Newsday*, 19.11.1997.

ideas about culture and race as inherited from the British during the colonial period.

Mental culture and politics in Burma

This book aims to shed light on selected long-term operative vernacular ideas that have hitherto enjoyed little or no consistent exposure either in the media or on the Internet. A seasoned observer on the relationship between politics and religion in Burma, and in South and South-East Asia in general, once commented that ‘the diversity, range, and inherent importance of the problems connected with this interaction [between politics and religion] in Burma are unequalled elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia. In no other country of this region has there been such a dramatic religio-political development...’¹ Though he referred in particular to the period of U Nu’s premiership, he summed up a general situation in Burma that has excited intellectuals attracted to the heady mix between Marxism and Buddhism. These include the founding father of alternative economics, namely E.F. Schumacher who, after practising *vipassana* in Burma, developed his theory of Buddhist economics (in which the economy should work to reduce rather than kindle desire) and founded the Society for Intermediate Technology in 1965.² I would also count among them the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, for whom Buddhism provided an alternative idiom for structuralism, and for whom the Burmese experience of Buddhism represented a sense of freedom not permissible to Western society. Indeed after his deliberations on Buddhism, he concludes his book on an anthropology that is ‘entropology’, the ‘name of the discipline concerned with the study of the highest manifestations of ... [the] process of disintegration’. This questions the self at the basis of what he considered old-fashioned sociology and old-fashioned anthropology.³ Other authors for whom Burmese Buddhism was a subject of extreme interest include Trevor Ling, Winston King, Michael Mendelson and Manuel Sarkisyanz, and converts to Buddhism such as Nyanatiloka, Ananda Mettaya and Francis Story.

This book is also a product of intellectual excitement at discovering such radically different ways of perceiving and organising the world. There is no doubt that Burmese society and political thought have many unique features. In this book I work out in what ways mental culture – which incorporates a wide array of practices usually identified as ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplation’ – is at the heart of Burmese politics. I demonstrate that it is not a coincidence that mental culture has provided an important key to government reform. The logic of this is primarily set out in Appendix 1 – mental culture has taken on the ritual efficacy

¹ Smith (1965:307).

² Fritz Schumacher’s experiences in Burma are of interest. This is described in *Alias Papa: a life of Fritz Schumacher* (Oxford UP, 1984) by Barbara Wood, his daughter. Though he was sought out to advise the British government of Burma as early as November 1944, he ended up in Burma at the invitation of Prime-Minister U Nu between early January and early April 1955. A threat of the American-sponsored Kuo Mintang forces to Burma on 30 June 1953 had resulted in the breakdown of the USA aid programme. U Nu searched specifically for a non-American economic adviser and wanted Schumacher, who was by then known as an economist with Fabian and Buddhist sympathies. For Schumacher this appointment coincided with a period in his personal life of increased interest in religion after 1950. He frequently met Buddhologist Edward Conze during 1953, whose lectures on comparative religion he attended. Schumacher’s experiences in Burma are described in chapter 17 ‘The breakthrough’ and chapter 18 ‘I am a Buddhist’. Schumacher initially wrote a paper called ‘Economics in a Buddhist country’. He viewed Burma as ‘a country with aspirations and ideals traditionally opposed to those of Western civilization, deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of Buddhism’ and he realized that ‘economic development in Burma was not a question of matters such as trading arrangements, as he had advocated in the days of the Wilson Committee, it was far more fundamental, it required a different kind of economics altogether, a “Buddhist economics”.’ Though he conceived this Buddhist economics initially in terms of the Gandhian spinning wheel, his experiences in Burma resulted in a more specifically Buddhist chapter on ‘Buddhist economics’ in his book *Small is beautiful: a study of economics as if people mattered*. (Blond & Briggs 1973), orig. published in *Asia: a handbook* ed Guy Wint (London: Anthony Blond, 1966). See also H. Henderson. ‘The legacy of E.F. Schumacher.’ *Environment*, May 1978.

