

## **Burmese Governance and the Buddhist Ironies of U Win Pe’s “Clean, Clear Water”**

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### **Abstract**

The Theravadan Buddhist *dharma* [teachings of the Buddha] and Burmese cultural identity are inseparable. Likewise, Burmese monarchs from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries revered India’s Mauryan ruler Ashoka (c. 280-200 BCE) as the epitome of noble Buddhist kingship. In recent decades, military regimes have drawn upon inherited Theravadan tropes and topoi, while dissident pro-democracy voices have invoked the Theravadan *dharma* to expose the hypocrisies of authoritarian rule in subtly disguised ironical writings. This essay argues that the Buddhist ironies permeating U Win Pe’s short story “Clean, Clear Water” epitomize this latter phenomenon. A witty folktale on one level, the story reverberates ironically with the tropes and topoi of the Theravadan *dharma*. On the one hand, “Clean, Clear Water” prompts critical reflection upon the suffering associated with the attitudes and policies of Burma’s military rulers; on the other hand, the story’s ambiguous ending encourages some wishful thinking about the ostensibly consensual politics of Burma’s contemporary democratic reformers. The essay closes with some observations about U Win Pe’s continuing dissident work and concludes that his multifold use of irony in “Clean, Clear Water” constitutes an important marker in Burma’s ongoing struggle to restore the country’s tradition of right relations between political power and Theravadan Buddhist thought and practice.

**Key Words:** Burma, Buddhism, U Win Pe, short story, irony, governance

### **Introduction**

**T**he Theravadan Buddhist *dharma* [teachings of the Buddha],<sup>1</sup> and Burmese cultural identity are inseparable.<sup>2</sup> Although the precise historical origins of this association are unclear, Burmese chroniclers relate several legends linking the Buddha himself directly with Burma. In Donald K. Swearer’s words, “the Buddha’s physical presence serves to establish [Burma as] a ‘holy land’ or *buddhadesa*” (Swearer 2010: 105).<sup>3</sup> Other tales associate the arrival of the *dharma* in Burma with important figures in the Theravadan tradition. The distinguished fifth-century Theravadan scholar

Buddhaghosa is said to have taken to Burma Pali copies of the *Tipitaka* [*Three Baskets* (of Sacred Scriptures)], along with his own commentaries on the Buddhist scriptures and the *Visuddhimagga* [*Path of Purification*] (c. 430 CE).<sup>4</sup>

Later, Burma's Pagan, Hanthawaddy, Taungoo and Konbaung monarchical dynasties from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries revered India's Mauryan ruler Ashoka (c. 280-200 BCE) as the epitome of noble Buddhist kingship. A convert to Theravadan Buddhism, Ashoka promoted a religious vision of political harmony which, as Emanuel Sarkisyanz has observed, "reflects (and is reflected in) the moral universality of the Dhamma [*dharma*] as ethical, natural and rational norm" (Sarkisyanz 1965: 27). More particularly, a Theravadan golden age begins in Burma with the conversion in 1044 of Anawrahta [Aniruddha] (1014-77), king of Pagan, under the guidance of Shin Arahan [Arahanta] (c. 1034-1115), an erudite Theravadan monk. At the heart of this regime's ideology lay a "kammatic" understanding of the Theravadan *dharma*: the continuous accumulation of merit through good deeds, that is *kamma* (Pali) or *kharma* (Sanskrit), secured eventual liberation from the perpetual cycle of life, death and re-birth, known as the stream or ocean of *samsara* (Spiro 1982: 97). With the unification of Burma under Anawrahta, "Theravada Buddhism became firmly established as a popular – rather than merely a court – religion" (Herbert and Milner 1989: 1). Theravadan monks taught the *dharma* in vernacular languages and instituted a calendar of Buddhist rituals and festivals for city and country folks alike. In implementing the Ashokan paradigm of ideal kingship, Anawrahta wished to knit together Theravadan Buddhist tradition, the Pagan monarchy and the Burmese commonfolk in a perichoretic weave of piety, politics and populism. This strategy, it was felt, furnished a firm basis upon which to build a Burmese tradition of right relations between political power and Theravadan Buddhist thought and practice.

Though modern scholars may disagree over the historicity of the legends about the Buddha and Buddhaghosa on the one hand, and on the other, about the extent to which Burmese rulers succeeded in implementing the Ashokan ideal of Buddhist governance, these narratives constitute an authentic and authoritative genealogy of the Theravadan *dharma* in Burma for the majority of Burmese Buddhists. Rooted in such narratives, Burma's cultural identity has undergone a variety of transformations down the ages, as governance of the country evolved from the Pagan,

Hanthawaddy, Taungoo and Konbaung monarchical Buddhist dynasties, through British colonial rule from the early nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, to independence in 1948 and subsequent stretches of socialist republicanism and military dictatorship. But even the efforts of military regimes to maintain control over the country draw upon inherited Buddhist tropes and topoi. At the same time, dissident pro-democracy voices have also implicated the Theravadan *dharma* to expose the hypocrisies of authoritarian rule in subtly disguised ironical writings. This essay argues that U Win Pe's short story "Clean, Clear Water" epitomizes this latter phenomenon. It discusses the short story in Burma, then introduces U Win Pe as a short story writer, focusing on "Clean, Clear Water." Capable of interpretation on several levels, the essay goes on to argue, this folksy tale draws ironically upon Theravadan Buddhist tropes and topoi to satirize authoritarian governance in contemporary Burma. The essay closes with some observations about U Win Pe's continuing dissident work and concludes that his multifold use of irony in "Clean, Clear Water" constitutes an important marker in Burma's ongoing struggle to restore the country's tradition of right relations between political power and Theravadan Buddhist thought and practice.

