

History of the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged

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Abstract

Among Myanmar women, Aphwa Daw Oo Zun (1868-1944) is one whose name has still remained unforgotten for many years. In 1915, she built the first Buddhist Home for the Aged in Mingun, Sagaing region. This paper traces the history of the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged highlighting the diligence, patriotism and desire of Aphwa Daw Oo Zun to promote Buddhism. The aim of this research is to investigate the history of the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged. The objectives are to point out the generosity, big-heartedness and bravery of Aphwa Daw Oo Zun and her nationalist sentiments. In so doing, the researcher hopes the youth in Myanmar would be proud of her and be inspired to follow her path. The data required for this paper were mainly collected from Universities' Central Library, University of Yangon Library, Library of Myanmar Historical Research Department and Internet websites. This is an archival research in which the descriptive and analytical study methods are used.

Keywords: Aphwa Daw Oo Zun, Mingun, Buddhism, Home for the Aged, patriotism

Introduction

Since the time of Lord Buddha, the elderly persons were taken care and treated by the Buddha himself. During the reign of Myanmar Kings, they also took care of the elderly persons. In the colonial period, Christian missionaries established Homes for the Aged in Myanmar to promote their religion. Therefore, some Myanmar Buddhists felt that they had to establish the Buddhist Homes for the Aged in order to take care of the old people and promote and protect Buddhism in Myanmar.

In 1915, Aphwa (Grandmother on the elderly women) DawOoZun founded Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged encountering many difficulties. Mingun is situated at the distance of 16 miles northeast of Sagaing and located about (7) miles up the Ayeyarwady river on the west bank from Mandalay. Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged is the first Buddhist home for the elderly persons in Myanmar. This paper discusses how *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun promoted Buddhism, Buddhist teaching and nationalism during the Colonial period while she was just a single woman without having many resources.

Concerning Myanmar Buddhist Homes for the Aged, some researchers had compiled the autobiographies of U Tin who was the founder of *Hnin-si-gon* Home for the Aged, and *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun, the founder of *Mingun* Buddhist Home for the Aged. None of these papers, however, explained the diligence, patriotism and desire of Aphwa Daw Oo Zun to promote Buddhism. This paper traces the history of the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged pointing out the diligence and desire of some Myanmar women to promote Buddhism and nationalism.

Aim and objectives

The aim of this research is to investigate the history of the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged. The objectives are to point out the generosity and bravery of Aphwa Daw Oo Zun, her nationalist sentiment and willingness to promote

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Buddhism. In so doing, the researcher hopes the youth in Myanmar would be proud of her and be inspired to follow her path.

Materials and Method

The data required for this paper were mainly collected from Universities' Central Library, University of Yangon Library, Library of Myanmar Historical Research Department and internet websites. This is an archival research and the descriptive and analytical study methods are used in this paper.

Research question

How did *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun establish the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged?

Findings and Discussion

After the decease of her parents one after another, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun felt misery and sad. She did a lot of charity works in memory of her parents including financial aid to the Kandawgalay Home for the Aged in Yangon. She experienced that some French nuns at the Kandawgalay Home for the Aged were christening old helpless Myanmar Buddhists and trying to promote Christianity. She decided that she must help and take care of the elderly Buddhist people. In 1915, she built a Buddhist Home for the Aged in Mingun, Sagaing region. This paper presents the history of the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged and its founder *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun. In so doing, the researcher points out her bravery, diligence, nationalist sentiment and firm resolution to promote Buddhism.

Biography of *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun

The entrepreneurial leading person who established the first Buddhist Home for the Aged in Myanmar was *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun. Her parents were Silk and Cotton merchants, U Ei and Daw Hmyin. She was born in Mandalay on Friday, 7 August 1868 during the time of King Mindon.¹ Since she was young, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun was a devout Buddhist under the teaching and guidance of two religious parents. She was also a smart girl supervising the silk and cotton business of her parents at the age of 16. Having full of wisdom and knowledge and being a good-natured person, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun had many good friends who helped her to promote her business and advised in her community welfare activities. She travelled a lot around Myanmar for her silk trading.²

Although she grew up in a well-to-do family, she was never arrogant nor boasting but practising asceticism in accordance with the Buddha's Dhamma and she used to donate generously.³ *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun was a woman having gentle and strong will. She did not love events, festivities and entertainment. She used to wear fawn clothes and Amarapura garments and rarely put on precious jewellery. *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun believed that it was her pleasure to perform the good deeds with firm resolve. She lived as a spinster throughout her whole life just enjoying Buddha's Dhamma and taking care of the elderly persons.