Schumacher’s Buddhist experience in Burma is described in U Thet Tun’s ‘A Buddhist economist’ (*In honour of Mingun Sayadaw’s 80th birthday*, Tipitaka Nikaya Ministrative Organization, 1991, pp. 91-99). He begins this article describing the ‘Age of refugees’, including ‘political refugees’, ‘economic refugees’, ‘boat people’ (from Vietnam), ‘culture refugees’ (Americans to old Europe), and finally ‘spiritual refugees’. The latter are ‘the Western individuals seen at various meditation centres in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand’ who are ‘the people who in economic language are not satisfied merely with the material infrastructure of their lives in their developed countries but seek the spiritual superstructure in the East.’ He concludes his work saying that ‘Buddhist Myanmar should be proud to have received such a discerning spiritual refugee as E.F. Schumacher and to have relaunched him as the world famous Buddhist economist.’ (p. 99).

³ Lévi-Strauss’s interest in Buddhism is clearly evident in his *Tristes Tropiques* (Penguin, 1976). Though on the subject of the Amazon, this book ends with the final two chapters on a Buddhist note – on his return from the Amazon in chapter 39 he visits Taxila, the Indian centre of Buddhist learning, and chapter 40 culminates in his recounting a visit to a Burmese Buddhist monastery along the Burmese frontier with Chittagon in September 1950. (See also I. Strenski. Lévi-Strauss and the Buddhists. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22, 1, 1980, pp. 3-22).

of sacrifice, the method *per se* of confronting disorder, evil and embodiment. However, it does so by uprooting certain impure qualities in the mind, namely by 'self'-sacrifice. Indeed, I demonstrate here that vital political concepts such as 'national unity', 'national independence' and 'freedom' are all conceived of, ultimately, as products of mental culture. This relationship is cemented by identification of mental culture and political order at various levels. For example, 'Burma' is popularly derived from Brahma, the entirely spiritual beings in the upper heavens, and their lives and attainments are identified with mental culture. Furthermore, given the importance of mental culture in politics, I am presenting the institutions that teach *vipassana* as perhaps the only institutions in Burma that have the potential to transcend the current entrenched political divisions. Exponents on both sides accept its importance, and both sides patronise its traditions. I hope this book will alert policy makers on Burma to the relevance of these Buddhist concepts and institutions in Burma for developing conciliatory politics. In Burmese political tradition, the neutrality of the renouncer competes favourably with the neutrality of the United Nations and NGOs.

The Internet and the foreign media have challenged the military concept of 'self' and stretched it to the limits. In this context the techniques of self-investigation have begun to play a role in Burma that goes back to the beginnings of British colonial occupation of Burma. The politicisation of mental culture goes back to the foundation of the Burmese Buddhist state as celebrated in the encounter between Anawratha and Shin Araham (see Appendix 1.2). Burmese rulers have historically been legitimated, in part at least, by demonstrating support for Buddhist saints, in particular forest monks. The primary duty of the king is to provide for the Buddhist order, and Konbaung kings were known by the epithet 'benefactor to the Buddhist realm' [ဘုရားနာဒါဝိတာ].¹ Since Anawratha's rule, arhats have been consulted by rulers at moments of crisis and such encounters have retrospectively been construed as having had implications for changes in the shape and structure of, not only the political, but also of the Buddhist order. Thus, Anawratha's encounter with Shin Araham in 1056 supposedly resulted in the introduction of the Theravada Buddhist monastic ordination tradition to the Pagan dynasty by forcible appropriation from the Mon (Thahton) in the south, but it also marked the beginning of a new Theravada Buddhist monarchic system in Upper Burma. This system lasted until the British put an end to it in 1886. As I will show, the idea of national unity that developed under the monarchy was originally conceived in terms of the unity of the Sangha, but after 1988 it came to be expressed as the unity of the army.

A decisive shift took place during Mindon's reign (r. 1853–78), after the second Anglo-Burmese War.