### **The Short Story in Burma**

As Gustaaf Houtman notes, for the English 'novel' the Burmese use the term *wut-htu*, which more literally translates as "subject, story [or] account," and the term *wut-htu do* for the English 'short story,' where *do* means 'short' (Houtman 1990: 327). Whatever the origins of the narrative prose fiction in other contexts, the term *wut-htu* has a long and rich literary history in Burma.<sup>5</sup> It was "traditionally used for episodes from the Buddhist scriptures, and later from romantic tales of royalty and court life, long before modern Burmese novelists appeared" (Houtman 1990: 327). Burma boasted a notable readership beyond the urban élites, too. As early as the 1850s British colonial administrators were reporting that the country's "basic literacy rates exceeded those of India and matched those of Italy, Ireland and North America" (Schober 2007: 54). The popularity of printed plays in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicates a ready audience for fiction in Burma's colonial period.

It is the short story rather than the novel that gains early traction in Burma's modernizing literary marketplace. Burmese readers learned to appreciate the form in part through translations

and adaptations of the work of western writers. More importantly, though, original stories in both Burmese and English proliferated in the years between World War I and World War II. Scholars credit Shwe U Daung with Burma's first *bona fide* short story, a sentimental tale of young love titled "*Maung thein tin ma thein shin wuthu*" ["The Story of Master T.T and Miss T.S"], which appeared in *Thuriya metgazin* in 1917. Over the ensuing decades, Burmese authors published hundreds of short stories under their own names and under a plethora of pseudonyms. In the 1930s, writers of the *Khitsan* ["Testing the Times"] movement like Zawgyi [U Thein Han] (1907-90), U Sein Tin (1899-1942), Min Thu Wun (1909-2004) and Myo Min [Nwe Soe] (1910-95) turned to short fiction to mediate their vision of a simplified literature of everyday life. The Burma Education Extension Association published two volumes of their work in 1934 and 1938 under the title *Khitsan poun byin mya* [*Stories Testing the Times*]. Not surprisingly, after World War II, life under the Japanese and Burma's subsequent drive for freedom from the British provided material for short story writers. In another vein, post-independence writers of the *Sarpay thit* ["New Literature Movement"] saw short fiction as a useful vehicle for their socialist realist agenda.

Nationalist themes persist among post-independence authors, but by the 1960s they had begun to range more widely "to include the lives of people in various classes, and character development became more subtle and realistic" (Yamada 2002: 2). Settings for this fiction vary a good deal, as the focus often shifts from the country to the city. Social questions preoccupy some women writers. While novels were subject to the authority of the Ne Win (1911-2002) regime's Press Scrutiny Board (PSB) after the military coup of 1962, shorter pieces submitted to magazines "enjoyed more freedom," since decisions about publishing were usually at "the discretion of the magazine editors" (U Thuang 1981: 7-8). At the same time, increased censorship resulted in the incarceration of writers whose work the PSB considered subversive. Amidst such insecurities, as Anna J. Allott has observed in her comprehensive survey of Burmese short fiction, authors reacted to the threat of government action in a variety of ways: "by self-censorship and taking care to avoid impermissible subjects; by not writing original material but choosing instead to make large numbers of translations; by testing the limits of acceptability and being prepared to have stories banned; by recourse to satire, metaphor, allegory, and allusive 'new style' [*han-thit*] writing; or by simply ceasing to write" (Allott 2009: 154). Put otherwise, the censorship of the PSB did not end

the steady flow of short fiction in Burma (Allott 2009: 154). Indeed, Allott describes the 1970s and 1980s as “the golden age of the Burmese short story” (Allott 2009: 165).

Only a minority of these stories from “the golden age” were written in or have been translated into English. Published in 2008, however, a collection of twenty-three tales captures the spirit of this later twentieth-century work. Rendered in English by Ma Thanegi, these tales are selected from “thousands” of stories by scores of writers (Thanegi 2009). They cover “a wide variety of human life: marriages like tongue and teeth; love beyond the grave; the anxiety of mothers; the kindness—and unkindness—of strangers; and the snares of enticement and greed” (Thanegi 2009). Khin Hnin Yu (1925-2003) stands out, celebrated for her realistic depictions of the toxic effects of authoritarian policy upon Burma’s less privileged, especially younger women. By contrast, the short stories of Kan Chun (1946-2009) dramatize social and political matters with a cartoonish humour (Thanegi 2009). Similarly, Aung Bala (1926-2008) satirizes, among other things, “the greed of high officials in government departments ... and the power of the black market” (U Thuang 1981: 8). In another vein, Thein Pe Myint (1914-78) published short fiction firm in the leftist ideological conviction “that literature must be used for political ends,” as Patricia Meredith Milne puts it in the introduction to her English renderings of eight tales by the “literary giant” (Milne 1971: 29; U Thuang 1981: 91). Finally, whatever the storyline, the motifs of Theravadan Buddhism frequently furnish a thematic vocabulary for the social and political concerns of these and other writers. Introducing an anthology of English translations of Khin Hnin Yu’s tales, for example, Mi Kyaw Thaug reports that his mother “also taught that Buddhism and its way of life are our true companions,” while Maung Thar Ya (1930-2016) “uses phrases from old Buddhist religious stories, combines them with modern language, and thereby creates a new style” in his stories “dealing with the lives of doctors, politicians, drillers, taxi drivers, military officers, fishmongers, *etc*” (Khin Hnin Yu 2009; U Thuang 1981: 90). As we shall see, U Win Pe’s short stories embody several of these characteristics, especially his folksy wit and ironic use of Buddhist tropes and topoi to expose authoritarian abuses of political power, and “Clean, Clear Water” epitomizes this preoccupation.

### **The Provenance and Plot of U Win Pe’s “Clean, Clear Water”**

Born in British colonial Mandalay in 1936, U Win Pe refers to himself as a survivor of World War II (Brang Shawng 2009). In the immediate post-war era, U Win Pe studied art and music at high school in Mandalay. He carried forward these interests at the University of Yangon, where he held several exhibitions of paintings. After working for a short time as a journalist, cartoonist and editor, he served as Principal of Mandalay’s State School of Fine Arts, Music and Dancing. Retiring from this position in 1973, he took to writing screenplays and making films. In 1981, he received Burma’s domestic Academy Award for Best Director for the drama, *Hninsi ni eain mat* [*Dream of a Red Rose*]. During these years, however, U Win Pe was celebrated in literary circles for his “humorous and satirical short stories” (Allott 2009: 174). Working in Burmese, he began to publish his tales in local magazines “in the late 1980s” (Zon Pann Pwint 2015). He gathered a number of these stories into two Burmese-language collections: *Wuthtu do baung gyok* [*Collected Short Stories*] (1991) and *Let ywe zin wuthtu do mya* [*Selected Short Stories*] (1992).