¹Mingun Home for the Aged, *Knowledge about Mingon Home for the Aged*, Mandalay, Khithme Offset, 2-3 (Henceforth: *Knowledge about Mingun*)

²Takathosein Tin, (2007) *Grandmother OoZun, (The gentlewoman, the owner of benevolence, goodwill, sympathy attaining TPS degree offering services to the country)*, Yangon, Myint Theingi Press, 40 (Henceforth: TekathoseinTin, 2007)

³Takathosein Tin, (1991) "Mandalay MyoMyat Nar Phone Myar", *Dana Economic Magazine*, No.11, Yangon, TaungOkkalar Press, p. 85

Donation to the Kandawgalay Home for the Aged

At the age of twenty-two after the demise of her parents, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun inherited a brick mansion, a house, 150,000 kyats and many acres of farmland. Feeling upset about their death, she had no mental peacefulness.¹ Since then, she made a lot of donation and meritorious deeds in remembrance of her parents. While managing the family business of silk and cotton industry by herself, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun actively participated in social and community welfare activities of the neighborhood.

In 1890s, there was peace and tranquility throughout Myanmar, so *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun extended her silk and cotton business throughout the country. Her silk and cotton clothing business was flourishing substantially. In 1898, she donated a brick mansion and a temple to Sayadaw U Zargara (Padamya Sayadaw) in Mandalay and that was why she was named as the Ruby-brick monastery donator (*Dayakama*) Daw Oo Zun.²

Since 1914, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun regularly donated to Kandawgalay Home for the Aged at Theinbyu Road, Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township in Yangon with the profit from her silk fabric business. Losing her parents while she was young, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun sympathized with the elderly persons and wished to take care of them in memory of her deceased parents. Therefore, she used to visit and donate to the Home for the Aged (Kandawgalay) which was established by the French nuns. *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun saw in the Kandawgalay Home of the Aged that by means of caring and safeguarding the elderly persons, the French nuns were trying to baptize old Myanmar Buddhists as Christians promoting the Baringy Religion.³

Moreover, she saw a very old man falling down on the roadside near Zaycho market, Mandalay suffering from malnutrition. Therefore, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun decided to offer assistance to old helpless persons as much as she could. She thought that it would be a great good deed to feed, treat and take care of the helpless old persons by means of founding a Buddhist Home for the Aged. Her desire was inspired by her nationalist spirit and religious nature. In order to do so, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun researched the situations of old helpless persons and also went to the Kandawgalay Home for the Aged four times.⁴ Gradually, she materialized her idea of Buddhist Home for the Aged consulting with her friends from politics and business fields.

Development of Buddhist Home for the Aged

Aphwa Daw Oo Zun believed that it was really important to establish the caring centers for elderly helpless persons in Myanmar with the support and leadership of nationalist Buddhists. She tried very hard in finding ways for the safeguarding of the old persons and she also believed that taking care of Myanmar nationals to each other would promote the nationalistic spirit of the Myanmar people.⁵ She did a lot of consultation and discussion with her intimate friends in her residence at Kyaukthwaytan Ward and finally she got an idea to construct a

¹LuduDaw Amar, (1991) *Mandalay Thu MandaleyThar*, Mandalay, Ludu Press, 143 (Henceforth: LuduDawAmar,1991)

²Ibid., p.144

³Hninsigon Home for the Aged, (2013) *Articles competed in (80) years full PatamyarYatu*, Yangon,182 (Henceforth: (80) years full Patamyar Yatu)

⁴Ibid., p. 15

⁵Ibid, pp. 11-12

Buddhist Home for the Aged at a peaceful and quiet neighborhood near Mingun Pagoda and Great Mingun Bell. She loved the peaceful and beautiful scenery of Mingun area while she visited a friend at Mingun. Her choice of Mingun area for her Buddhist Home for the Aged actually depended upon the following conditions:

- (1) Having the historical stupas such as famous pagodas, two great lion statues and the great Mingun bell;
- (2) Having beautiful spectacular scenery;
- (3) Being a place of devout Buddhists;
- (3) Being easy to visit by means of water way from Mandalay; and
- (4) Getting the support and assistance of the Ariyamaggin Sayadaw who was famous in Mingun region.¹

In 1914, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun formally addressed to Mingun Ariyamaggin Sayadaw to construct a Buddhist Home for the Aged. Sayadaw totally encouraged and supported the idea of *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun and he even provided her a motor boat for the transportation purposes.² After getting permission from the Ariyamaggin Sayadaw, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun sold out her four mansions, farmlands and jewellery including her diamonds: total worth of about two million kyats.³ It was a great sacrifice for a woman of that time.