Men of prowess tend to be fascinated by severe ascetics. In Mindon's court there were some people who wielded influence not because of official position but because of their 'spiritual power'. Those ascetics included Htuthkaung Sayadaw and the Shwegyin Sayadaw, holy men, the nun Mai Kin, and a Manipuri Brahman. Interested in the occult, astrology, and alchemy, King Mindon supported all these ascetics.²

In his history of Buddhism in Burma, Ferguson observed that 'after King Mindon ... many lay people, particularly in Lower Burma, began to honour meditating forest monks, and some of these developed the belief that meditation was superior to textual memorization as the means to nirvana.'³ There is a substantial body of vernacular Burmese literature arising in the course of this period that points at Buddhist mental culture as the highest form of Buddhism. Dozens of these point at historical evidence of the practice and teaching of *vipassana* ([၆] ဝါ), or insight contemplation, in the 19th century that have not so far been explored by Western scholarship. A number of such works originated in the middle of the last century, but most are of 20th century origin. This literature reveals how *vipassana* practice was subject to debate from the second quarter of the 19th century onwards, roughly coterminous with the British encroachment on Burmese territory and the loss of self-esteem this brought to members of the royal family. It involved monastic personalities such as Thilon Sayadaw (1786–1860), Htuthkaung Sayadaw (1798–1880), Shwegyin Sayadaw (1822–93), Hngetdwin Sayadaw (1831–1910), and Hpondawgyi U Thila (1832–1908), at least one nun, namely Me Kin (1814–82), and members of Mindon's Court, such as his queens and the Minister of Interior Affairs Yaw Atwin Wun U Hpo Hlaing (1829–1883), Minister of the Interior under the last two kings of Burma. This minister was himself a practitioner of *vipassana* and author of three books on the subject. He furthermore advocated 'traditional democracy' back in the 1870s.

In supporting these personalities Mindon raised the profile of the Burmese *vipassana* traditions more than any king before. Furthermore, his personal practice and encouragement of these techniques between

¹ Maung-daung Hsayadaw (1961:110, 457, 462); Toe Hla (1987:173n11).

² Myo Myint (1987:124).

³ Ferguson (1975:257).

1840–70 sets him apart from his predecessors in Burmese history. During his rule, and as a result of his sponsorship, came to fame these earliest generations of *vipassana* practitioners to whom contemporary teachers trace back their lineage of practice. Indeed, as I will show later, he was the first Burmese king to incorporate mental culture into royal discipline.

The popularization of *vipassana* did not take place on any great scale, among unordained Buddhists at least, until the economic depression of the 1930s when these techniques came to be disseminated predominantly by pupils of the Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) and Mingun Sayadaw (1869–1954). Though a famous role model in terms of his own meditative practices, contributions by the Ledi Sayadaw himself were mainly limited to preaching and writing about the subject: he personally never practically taught lay persons on any scale. Mingun's contribution, on the other hand, did involve practical instruction to the laity on some scale, as he was involved in the earliest-known institutionalization of formal classes for unordained in a centre founded for this purpose by his disciples as early as 1911. Nevertheless, it was mainly pupils of these two monks who took *vipassana* methods to the masses. The big names in the 1920s and 1930s were the Kyaungbàn Sayadaw (1860–1927), Nyaunglún Sayadaw (1864–1933), Theikchádaung Sayadaw (1871–1937), Mòhnyìn Sayadaw (1873–1964), Hsaya Thetgyì (1873–1946), Hanthawádi Sayadaw (1886–1959), Sùnlùn Sayadaw (1878–1952), Myat Theìn Htùn (1896–) and the Webu Sayadaw (1896–1977): possibly with exception of Nyaunglún Sayadaw, these had all been influenced in one way or another either through personal contact or reading the writings of the Ledi or Mingun Sayadaws.