Although in the broader scheme of things, nationalist sentiments might well have motivated U Win Pe’s choice of the vernacular for his stories, other factors probably informed this decision as well. In 1993, Allott raised this likelihood when introducing her translations of three of U Win Pe’s pieces in the anthology *Inked Over, Ripped Out: Burmese Storytellers and the Censors*. All three stories first appeared in Burmese-language magazines – “The Day the Weather Broke” in *Shwe amyu te*; “A Pair of Specs” in *Yok shin tei kabyar*; and “The Middle of May” in *Anawa*. As their translator into English, Allott remarks: “it is possible to discern a political message, even if the author himself did not intend it” (Allott 1993: 38). In “The Day the Weather Broke,” a young boy fails to rescue a wild bird from a housecat, which the enraged youngster in turn tries to kill. Allott suggests that this served as a metaphor for the senseless savagery of 1988, when the military regime’s brutalities “in their turn provoked violent and bloody reactions by ordinarily peaceful citizens” (Allott 1993: 39). Likewise, “A Pair of Specs” tells of an old man demanding “more and more exaggerated acts of gratitude” from a young man to whom he has gifted a pair of glasses, in the same way that “the SLORC incessantly claims to have saved Burma from disintegration (in 1988), and to have merited the undying gratitude of the people” (Allott 1993: 39; parentheses in the original). In a related manner, Allott surmises, the vision of neighbours arguing over an

abandoned potted plant in “The Middle of May” subtly reminds those Burmese who wish to avoid political difficulties and personal hardship to keep their heads down and not show any public initiative (Allott 1993: 39).

The short story “Clean, Clear Water” more compellingly, yet also more subtly embodies U Win Pe’s efforts to sustain popular resistance to Burma’s authoritarian government. Like his other stories, “Clean, Clear Water” was first published in the vernacular, appearing in 1992 in the Burmese-language magazine *Dhana*. Teri Shaffer Yamada notes, however, that U Win Pe himself consented to Robert Vore’s translation of the tale for inclusion in the anthology *Virtual Lotus: Modern Fiction of Southeast Asia* (Yamada 2002: 11). No doubt the Burmese author’s own comfort with the English language will have informed this *imprimatur*. Either way, “Clean, Clear Water” revolves around a central character, Ba Gyi Kyaw, “the reigning patriarch” of the extensive Kyaw clan (U Win Pe 2002: 11). Though his “full name ... Tun Aung Kyaw ... means brilliant, successful, and famous,” the narrator tells us, Ba Gyi Kyaw exhibited none of these qualities (U Win Pe 2002: 11). Rather, he stood out simply because he was “unique”; indeed, the story is about “his uniqueness” (U Win Pe 2002: 11, 12).

Two characteristics constituted Ba Gyi Kyaw’s singularity: his “complete authority over the affairs of the family” on the one hand, and on the other, his peculiar obsession with “the family toilets” (U Win Pe 2002: 12). In the first instance, supported by a large inheritance, he did not work, while his relatives indulged his every whim, never questioning his right, “as the eldest among them,” to live in the family house at their expense (U Win Pe 2002: 12). In the second instance, he displayed unparalleled “genius” in his comprehensive knowledge of and fastidious attention to the family’s three indoor and two outdoor facilities. He himself used these toilets numerous times a day, making sure each was working properly and stocked with all the necessary accoutrements. If a toilet needed attention, Ba Gyi Kyaw instructed whomever was nearest at hand to see to it immediately. He personally supervised “maintenance and repair,” which had to be carried out by the most capable tradesmen to the highest standards. If any aspect of the toilets were neglected, he fumed, arguing that toilets are the foundation of “health, wealth, wisdom, and mental balance” (U Win Pe 2002: 13). On the toilet, he asserted, we all conceive “our most worthy thoughts, opinions, and plans” (U Win Pe 2002: 13). To illustrate this point, Ba Gyi Kyaw cited

his own experience and the example of Archimedes, though what exactly the former conceived “no one knows or dares ask,” while the latter’s eureka moment came in the bath, not on the toilet, as younger members of the family pointed out, much to the patriarch’s annoyance (U Win Pe 2002: 13).

At the same time, however, everyone acknowledged that Ba Gyi Kyaw’s “practical expertise” in toilets was unequalled (U Win Pe 2002: 13). He was as well-versed in western technologies as in traditional modes of human waste disposal, so that even builders consulted him. Confident in this expertise, the patriarch embarked upon a study of “the role of toilets in world history” (U Win Pe 2002: 13). He began with Burma but was disappointed to discover that the country’s cultural heritage contained “no direct evidence of toiletry” from the Pagan period forwards (U Win Pe 2002: 14). Unperturbed, Ba Gyi Kyaw continued to impress his learning upon the rest of the family, so that they, now expert themselves, might enjoy “well-ordered and clean” toilets (U Win Pe 2002: 14). He then turned his attention to “the latest developments in scientific bathrooms,” becoming an authority on their “architecture and methods for the preventing the spread of disease” and making “separate studies of toilet filth and putrefaction, the release of noxious odours, the microbiology of infectious agents, and the mechanisms by which epidemics begin and spread” (U Win Pe 2002: 14).