On 11 October 1915, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun together with BIA U Maung Gyi, U Ba Chan, and Buddhist nun Daw Ottamasari (Daw Aye Cho) started the construction of three Buddhist meditation halls near the lion statute which situated at the northeast of the Mingun stupa. In building these halls, they used toddy palm leaves for the roofs and the walls, and bamboo for flooring. She even joined herself in clearing the place. Among three halls, one was for *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun and her assistant girl and the other two was for the elderly helpless persons: *Aphoes* (grandfathers or the elderly men) and *Aphwas* (grandmothers or the elderly women). Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged has also become the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary.

In September 1915, three elderly persons (98 years old *Aphwa* Daw Ho, 85 years old *Aphwa* Daw Mae and 95 years old *Aphoe* U Sint) were firstly accepted at the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary.⁴ *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun and her assistant girl took care of cooking, feeding and housekeeping for them. U Ba Gyan, son of the Buddhist nun Daw Ottamasari (Daw Aye Cho) helped by supplying firewood and water for them. The medical treatments to *Aphoe* and *Aphwas* were taken care of by U Maung Gyi (BIA), the practitioner of indigenous medicine.⁵ Ariyamaggin Sayadaw and the Buddhist nun Daw Ottamasaryi helped to keep the precepts on the Sabbath days and taught them how to practise meditation.⁶ With the popularity of the Mingun Buddhist Home of the Aged, the number of *Aphoe* and *Aphwas* gradually developed to about twenty. The number of meditation halls also

¹SagaingThuya, (2005) Historical Record, Yangon, Pinmyint Marlar Press, Yangon, p. 23
(Henceforth: SagaingThuya, 2005)

²Takatho Sein Tin, 1991, p. 53

³Ludu Daw Amar, 1991, p. 126

⁴Than Win Hlaing, (2007) Extraordinary Myanmar Historical Persons told from the Statue, Yangon, Shwe Lion Press, p. 352

⁵Takatho Sein Tin, 1991, p. 69

⁶Ludu Daw Amar, 1991, p. 146

increased to 25 in 1918. It was mainly because of the benevolence, perseverance, hardworking and diligence of *Aphwa Daw Oo Zun*. During these three years, all the expenses were paid by *Aphwa Daw Oo Zun* alone.¹

Furthermore, in order to the sustainability of the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary, *Aphwa Daw Oo Zun* tried to establish the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary Association with the help of her honourable friends. She invited the honorary ladies and gentlemen to her house in Mandalay and held a meeting to discuss on the organizing of the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary Association. The meeting decided to organize the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary Association which consisted of five members at *Aphwa Daw Oo Zun*'s house situated at Kyaukthwaytan, Mandalay in 1918.² They were U Pho Lwin, U Maung Gyi (BIA) (Auditor), U HlaTun (Treasurer), U Hla Kyaw (Secretary) and U Pho Yin. *Aphwa Daw Oo Zun* was elected as the Patron of the Association.³ With the guidance and assistance of the lawyer Mr. Pearl, the organization was officially registered as No. 20 "The Buddhist Infirmary Association (BIA)" under the Article 21 of the India Act (1860).

As an official organization, the Association systematically collected and managed donations of materials and money from the Buddhist community. It also helped donors to visit Mingun and donate themselves by taking responsibility of transportation to Mingun in free of charge. The family members of the donors were even helped to visit the famous pagodas near the Mingun area and the Great Mingun Bell.

The two brothers who were the owners of the Eaikumtaung Tiger pharmaceutical Company, Yangon, donated the new buildings, financial aid and medicines for the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary.⁴ They supplied the necessary things through their uncle U Bo Lwin who lived in Mandalay. They were leading donors of the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary. Due to the popularity and good management skills of *Aphwa Daw Oo Zun*, even India Governor General Lord Irwin (1926-31) visited the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary making some donations in November 1928.⁵ He also praised *Aphwa Daw Oo Zun* for her great effort for the old helpless persons.