From the Mindon period to the time of U Nu, the *vipassana* traditions moved from a technique appropriated by the aristocracy to a popular technique that is within reach of everyone – it represented the democratisation of enlightenment. What Mindon had done in the domain of the palace, U Nu did for the country as a whole – his was a programme for the true popularisation, democratisation and internationalisation of enlightenment. U Nu (1907–95), Burma's only democratically elected Prime Minister, sponsored in the 1940s and 1950s what was by then a third generation of teachers to disseminate these *vipassana* techniques under the umbrella of state sponsorship, amongst whom the Mahasi Sayadaw was by far the most influential. The *satipatthana* methodology of the Mahasi is traced back ultimately to the Thilon Sayadaw, a forest monk whose teachings greatly influenced King Mindon. Accountant-General U Ba Khin, the other influential *vipassana* teacher, traces his method back to the *anapana* technique of the Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) who was greatly influenced by U Hpo Hlaing.

These were an informal instrument for government reform and for the establishment of a bureaucracy emancipated from greed and corruption. The empire of meditation centres that teach the techniques of the Mahasi Sayadaw, though originally established as a private initiative beginning in the late 1930s, became virtually an instrument of state when they were established under the patronage of the Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Association founded by U Nu, who became Prime Minister within months of founding this organization.

The writings of John F. Brohm (1957), Winston King (1960, 1964, 1980), the auto-biographical travelogues of Shattock (1958) and Byles (1962, 1965), and the vignettes by Kornfield (1977), have so far constituted the main source material in English upon which our current understanding of these traditions is based (apart from my own thesis). Though Brohm and King, in their concern to document the Nu era, ignored historical dimensions prior to the Nu period, the correlation they both identify between transformation in the political order and popularisation of *vipassana* during the U Nu period holds also for the Mindon period – Mindon and U Nu were the only two statesmen to have sponsored a programme of *vipassana* and a Sangayana (Buddhist Synod), and to have taken mental culture into the heart of government. However, the Mindon and the Nu era, almost a century apart, also marked either end of the colonial period, whilst faith in Burmese Buddhist identity was most severely shaken, but where there were the horizons of freedom and national independence still in view. In this sense *vipassana* accomplished more than crossing the threshold of death as part of some life-cycle ritual. In character with the way Van Gennep derived his theory of rites of passage, it also, as we shall see, plays a role in that rite of transition between one concept of domain as opposed to another, and one political system as opposed to another. Indeed, *vipassana*, with its ideal of practice in the wilderness, has a role to play in the personal transformation of Burmese leaders, of the Burmese people and of their polity. Furthermore, foreigners were historically 'wrong-viewed', which provided the popular idiom for the justice of war; now this war is fought in the minds of the *vipassana* practitioners, for whom attainment of right view is the main prize.

Given this strong association with reform and attempts to introduce indigenous models of democracy

during the final days of Burmese royalty in the last century, why should it surprise us that contemporary NLD leaders should have taken to *vipassana* practice the way they did? The *vipassana* traditions have been strongly associated with government reform. They also have much to do with the reform of the status of women in Burmese society; for example, the Mingun Sayadaw (1869–1954), the teacher of the Mahasi Sayadaw, advocated that the lineage of female *bhikkhunis* be restored.

The structure of this book

Tambiah saw an ‘inner logic to what at first sight is an unlikely conjunction between the imperial ruler and the ascetic renouncer: each may pursue his objective with integrity and yet buttress the other’.¹ The relationship between king and saint is symbiotic, symbolised by the monk Shin Araham supposedly seating himself on Anawratha's throne.² Implied in the stories of Aung San Suu Kyi's encounter with the Thamanya Sayadaw after she was released from house arrest is also such a hopeful message of momentous change in the political order. Realisation of truth in meditative act has a long history in Burma and in Theravada Southeast Asia more broadly as a precursor to momentous political change.

This book then, focuses on this third episode in the history of *vipassana* that is taking place today before our very eyes. It focuses on how the terminology and practices of mental culture inform, indeed constitute coherent internal cultural debates surrounding the politics of the military regimes since 1962, and in particular since 1988. More specifically, I focus on ‘mental culture in crisis politics’, the subject of this book, meaning the role of Buddhist discourse surrounding Buddhist techniques of meditation and contemplation in providing a structure for coping with the political crisis. This is so at the level of emotion, but also at the level of politics, for the teachers of mental culture are a nexus where the political elite come to offer their services. Indeed, mental culture provides the key ideas associated with national independence, freedom, and national unity that ultimately underlie the struggle for political legitimacy on both sides. Furthermore, I aim to show how at the same time these practices also play a role in ameliorating the suffering of prisoners confined under extreme conditions. These provide primary categories in terms of which key actors have made sense of the political arena since the 1850s.