At last, cultivating a particular interest in “pathogen-free sub-toilet septic tanks,” he designed “a seven-tiered under-toilet tank” and developed special “chemical purifiers,” claiming that “the water that drained into the lowermost chamber would be absolutely pure – would be, he said, perfectly free of sediment and microbes and suitable for either bathing or drinking” (U Win Pe 2002: 15). Not content with theory, however, Ba Gyi Kyaw insisted that the family demonstrate “open, full-hearted support” by underwriting the construction of the new facility, despite its inordinate cost (U Win Pe 2002: 15). Once the project was completed, to prove that his design worked as intended, Ba Gyi Kyaw obliged every member of the family always to use “the experimental toilet” rather than “the perfectly good bathrooms in the main house” (U Win Pe 2002: 15). The family obeyed, till water has passed “through all seven stages of the filtering process,” filling the whole system, including “the lowermost reservoir” (U Win Pe 2002: 15-16). A month later, Ba Gyi Kyaw presented the family with a glass of the filtered water. It was “undeniably



clear,” but everyone “kept at a respectable distance all the same” (U Win Pe 2002: 16). They knew that the compound’s existing wells provided all the good water they needed, though again, no-one dared to question the patriarch’s intentions (U Win Pe 2002: 16). Neighbours expressed admiration, too, but they also want nothing to do with “the treated water” (U Win Pe 2002: 16).

“If no one would cooperate,” Ba Gyi Kyaw objected, “the experiment would be a failure no matter what anybody said” (U Win Pe 2002: 16). Taking matters a step further, therefore, he required the whole family to stay at home on a given Sunday. Carrying a bag of “sophisticated scientific instruments,” a certain Mr U Maung Maung Ba, “professor of biochemistry,” arrived at the compound (U Win Pe 2002: 16). The professor tested water from the seventh and final level of filtration, “using such extremely intricate procedures as to leave no doubt whatsoever as to the accuracy of the forthcoming results” (U Win Pe 2002: 17). The tests proved that the water “was clean enough to set the standards for water purity” and “could be used for drinking, bathing, washing – whatever one wished” (U Win Pe 2002: 17). Still no-one was willing “to drink the water, or even to so much as taste it” (U Win Pe 2002: 17). At first lost for words, Ba Gyi Kyaw then asked the professor to demonstrate the efficacy of the tests by drinking the water himself. But the professor vehemently refused, declaring that he was paid only to analyze the water, not to drink it. “Frantic, his mind groping desperately for a next move,” Ba Gyi Kyaw determined to drink “the filtered toilet water” himself (U Win Pe 2002: 17). But we never discover whether or not the patriarch had the courage of his convictions, for “Clean, Clear Water” ends with the three dots of an ellipsis (U Win Pe 2002: 17).

### **Reading the Buddhist Ironies of “Clean, Clear Water”**

What, then, are we to make of “Clean, Clear Water”? Needless to say, we may read this witty tale on a number of levels. On the surface, it is a light-hearted, even folksy story about strained family relations revolving around Ba Gyi Kyaw’s status as family elder and his fixated preoccupation with the theory and practice of human waste disposal. More particularly, “Clean, Clear Water” rehearses certain narrative conventions familiar to Burmese readers. As Swearer has noted, “[I]ay story-tellers and even monk-preachers often used humor – occasionally ribald – to keep the attention of their audience” (Swearer 2010: 17). Likewise, “Clean, Clear Water” stages “a

humorous tug-o-war between traditional sensibility and Western scientific reason” (Stacy Bierlein 2003). Literally and figuratively, it is toilet humour. But it is toilet humour with an edge. In the end, neither Ba Gyi Kyaw’s authoritarian insistence nor the professor’s empirical analysis can dispel the instinctive distaste for the filtered waste water that the family expresses from the first, followed by the professor of biochemistry, and in a final ironic twist, perhaps Ba Gyi Kyaw himself, as the story’s closing ellipsis seems to imply. Something tells everyone, including the professor and maybe even the patriarch, that the filtered water is likely not what it seems to be, no matter how well-researched and carefully constructed the system of sanitization and no matter how sophisticated and scientific the testing of the water.

But there is more than toilet humour to “Clean, Clear Water.” Allott has noted that the humorous character of other stories by U Win Pe fades upon reflection, leaving us “wondering if there wasn’t perhaps a deeper meaning to the series of events described” (Allott 1993). Such is the case with “Clean, Clear Water.” Most notably, U Win Pe’s ironic manipulation of traditional Theravadan Buddhist tropes and topoi, in particular the idealized model of Ashokan kingship, satirizes the exercise of authoritarian rule in postcolonial Burma. As Ronny Noor has observed, autocratic abuse of public office is a pervasive concern in Southeast Asia, especially in Burma, which, “for the most part, has been languishing under one dictatorship after another since its independence from Britain in 1948” (Noor 2003). Certainly, Ne Win and later the military rulers who seized power in 1988 were not the first to attempt to assert absolute power over the Burmese people. The kings of the Pagan, Hanthawaddy, Taungoo and Konbaung dynasties rarely tolerated limits to their dominion. But just as Burmese leaders, both ancient and modern, have wielded absolute power over the Burmese people, so Ba Gyi Kyaw enjoys “complete authority over the family” (U Win Pe 2002: 12). More to the point, his high-handed attitude serves as an ironic commentary upon the despotic politics of post-independence Burma. And like Burma’s contemporary masters, the patriarch abuses the privilege of his position. Far from securing the family’s well-being, his determination to design and build the perfect water filtration system threatens their economic survival. Although Ba Gyi Kyaw is heir to a “considerable inheritance,” his “new toilet would cost at least 150,000 kyat, an outrageous sum that they could in no way afford to pay” (U Win Pe 2002: 12, 15).