In 1922, the executive committee of the Association was reorganized with *Aphwa Daw Oo Zun* (Patron), U Bar Bar (Chairman), U Hla Kyaw (Secretary), U Aye Maung (Joint Secretary), U Maung Gyi (BIA) (Assistance Secretary), U Ba Gyun (Treasurer) and U Ba. Due to the collective efforts of the members of the Association, the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary had gradually developed with new buildings and Dhamma halls, modernized water supply system, new water tanks and electric generators.⁶

At the beginning of the Association, most of the Myanmar Buddhists were not interested in the activities of the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary. Later, however,

¹Mingun Home for the Aged, Knowledge about Mingun Home for the Aged, Mandalay, Khithme Offset,3(Henceforth: Knowledge about Mingun)

²Hninsigon Home for the Aged Administration Committee, Biodata of Grandmother Oo Zun who initially established the Hninsigon Home for the Aged,15(Henceforth: Grandmother Oo Zun Biodata)

³Ibid., p. 15

⁴(80) years full Patamyar Yatu, pp. 19-20

⁵Ibid., p. 27

⁶(80) years full Patamyar Yatu,20-21

Myanmar Buddhists gradually acknowledged the noble deed of the Mingun Infirmary Association and supported the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged. In 1935, the total number reached to 189 including 65 *Aphoes* and 124 *Aphwas*.¹ During the Second World War, the number increased up to 250.² Due to the increase in number of *Aphoes* and *Aphwas*, the Association moved the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary to the new buildings in the south of the Great Mingun Bell in 1926.³ Apart from the elderly persons, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun and the Mingun Infirmary Association also took care of twenty-eight orphans (thirteen males and fifteen females) and helped in their education.

After the demise of *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun in 1944, U Maung Gyi (BIA) led the Association and took care of the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary continuously. In 1952, Mingun Buddhist Infirmary was registered at the Department of Social Welfare and it started to take the second level support of the Government. On 4th February 1988, the name of the Mingun Buddhist Infirmary was changed to Mingun Buddhist Boe BwaYeiktha (Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged).⁴

The unique feature of the Mingun Buddhist Boe BwaYeiktha (Mingun Buddhist Home for Aged) is its permission for the old couples to live together. It has rooms for the couples so that they can enjoy each other's company. In most of the elderly homes, males and females are separated. Nowadays, the Mingun Buddhist Boe BwaYeiktha accepts all eligible elderly persons without discrimination of religion, race or nationalities. Currently, it has a total of 125 *Aphoes* and *Aphwas*.⁵

The main difference between the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged and other homes for the Aged is that it was founded by a single lady who had enough courage to face many difficulties and hardship in founding a Buddhist Home for the Aged. She was also very honorable and good-natured, so she took care of the elderly persons by herself. During the colonial period, only the Christian missionaries established homes for the aged in order to spread Christianity with the funding and support of the colonial British government and oversea Christian religious organizations. *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun bravely initiated the culture of the Buddhist Homes for the Aged in Myanmar in order to protect Buddhism and promote nationalism just by herself without having any substantial support.

Conclusion

The Buddhist Home for the Aged was firstly introduced in Mingun during the colonial period. It was founded by *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun with her bravery, efforts and patriotism in 1915. Among Myanmar women, *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun (1868-1944) is one whose name is not forgotten for many years due to her sacrifice and nobility. The introduction of the Buddhist Homes for the Aged plays a very important role in the Myanmar community culture. This paper presented the history of the Mingun Buddhist Home for the Aged highlighting the perseverance, diligence, patriotism and desire of *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun to promote Buddhism so that the later generations will be inspired to follow her path.

¹Mingun Executive Committee, Taing Kyo Pyi Kyo Saung *Aphwa* Daw Oo Zun, p. 9

²Takatho Sein Tin, 1991, p. 84

³Sagaing Thuya, 2005, pp. 24-25

⁴*Myanmar Encyclopedia*, Vol. 9, (1967), Yangon, SarpayBeikman Press, pp. 225-6

⁵Knowledge about Mingun, p. 11

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