This book deals with the correlation between the political domain as represented in Table 1 – its events, conceptualizations and personalities – with those in the Buddhist domains, as represented in Table 2. It is not the purpose of this book to analyse the entire history of correlation between political crisis and mental culture, for that would take us too far back in Burmese history, and it would take us into complexities that do not necessarily bear on the contemporary situation. My focus is primarily on the post-1988 events, though to make sense of vernacular political terminology we often have to glance back to the development of Burmese Buddhism under British colonialism, in particular in relation to Aung San and Thahkin Kodawhmaing.

Part I describes the parameters of Burmese politics as these developed since 1988, and how these are different from the preceding BSPP and U Nu periods. The SLORC–SPDC have now been in power for over a decade, and in the course of that period they have taken several initiatives that need to be understood before I can develop the NLD perspective in the subsequent Parts II–V. Having had responses from Burmese readers on a draft of this book, I realise that the importance of Part I may escape those who do not appreciate the force of irony. In my view, the military has self-produced the National League for Democracy and virtually all their ‘enemies’ by their own short-sighted behaviour. All parts have to be read to understand that, in writing this, I am not apologising for the regime, but exposing what I interpret as measures put in place to imprison and immobilise the population of Burma – to confine them to a particular *loka* much as a *beiktheik saya* would when performing *loki mangala*.

Part I elaborates post-1988 SLORC–SPDC initiatives in terms of two developments, namely ‘Aung San amnesia’ and ‘Myanmafication’. Under both U Nu and Ne Win's leadership political legitimacy depended heavily on who could claim the heritage of Aung San, the martyr for the freedom and national independence struggle. This struggle was conceived of as spiritual – political concepts such as *nyi nyut-yei* (‘national unity’, ‘harmony’, ‘national reconciliation’) and *lut-lak-yei* (‘national independence’, ‘freedom’) are associated with attainments to do with mental culture, such as *loka-nibbana* and *byama-so tayà*. Since 1988, however, unable to match Aung San Suu Kyi's broad popularity, Aung San amnesia set in among the generals. In the course of

¹ Tambiah (1984:77).

² This has sometimes been compared to the way novice Nigrodha seated himself on the throne of the great Indian king Asoka.

investigating alternative ways of legitimizing their rule, the military have set in motion a process of Myanmarification. This took the place of Aung San's heritage, involving the renaming of the country to reflect Burman pronunciation and the re-enculturing of its peoples. Since Aung San minus socialism equals democracy, and since Aung San had been reclaimed by the democracy movement, the generals conveniently forgot about him. Just as Ne Win left out 'democracy', so the SLORC-SPDC retained only a very selective part of his total spiritual quest, namely 'national independence' and left out 'freedom'. Instead of reforming government, the regime is attempting to reinvent Burma – Myanmarification is the unambiguous reinvention of Burma (Myanmar) and Burmese (Bamar).

Such military authoritarian powers have come at the cost of extreme restrictions on the population of Burma. Part II elaborates on the prison experiences of exponents of the democracy movement in terms of 'mental culture', an idea that permits freedom from the constraints of culture imposed by the regime. Practice of *vipassana* permits relief – the transcendence from *samsara* that it affords, however, is not just for the prisoner, it is relevant to the country as a whole. I also show how these *vipassana* movements are involved in government reform and are related to 'traditional democracy' and in the reform of criminals in prisons abroad.