More specifically, Ba Gyi Kyaw's fiscal presumptuousness reflects the policies of Burma's post-colonial leaders, who expended considerable amounts of public money on the centralized economics and bureaucratic machinery of *The Burmese Way to Socialism* in mimicry of the Ashokan model of Buddhist good governance. In particular, Ba Gyi Kyaw's seven-tiered design seems ironically to reference the way in which Ne Win's construction of Yangon's seven-tiered Mahawizaya pagoda in 1980 apes historic Ashokan merit-making practices. Although some commentators interpret this initiative "as a meritorious act following the death of his mother," others see it as a cynical ploy "designed to allow Ne Win to remain in power" (Swearer 2010: 113-14; Tosa 2005: 167). Indeed, the Burmese scholar Mya Maung asserts that Ne Win's pagoda enjoys no special status as a place of reverence or pilgrimage because it embodies "the dark horror of his soul and sins" (Mya Maung 1992: 42). Either way, the new pagoda stands next to the Shwedagon temple, its architectural lines almost a parody of the seven-tiered design of this most revered of Burma's sacred places, which, as Michael Aung-Thwin has noted, enjoys a "national stature" among the country's numerous sites of Theravadan Buddhist devotion (Aung-Thwin 2013: 267).

If, then, the architectural motif of "Clean, Clear Water" serves as an allegory of tensions between autocratic rule and the popular will, U Win Pe also draws ironically upon the Theravadan trope of purification to expose the way in which Burma's post-colonial leaders have subverted the Ashokan paradigm. This trope first appears in the context of Ba Gyi Kyaw's research on the global history of toilets. He finds out that despite "a great deal of information about uniquely Burmese innovations in many areas of culture and the arts, ... beginning with the Thaye and Pagan periods ... no direct evidence of toiletry is to be found in literature, mural art, sculpture, or anywhere else" (U Win Pe 2002: 13-14). Disassociating the patriarch's peculiar obsession from Burma's proud cultural heritage in this manner permits U Win Pe to elaborate upon the former without risking the accusation that he is disparaging the latter. Further, when Ba Gyi Kyaw discovers that Pagan's human waste facilities were toxic enough to produce an "alchemical transformation" in an otherwise inert metal amalgamate dumped into a toilet by the celebrated alchemist, Shin An Zagana, the wonder of this event fails to capture the patriarch's attention; rather he is "shocked" that "Pagan's toilets could have been so incredibly foul" (U Win Pe 2002: 14).<sup>6</sup> In other words, like the Buddhist monarchs of Burma's Pagan, Hanthawaddy, Taungoo and Konbaung dynasties,

Ba Gyi Kyaw is preoccupied with questions of purity. But once again, unlike these kings of old, the patriarch does not seem at all concerned with the processes of purification that move the Buddhist along the path towards liberation from the stream of *samsara*. To drive home this point, U Win Pe tells us that, by contrast, Ba Gyi Kyaw held the “good toilet systems” of Muslim Turkey in “great esteem” (U Win Pe 2002: 14). Indeed, in a redoubling of such ironies, U Win Pe couches Ba Gyi Kyaw’s infatuation with the purity of wastewater in the language of spirituality: he espouses a “missionary zeal for toilets” (U Win Pe 2002: 14).

In the remainder of the tale, U Win Pe further develops this ironic parody of Buddhist notions of purification as an implicit critique of political authoritarianism. Intent on compensating for Burma’s perceived lack of research on toilets, Ba Gyi Kyaw determines to make use of “the latest developments in scientific bathrooms” to design and build “his own pure-water collecting tank” (U Win Pe 2002: 14, 15). More specifically, as we have seen, he plans to combine his own specially formulated “chemical purifiers” with a “seven-tiered under-toilet tank” (U Win Pe 2002: 15). This combination, the patriarch claims, will produce “absolutely pure” water, “perfectly free of sediments and microbes and suitable for either bathing or drinking” (U Win Pe 2002: 15). But here, too, there is more to U Win Pe’s language than at first meets the eye. Certainly, the way the patriarch ignores the family’s concerns and commits whole-heartedly to chemical formulas and sophisticated technical design seems to bespeak the subjection of traditional sensibilities and collective wishes to the requirements of modern western science. At the same time, however, the notion of a “seven-tiered” septic system for the purification of water brings to mind the seven stages of purification (*satta-visuddhi*) upon which the Buddha expounds in the *Tipitaka* and upon which Buddhaghosa elaborates in the *Visuddhimagga*.

More specifically, the *Tipitaka* include two significant discourses on the seven stages of purification. The *Tipitaka* fall into three groups: *Vinaya pitaka*, *Sutta pitaka* and the *Abhidhamma pitaka*. The *suttas* in the second group contain all the central teachings of Theravadan Buddhism. They are divided into five *mikayas* [collections]. The second collection is known as the *Majjhima nikaya* (Webb 2008). Titled the *Sabbasava sutta* [*Discourse on All Asavas*], the second *sutta* of the *Majjhima nikaya* explores the seven stages of purification (*visuddhi*). Speaking to disciples in the gardens of the Jetavana monastery of Anathapiṇḍika, near Savatthi, India, the Buddha

identifies seven kinds of spiritual defilement (*asava*) and seven ways in which to restrain them.<sup>7</sup> These seven stages are also discussed in the twenty-fourth *sutta* of the *Majjhima nikaya*, called the *Ratha-vinita sutta* [*Relay Chariots*].<sup>8</sup> Again, the gardens of the Jetavana monastery provide the setting. On this occasion, however, the *sutta* focuses upon a conversation between Sariputta, an early follower of the Buddha, and [Maha]Punna Mantaniputta, a Burmese merchant who, according to the chroniclers, built a red sandalwood pagoda which the Buddha himself consecrated during a seven-week sojourn in Burma.<sup>9</sup> Lastly, the framework of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* follows the stages of purification discussed by Sariputta and [Maha]Punna Mantaniputta, and as such, "forms the hub of a complete and coherent method of exegesis of the *Tipitaka*" by setting out "detailed practical instructions for developing purification of mind" (Ñāóamoli 2010: xxvii).<sup>10</sup>

For a contemporary Burmese Buddhist audience, then, Ba Gyi Kyaw's "seven-tiered" process of waste-water purification parodies essential aspects of the Theravadan tradition. Furthermore, U Win Pe again redoubles the irony by couching the patriarch's ambitions in the language of devotion. According to Ba Gyi Kyaw, the construction of the new toilet "would be such a demonstration of enlightened thinking and advanced design technique as to border on religious experience" (U Win Pe 2002: 15). But the words "border on" will remind Burmese Buddhist readers of the inherent limitations of western science and technology compared with the moral and spiritual aims of the Theravadan *dharma*. What is more, the patriarch argues that "building the toilet and proving its effectiveness would bring recognition and acclaim to the entire family" (U Win Pe 2002: 15). But ironically, if Ba Gyi Kyaw envisions the family gaining status from the successful completion of the water purification system, the story's parodic echoes of the *Tipitaka* and Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* reacquaint the reader with those questions of moral and spiritual purity that are so central to the Theravadan *dharma*. In this respect, "Clean, Clear Water" suggests that the sort of merit associated with the kind of vainglorious ambition which Ba Gyi Kyaw espouses compares only feebly with the sort of merit, accrued through kammatic reciprocity between ruler and ruled, that defines the Ashokan paradigm of Buddhist good governance.

In general terms, of course, U Win Pe's short story ultimately reverberates with the ambiguous symbolism of water to be found in the Theravadan tradition. As Steven Collins has

noted, some of this symbolism has “negative” connotations, some of it “positive” (Collins 1982: 249). “In the negative use,” writes Collins, “the fundamental idea is of desire, of the craving for and enjoyment of sense-pleasure as an uncontrollable force a current by which one is drowned or carried along helplessly in the round of rebirth, *samsara*” (Collins 1982: 249). On the positive side, the Theravadan *dharma* likens the state of meditation to “a still, cool, deep, and peaceful expanse, as in a lake or an ocean,” while “the movement of the Buddhist religious life toward *nibbana* is like that of rivers toward the ocean” (Collins 1982: 259, 260). In other words, purifying the mind of defilements enables the Buddhist adherent to resist the onrushing turmoil of *samsara* and to cultivate the oceanic calm of *nirvana*. “The difference between fools and wise men,” Collins concludes, “is like the difference between noisy, gushing streams and the smooth silence of the great sea” (Collins 1982: 259). As we have seen, although U Win Pe’s intent is ironical, Ba Gyi Kyaw’s efforts to transform human waste into “absolutely pure” water will likely awaken the reader to these fundamental aspects of the Theravadan *dharma*.

More to the point, however, the symbolism of water assumes even greater significance in the Burmese context. Known as Thingyan, the most important festival of the Burmese ritual calendar is a Festival of Water. For three days in the middle of April, Thingyan stages and celebrates individual and collective acts of purification, culminating in the Burmese Buddhist New Year. Jaruphan Supprung describes events:

During the festival, Myanmar people pour water over one another to the melodious tunes of singing and dancing at the decorated pavilions. Pouring water signifies cleansing the body and mind of evils of the past year, performing a lot of meritorious deeds to usher in the New Year such as going to pagodas and monasteries, offering food and alms to monks, paying respect to parents, teachers and the elders, setting free fish and cattle and so on. (Supprung 2015)

Again obliquely, “Clean, Clear Water” conjures a reference to this “cleansing” Festival of Water. After working “at feverish pace almost without stopping,” writes U Win Pe, builders of the “seven-tiered” water filtration system finish “on schedule, exactly three months and seventeen days after groundbreaking” (U Win Pe 2002: 15). In fact, the time taken to complete the patriarch’s water purification system recapitulates the time elapsing annually between the western New Year and

the Burmese Buddhist New Year. It is also evident that Ba Gyi Kyaw's project, though successful from a scientific and technological standpoint, scarcely captures either the moral purpose or the spiritual ethos of Thingyan.

As "Clean, Clear Water" moves towards a climax, U Win Pe maintains the ironical aura of devotion surrounding the patriarch's project. To be tested, the filtration system must be filled with human waste. Under Ba Gyi Kyaw orders, "the entire family, young and old," helps to do so, "religiously patronizing the new toilet" for "four months" (U Win Pe 2002: 16). Similarly, after Mr U Maung Maung Ba has subjected the filtered water to a battery of scientific tests and declared it absolutely pure, the patriarch's "face lit up with a broad, ecstatic, self-satisfied smile" as the family "heaped praises on him and loudly proclaimed their amazement at the wondrous success of the experiment" (U Win Pe 2002: 17). At the same time, U Win Pe further heightens tensions between traditional sensibilities and western ways of knowing and doing. Ba Gyi Kyaw's relatives "adamantly refused to drink the water, or even to so much as taste it," although the professor's analyses reveal it signally fit for household use (U Win Pe 2002: 17). The patriarch offers an explanation for the family's refusal: "[A]lthough the Kyaw family believed the results of the analysis, they were not yet prepared to act upon what they knew to be true" (U Win Pe 2002: 17). But U Win Pe's phrasing is crafty; Ba Gyi Kyaw says more than he realizes. Totally committed to the rationalist methodology of western science and technology, the patriarch expresses his family's decision as at once a belief and a rational certainty. Divergent epistemologies are at play in this rhetorical sleight of hand. On the one hand, scientific analysis confirms that the clear water produced by the filtration process corresponds with what theoretical reasoning predicts of a system of such technological complexity. Indeed, by calling upon the services of a professor of biochemistry and obliging the family to attend his experiments, Ba Gyi Kyaw pushes this rationalist paradigm to its limits. On the other hand, even when faced with indubitable scientific proof of the filtered water's purity, the family rejects it, unanimously agreeing that the wells they had been using for years provided perfectly adequate water for all domestic purposes. Consensual convention thus trumps rationalist science, an outcome further strengthened by Mr U Maung Maung Ba's own refusal to sample the filtered water.