Part III deals with the tools and manifestations of liberation politics. It shows that the ideas of revolution – *taw-hlan-yei* – and martyr – *azani* – are ultimately related to ideal results anticipated from the practice of mental culture. It also shows how the machinery of government is different from what we would expect, for it is a machinery tied into the supernatural forces of *yantara*, *mandala*, *sek* and the magic of Bo Bo Aung's circles. I have shown that other political organizations identified with the overthrow of the British colonial regime were closely associated with these practices – the *Wunthanú* movement and the *Htwet-yak-gaing* both see righteous politics as situated in the attainment of supernatural power to protect the *sasana* attained through *samatha* and the power to control *samsara*. An analysis of Aung San's speeches reveals that politics is not about the world as we know it, but it is about the Buddhist topography of *loka* and about *samsara*. I show how politicians have repeatedly opted for the practices and concepts to do with mental culture when they were challenged by crises, when they were insecure, and particularly desirous of transformation.

Part IV looks at how Aung San Suu Kyi made sense of Burma's politics increasingly in terms of Buddhism. This is the only possible avenue open to political opposition in Burma, given the criticism and the pervasive practices of 'illegalisation', the depriving of place for all forms of opposition, by the military regime. Her house arrest was symptomatic of a broader condition of political constraint – the idiom for political opposition is mental culture. I deal in some detail with her concepts of 'freedom from fear' and 'the revolution of the spirit'.

Part V addresses the chief terminology of mental culture – *samatha*, *vipassana*, and *byama-so tayà*. I catalogue the myriad ways in which these are involved in ideas about ethnic and political identity, and how they are employed in attempts to transform political, economic and other conditions deemed undesirable.

This book does not have a conclusion, for to write one at this stage would be to create the illusion that the issues have been fully understood. This is not so. This book is merely an exploratory attempt to open up the language of Buddhist practice in Burmese political ideology. The debates I raise here are not foreclosed and are very much open to interpretation and re-interpretation. The main point I wish to make is that these would be nothing but arid concepts were it not for the personalities that brought these to life, in this century of struggle for national independence *and* freedom. This book shows that the preoccupation with mental culture on the part of the political leadership in Burma is the rule, not the exception. The democracy movement, in emphasizing mental culture under repression, is indeed emphasizing, not so much 'Asian', as 'Myanmar' values, and is in fact acting in line with a long history of responding to conditions of imprisonment by means of mental culture. However, its particular brand of mental culture is not so much in the tradition of narrow Myanmarification à la 'hermit land', in which the aim is power and control over domains (*loka*), but in the tradition of freedom that opens up identity to exchanges without fear, as in the practice of mental culture that transcends *samsara*. After all, U Hpo Hlaing, as Minister of the Interior, opened up new vistas for the country with his 'traditional democracy' reforms, involving regular meetings between diverse interest groups and an enlightened government that works on the basis of wisdom rather than arbitrary authority. He did so while also practising and writing about *vipassana*. That this should land one in prison is the great tragedy of Burma.

Table 1. Elected governments and unelected regimes of Burma since national independence