At this point Ba Gyi Kyaw reasons that he has no other choice but to drink the filtered water himself. Further intensifying the ironies of “Clean, Clear Water,” the language of devotion again returns: “the entire family looked on in rapt attention” and the “professor stood unmoving, transfixed with anxious anticipation” (U Win Pe 2002: 17). In a final twist, however, “Ba Gyi Kyaw himself began to quail, his body trembling slightly” (U Win Pe 1992: 17). Like the family members and the professor, the patriarch himself seems a parody of the ecstatic supplicant seized by the power of some sacred object: “He took hold of the glass of filtered toilet water, raised it, and made ready to drink” (U Win Pe 1992: 17). As we have seen, though, “Clean, Clear Water” ends in an ellipsis, the story’s outcome at once indeterminate and undetermined, left in suspension like “the glass suspended in his [Ba Gyi Kyaw’s] hand” (U Win Pe 1992: 17). Wordlessly, this ellipsis thus captures the ambivalence about the filtered water’s purity felt by every member of the family, by Mr U Maung Maung Ba the biochemistry professor, and even, it seems, by Ba Gyi Kyaw himself, despite the mass of scientific evidence testifying irrefutably to the efficacy of the patriarch’s water purification project. At the same time, though ironic, the devotional language dominating the closing paragraph of “Clean, Clear Water” leaves the reader not only questioning the legitimacy of Ba Gyi Kyaw’s autocratic attitude and the scientific rationalism within terms of which it is ultimately expressed, but also wondering about alternative ways of conceiving and enacting relations between those with authority and those over whom it is exercised that the story’s ironical and indirect invocations of the Theravadan *dharma* suggest.

### **Conclusion**

In 1994, U Win Pe was chosen as the first writer from Burma to participate as a Visiting Fellow in the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program (Zon Pann Pwint 2015). In the United States of America, he publicly espoused the principles and practices of democracy, including freedom of expression. In U Win Pe’s own words:

If you study art and literature, you are getting to know freedom. It is very important to have freedom of expression to create art or literature. People who study art are studying freedom indirectly. If you do not have freedom within you, you cannot create any art form. (Khet Mar 2012)



Deemed subversive, such sentiments did not endear U Win Pe to the military regime in Burma, who interpreted his candour as criticism of their policies. *Persona non grata* in his home country, U Win Pe remained in exile in the United States. He continued to write and to paint, at the same time freelancing as a journalist and helping to set up the Burmese-language service of Radio Free Asia. In 2006, U Win Pe published *Baraḥi and Other Stories*, a third collection of tales written between 1989 and 2006. Reviewing this collection for *The Irrawaddy*, Khin Maung Soe reaffirms the literary reality that “the state of Burma’s censorship laws precludes overtly political or socially activist themes, but in many instances such themes can be drawn – with or without the author’s intent – from the text” (Khin Maung Soe 2007). Despite this quite public recognition of his dissident sympathies, however, U Win Pe took advantage of a softening in the military regime’s policy towards exiles and returned home in 2012, though in recent years he has focused his creative energies not on writing, but on painting, as Kyaw Phyo Tha has noted in *The Irrawaddy* (Tha 2019).

That said, Burma’s post-colonial rulers have been all too aware of the way in which the country’s political and religious legacies are inextricably interwoven. More to the point, perhaps, they have also been quite aware of the important role the literary community plays in forming public opinion. In 1949, for example, U Nu encouraged the Burma Translation Society to establish the *Sarpay Beikman* [“Palace of Literature”] awards in several literary genres, and successive regimes have promoted *Sarsodaw neit* [“Writers’ Day”], which was first instituted in 1944, during the Japanese occupation, as a national holiday celebrating Burma’s literary, intellectual and cultural heritage.<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, these themes coalesced in the opening ceremonies of the inaugural conference of Burma’s Literary and Journalists’ Organization, held at Yangon’s Institute of Nursing, 29 December, 1993.<sup>12</sup> Here, towards the end of a lengthy opening address, Khin Nyung articulates the regime’s expectations of the literary community:

In leading the people by virtue of your talent, literary workers are to perform the national tasks of non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, perpetuation of sovereignty, promotion of national pride and nurturing of a keen sense of patriotism to the best of your ability. In other words, literary workers are responsible for the material as well as spiritual wellbeing of the entire

people, and you are to preserve our cherished cultural traditions while taking part in the making of a modern and prosperous Union. (Khin Nyunt 1993: 34)

Perhaps as a folk-tale U Win Pe's "Clean, Clear Water" fulfills the mandate the military regime imagined for Burma's post-colonial "literary workers" (U Thuang 2007: 9). Indeed, it may well be, as U Thuang opined in 2007, that "the Government wants to see progress in the literary field in Burma" (U Thuang 2007: 9).

As we have seen, however, what Allott identifies as "a deeper meaning to the events described" in U Win Pe's short story likely bears little resemblance to what Khin Nyung and his cohorts envisioned as an appropriate take on Burma's "material as well as spiritual wellbeing" (Allott 2009: 175). If it reads as a witty folktale on one level, on others "Clean, Clear Water" may be interpreted as an ironic commentary on the vanity of authoritarian government, culminating in the wordless ambivalence of the closing ellipsis. The tropes and topoi of the Theravadan Buddhist *dharma* reverberating ironically throughout "Clean, Clear Water" prompt critical reflection upon the suffering produced by the attitudes and policies of Burma's military rulers on the one hand, and on the other, especially among Burmese readers, encourages some wishful thinking about the ostensibly consensual politics of Burma's contemporary democratic reformers. Indeed, scores of ironic pieces like "Clean, Clear Water," by dozens of writers – some celebrated, many pseudonymous – probably played a quiet but key role in preparing the ground for the 2015 electoral victory of Aung San Suu Kyi (1945-) and the National League for Democracy (NLD). At the time, their approach to public office promised to be a truer reworking than military autocracy of the idea of kammatic reciprocity between ruler and ruled, leader and led, that characterizes the admittedly idealized, but nonetheless alluring Ashokan paradigm of Buddhist good governance.<sup>13</sup> As Lucas Stewart has recently observed, writers in today's Burma may feel relatively confident that they may publish "without restriction" (Stewart and Birnbaum 2017: 14). But as we now recognize, Aung San Suu Kyi has failed so far to fulfill more fully the promise of more enlightened governance, especially in her refusal to speak out against the regime's treatment of Rohingya Muslims. In this respect, U Win Pe's multifold use of irony in "Clean, Clear Water" constitutes an even more important marker in Burma's ongoing struggle to replace military autocracy with

Buddhist democracy, and in so doing, perhaps, to restore the country's tradition of right relations between political power and Theravadan Buddhist thought and practice.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest Buddhist texts were written in Pali, then translated into Sanskrit. *Dharma* is the Sanskrit rendering of the Pali *damma*. Sanskrit transliterations to English are now used more frequently, including in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Scholarship still varies in its use of “Burma” and “Myanmar” and “Burmese” and “Myanmaran.” This essay adopts the earlier wording. The later language might easily be assumed.