Dates	Leader	Name	Abbreviation	Informal references
Aug 1944	Aung San (founder of party)	The Anti-Fascist Organization ဖက်ဆစ်ဆန့်ကျင်ရေးအဖွဲ့ချုပ်	AFO	Aung San is known as 'The General' (Bogyok), and as 'the father of Burma's national independence' [မြန်မာ့လွတ်လပ်ရေးဖခင်ကြီး]
Aug 1945		The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League ဖက်ဆစ်တိုက်ဖျက်ရေး ပြည်သူ့လွတ်လပ်ရေးအဖွဲ့	AFPFL ဖ-တ-ပ-လ hpa-ta-pa-la ဖ-ဆ-ပ-လ hpa-hsa-pa- la ¹	
4 Jan 1948 ² – 12 Jun 1956 ³	U Nu (Prime Minister)	"	"	
12 Jun 1956 – 3 May 1958 ⁴	Ba Swe (Prime Minister)	"	"	
3 May 1958 – 28 Oct 1958	U Nu (Prime Minister)	The Clean Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League	Clean AFPFL ဖ-ဆ-ပ-လ (သန့်ရှင်း) ⁵ hpa-hsa-pa-la (thán- shin)	
28 Oct 1958 – 1 Mar 1960	General Ne Win ⁶ (Prime Minister)	Caretaker Government အိမ်စောင့်အစိုးရ		
1 Mar 1960 – 2 Mar 1962 ⁷	U Nu (Prime Minister)	The Pyedaungsu Party (The Union Party) ပြည်ထောင်စုပါတီ	ပ-ထ-စ pa-hta-sa	
2 Mar 1962 – 4 Jan 1974 (military coup)	General Ne Win	The Revolutionary Council တော်လှန်ရေးကောင်စီ	တော်လှန်ရေးအစိုးရ taw-hlan-yei a-sò-yá	
4 Jan 1974 – 8 Aug 1981	(ex-General) U Ne Win ⁸ (President, Chairman BSPP)	The Burma Socialist Programme Party မြန်မာ့ဆိုရှယ်လစ်လမ်းစဉ်ပါတီ	BSPP မ-ဆ-လ ma-hsa-la	'mortar' (မဆလ) – joke about the mixture of disparate ideas in party philosophy
8 Aug 1981 – 23 Jul 1988	(ex-General) U San Yu (President) / (ex- General) Ne Win (Chairman BSPP)	"	"	"
26 Jul – 12 Aug 1988 ⁹	(Brig. (ret)) U Sein Lwin (President, Chairman BSPP)	"	"	"
19 Aug – 18 Sep 1988	Dr Maung Maung (President, Chairman BSPP)	"	"	"
18 Sep 1988 – 23 Apr 1992 (bloodless 'fake' military coup)	General Saw Maung (President)	State Law and Order Restoration Council နိုင်ငံတော်ငြိမ်ဝပ်ပိပြားမှုတည် ဆောက်ရေးအဖွဲ့	SLORC န-ဝ-တ ná-wá-dá	'jaywalker'/ 'lackadaisical' ¹⁰ (နဝေတိမ်တာင်)

¹ It should be noted that 'Ba Cho's views included much Beidin [astrology]' and, sensitive to the auspicious letters, he was responsible for changing the Anti-Fascist League's Burmese abbreviation from the original T M S Z [တံ၊ မ၊ သ၊ န] to T B S Z (Gyi Maung 1969:130).

² National Election 1 took place on 25 September 1947, and National Independence fell on 4 January 1948.

³ National Election 2 took place in 1952.

⁴ National election 3 took place in 1956.

⁵ A split took place in the AFPL between the Clean AFPFL led by U Nu and the Stable AFPFL (ဖ-ဆ-ပ-လ (တည်မြဲ)) led by U Ba Swe.

⁶ Formerly known as Thahkin Shu Maung.

⁷ National Election 4 took place on 6 February 1960.

⁸ The 1974 BSPP Constitution specified that only civilians were to take up Chairmanship of the BSPP and Presidency of the country. Therefore, Ne Win became a civilian. However, continued army influence meant that this was widely regarded as 'wearing civilian dress over army uniform'.

⁹ The protests following 8.8.88 forced out Sein Lwin.

¹⁰ Jaywalker – 'pedestrian who crosses, or walks in, street without regard for traffic'. Lackadaisical – 'languishing, affected, given to airs and graces, feebly sentimental; unenthusiastic, listless'.

30 May 1990 – Election 5 – NLD victory, winning 392 out of 485 seats (81%); military sponsored National Unity Party wins only 2%	Aung San Suu Kyi, U Kyi Maung, U Tin U (leaders of the elected NLD Party not permitted to assume government)	National League for Democracy အမျိုးသားဒီမိုကရေစီအဖွဲ့ချုပ်	NLD	
23 Apr 1992 – 15 Nov 1997	General Than Shwe (President)	State Law and Order Restoration Council နိုင်ငံတော်ပြန်လှုပ်ပြန် ဆက်ရေးအဖွဲ့	SLORC န-ဝ-တ ná-wá-dá	'jaywalker'/ 'lackadaisical' (နဝတိမ်တောင်)
15 Nov 1997 – present	General Than Shwe (President)	State Peace and Development Council နိုင်ငံတော်အေးချမ်းသာယာ ရေးနှင့်ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးကောင်စီ	SPDC န-အ-ဖ ná-á-hpá	'Cow Committee' (နွားအဖွဲ့)