<sup>3</sup> Historically, Burma has prided itself on being second only to Sri Lanka in its espousal of Theravada Buddhism, not Mahayana. Burmese Buddhists believe that India's Mauryan king Ashoka (c. 280-200 BCE) sent Buddhist missionaries to the Mon peoples of ancient Burma in the third century BCE, well before the Fourth Buddhist Council (c. 100 CE), which accelerated the development of Mahayana Buddhism in the second century CE. Today, almost 90% of Buddhists in Burma are Theravadan. Almost by definition, therefore, to speak of Buddhism in the context of Burma is to speak of Theravadan Buddhism.

<sup>4</sup> Burmese imperial chronicles like the *Mahayazawingyi* [*Great Chronicle*] (1724), the *Mahayazawinthat* [*New Great Chronicle*] (1798) and the *Hmanhanyazawindawgyi* [*Glass Palace Chronicle*] (1829-32) associate Burma and the Burmese monarchy with various aspects of Buddhist lore, as do provincial royal works like the Mon *Bago yazawin* [*Pago Chronicle*] (c. 1800) and the Shan *Theinni yazawin* [*Chronicle of Theinni*] (c. 1850). Other writings echo the royal and provincial chronicles, most notably the *Sasanavamsa* [*History of the Buddha's Religion*] (1861), composed in 1861 by the Burmese monk Pannasami, who served as spiritual advisor to penultimate Burmese monarch Mindon Min (1808-78).

<sup>5</sup> For a history of the novel in various contexts, see Moore (2013). I am indebted to an anonymous reader for the reference to Moore's work. There are numerous studies of the short story in national literatures. See, for example, Flora (1985) or Moser (1986).

<sup>6</sup> The care with which U Win Pe disguises the ironical intent of “Clean, Clear Water” invites elastic inferences. Shin An Zagana, for example, seems not to be an actual historical figure, but the name conjures two possible associations. On the one hand, Burma's chroniclers eulogize the Theravadan Mon monk Shin Arahan for converting Anawrahta, the country's first great exemplar of the Ashokan kingly paradigm. On the other hand, Burmese readers of “Clean, Clear Water” will be just as familiar with the contemporary political satirist Maung Thura Zagana (1961-), whose work on stage and television has pilloried the country's military leadership since the mid-1980s. Thus, “Shin An Zagana” might at once bring to mind the country's most revered and most reviled rulers, the former serving as an implicit reminder of the shortcomings of the latter.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, section 16 of the *Sabbasava sutta*: “Bhikkhus! There are *asavas* that should be removed through vision, *asavas* that should be removed through restraint, *asavas* that should be removed through proper use [of requisites], *asavas* that should be removed through forbearance, *asavas* that should be removed through avoidance, *asavas* that should be removed through rejection and *asavas* that should be removed through cultivation [of the Factors of Enlightenment]” (Burma Pīṭaka Association 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Sariputta draws an analogy between a journey accomplished in seven chariot relays and the seven stages by which the Buddhist adept may overcome the seven kinds of defilement, hence the title *Ratha-vinita sutta* [*Relay Chariots*] (Thanissaro Bhikkhu 1999).

<sup>9</sup> According to Burmese chroniclers, the merchant Mahapunna becomes a disciple of the Buddha on a business trip to India. He accepts ordination, returns home to Burma and, with his brother Culapunna, builds a monastery of red sandalwood. Mahapunna then invites the Buddha to the consecration of the monastery. The Buddha travels to Burma with a large retinue of monks, along the way converting an ascetic called Saccabandha. He stays at the monastery for seven weeks, holding one assembly each week and drawing “eighty-four thousand beings ... to the *Dhamma*” (Law 1952: 61). In some accounts, the Buddha foretells the construction of the shrine built on the site of the monastery by the twelfth-century Pagan monarch Alaungsithu (1090-1167). On the way back to India, according to another version of the story, the Buddha preaches to the Naga people of northwest Burma. As testimony to his visit, he leaves footprints in rocks west of Minbu at Settawya, which means ‘Golden Footprints.’ This site continues to thrive as a pilgrimage destination and forest retreat. See, for example, the sixth chapter of the *Sasanavamsa* (Bode 1897: 61).

<sup>10</sup> Buddhaghosa arranges the *Visuddhimagga* under the headings: “Purification of Virtue,” “Purification of Consciousness,” “Purification of View,” “Purification by Overcoming Doubt,” “Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is and What Is Not the Path,” “Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Way,” and “Purification by Knowledge and Vision” (Buddhaghosa 2010).

<sup>11</sup> The Burma Translation Society was originally founded in 1937 as the *Nagani* Book Club by members of the nationalist *Dobama Asiayone* [“We Burmans Society”].

<sup>12</sup> The Literary and Journalists’ Organization is now known as the Myanmar Writers’ and Journalists’ Association, a re-branding moved and approved at this inaugural conference.

<sup>13</sup> Led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD won 378 of 664 seats in Burma’s parliamentary elections, 8 November, 2015. International observers declared the election the most free and fair in decades. Aung San Suu Kyi, whose two sons are British citizens, may not serve as Burma’s president because the country’s constitution bars from that office persons who themselves or whose immediate family members possess dual or foreign citizenship. As victors, however, the NLD chooses the president, and as the party’s leader, Aung San Suu Kyi will have had a controlling say in that decision.

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