2. Mental Culture in Burma and its socio-political implications

vipassana (insight contemplation)

- Buddha's enlightenment
- 1850s: response to Anglo-Burmese War II; associated with aristocracy: Mindon, his queens; factor in government reform; factor in Minister of the Interior Hpo Hlaing's 'traditional democracy'
- 1913: Mingun Sayadaw; first *vipassana* centre for the practice by laity
- post-1947: democratization of *nibbana*; U Nu – sponsor of Mahasi Sayadaw; meditation centres spread country-wide
- post-1962: nationalisation of property; Ne Win's actions forces people to come to terms with loss of property; many enter *vipassana* centres
- post-1988: prison; SLORC-SPDC; prisoners take to the practice of *vipassana*
- today: several dozen traditions, over a thousand centres, several million practitioners internationally; 'medi' visa

Buddhism

- purity (*visuddhi*); uproots mental defilements permanently; ultimate truth; *lokuttara*; awareness of suffering (*dukkha*), non-self (*anatta*), insubstantiality of existence (*anicca*); produces *ariya*; *nibbana*; 'burns' *kamma*; ceases *samsara*; *bodhi*

Socio-political implications

- justice; internationalism; democracy; influence (*awza*); transcends boundaries and 'inside'/'outside'; distrustful of language; autonomy; ultimate freedom; mental purity; government reform (salary cf. tribute); free from prison (*loka/samsara*); meditation centres; non-violent; abolishes need for police or military; 'apply oneself to the *dhamma*'; true Burman is realisation of non-self (Hpo Hlaing) cf. foreign theistic religions; equality

samatha (concentration meditation)

- beginning of world: Manu
- r. 1472–92: Dhammazedī
- 1782–1819: Bo Bo Aung challenged King Bodawpaya
- Bo Min Gaung
- 1910–40: *Wunthanú*, U Ottama, U Wisara, Thahkin Kodawhmaing
- 1930: Saya San rebellion
- 1939: *Htwetyak gaing* (Freedom Bloc), Aung San

- Galon/Nagani

Buddhism

- power (*abhiñña*); suspends mental defilements temporarily; conventional truth; *loka*; *samadhi* (one-pointed mind); *jhana*; supernatural powers; control rebirth up to highest heavens

Socio-political implications

- authority (*ana*); universal king; law; nationalism; rebellion; sovereignty; preoccupied with boundaries and 'inside'/'outside'; power; control; hermit (*yatheti*); *zawgyi*; *weikza gaing*; 'doing Sasana'; alchemy; material purity; cosmic travel; extension of life; pagoda building and conquest through royal charity; *cetana*; transactional; foundation of settlements and countries; medicine magic; armed conflict; highly localised; not (yet) exported abroad; hierarchy; magic (*loki pañña*)

byahmaso-tayà – brahma vihara: The Brahmā (Noble) Practices (Dwellings)

1840-70: King Mindon

1946: Aung San 'Problems for Burma's Freedom' (20 Jan)

1948: U Nu

1971: Burma Socialist Programme Party

1988: Aung San Suu Kyi – NLD

1992: SPDC-SLORC

Buddhism

- Mangala Sutta; *metta* (loving-kindness); *karuna* (compassion); *mudita* (sympathetic joy – *jhana* up to realm 20); *upekkha* (equanimity – *jhana* up to realm 27); social meditation ('glue of *loka*'); leading to attainment of *samadhi*; morality; preparation for success in *vipassana* and *samatha*; *paritta*

Socio-political implications

- 'mangala country'; good royal government; socialism; democracy; national harmony-unity; influence (*awza*); co-operation; engaged Buddhism; good economic development; freedom from fear; reconciliation with enemies; social bonding (ethnic identity); supernatural protection (*paritta*); higher heavens; free from unjust imprisonment (heat); non-violence; protection

¹ SLORC in Burmese literally means 'Quiet-crouched-crushed-flattened' [ZD4].