

## Chapter 5

# FROM RELATIONS OF POWER TO RELATIONS OF AUTHORITY

### *The Dynamics of Symbolic Legitimacy*

#### *Political Claims, Practices, and Ideology*

Two key questions underpinning this study are: What constitutes political legitimacy in Burma, toward which each postindependence government has aspired? And how have the sundry approaches taken by the several governments fulfilled or failed to fulfill this quest for legitimacy?

Following the 1962 coup that overthrew Burma's first postindependence and parliamentary democratic government, a succession of military regimes has asserted legitimacy on diverse grounds. Their successes in containing the upland minorities and keeping the country unified, in implementing a socialist-style redistributive system, and contemporaneously in acting as chief patron to the sangha have all functioned as claims to legitimate rule and to nation-statehood. In 1990, the regime refused to hand over power to Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party after a landslide election victory. Aung San Suu Kyi's resistance to the regime and claims for her own political legitimacy have been based primarily on a universalizing discourse of the emergent global society and its sensibilities about human rights, regime performance, and democratic self-determination. I regard these separate assertions for legitimacy as distinct but interrelated frameworks for thinking and action. The inconsistencies among them complicate the process of stable state making in Burma.

Although I devote the last chapter to describing the ways in which resistance to regime domination must be expressed indirectly for fear of reprisals, the root of my analysis in this final chapter is the question of how the regime continues to rule without direct and widespread confrontation to its authority. An argument claiming that rule is maintained simply through the threat of force might be reasonable for a shorter-lived regime. But the fact is, at forty-three years and counting as of this writing, the junta that rules Burma is one of the most successful of its kind in modern history—if success is measured by the relative stability of its continuity despite its dubious track record in economy and welfare, human rights and foreign relations. Increasingly, a domestic and international community of states and their citizens expect all these criteria to be met. Although disapproval and fear of the regime within Burma is widespread, there is something in the relations between the regime and its subjects that is grounded in common, accepted viewpoints and terms for rule.

Acknowledging this as a sort of axiom, I reiterate Weber's insight (as condensed by Mouthier Alagappa) that "[t]he legitimation of power relies on the conviction of the governed that their government (whether democratic, monarchic, communist, theocratic, or authoritarian) is morally right and they are duty-bound to obey it. In the absence of such conviction there can only be relations of power, not of authority, and political legitimacy will be contested."<sup>1</sup> Political authority, in other words, must be situated from the point of view of the governed; their belief regarding the moral rectitude in the actions of their government will determine the political legitimacy of that government. The absence of such assent will result in the exercise of "relations of power." Relations of this type are liable to be both trying and demoralizing for the governed, resulting in smaller or grander acts of resistance. A regime confronted by complete denial of its authority must, in the end, be more like an occupying force than a government, with all that is implied historically by this structure. And, as Weber continues, once a "particular claim to legitimacy is to a significant degree and according to its type treated as 'valid' . . . this fact confirms the position of the persons claiming the authority and . . . helps to determine the choice of means of its exercise."<sup>2</sup>

This concept, if not formulated directly in such terms, has already been in effect in much of the analysis of contemporary Burma, where the military regime is seen as having donned the garb of Buddhist kingship in order, presumably, to achieve just such moral legitimacy as Weber indicated. Practically, however, questions of strategic versus cosmologically taken-for-granted sincerity on the part of the regime are not easily resolved. Rather, this debate has tended to be partitioned into a strained dichotomy between manipulated versus sincere acts of legitimacy seeking and, ultimately, into a competition between secular and religious sources of interpretation.<sup>3</sup> I want to take a last step away from this debate with the consideration of two additional factors.

First, I will seek to locate some of the processes by which legitimate order is constituted not by asking whether the regime is or is not capable of manipulating the public's beliefs but by determining the sources and conditions of knowledge that may warrant or justify moral political legitimacy in Burma today. Second, I will put the notion of power itself into play.

It is material to point out, from the outset, that the military regime's rule continues in a context in which the legitimacy of the state has never been ratified, at the very least from the perspective of the ethnic minorities.<sup>4</sup> The seven leading minority populations make up some 30 to 35 percent of the total population. The consequence of this and similar quandaries emerges from a brief consideration of the historical background of Burma since attaining independence in 1948. On the eve of independence, seven armies were formed to fight the new central government. The principal source of the contention came from up-country ethnic minority groups who had no natural political reason to consider themselves subject to the national boundaries the British had specified; to this day, the country remains unstable along the same lines. Ideological and bureaucratic divisions, in addition to religious sectarianism within the lowland Buddhist Burman majority, destabilized the effort to establish a single state entity, even at its geographic center in Yangon. The geoterritorial boundaries of the Burmese nation-state do not correspond to a

single ethnopolitical community with shared norms and values. As Yangwhe comments, “Rebellions, insurgencies, and civil unrest have figured prominently since 1948 and have more or less become a permanent political feature of Burma . . . the legitimacy of the nation-state, régime, and government in Burma is highly contested.”<sup>5</sup>

In their efforts to create and maintain autonomous political regions in opposition to the central government, the ethnic minorities have engaged Yangon in a debate—itsself in statist language—over both the terms and the boundaries of the state as originally handed down by the British colonial government. Further, the question of state borders is determined by more than internal debates and considerations. The boundaries of neighboring states pose a de facto definition of state space for Burma as well. This situation is complicated by the fact that ethnic populations spill across other state borders, and it sometimes can lead to nationalist movements that do not reflect existing country boundaries. Since the early 1950s, for example, the country’s estimated one hundred thousand Nagas have been seeking, in consort with the estimated one million Nagas living across the border in India, to form an independent nation.<sup>6</sup>

Early documents of intent of the newfound state are a hodgepodge of socialist, Marxist, democratic, and Buddhist principles—reflective of what I will later refer to as competing and overlapping surfaces of knowledge. Seeking the most democratically representative form of government and the moral high ground, the first prime minister, U Nu, attempted to establish an explicitly Buddhist state. In 1962, this effort collapsed in a coup staged by Ne Win. Ne Win’s military government reversed the Buddhist resolution entirely, adopting instead a socialist-materialist philosophy. Religion was to be excluded from the affairs of the state, which would derive its authority from successful provisioning and organizing collectivities for that purpose.

Until 1971, the Ne Win regime formulated this political philosophy as “Only when your stomach is full can you keep your *sīla*.”<sup>7</sup> The statement implicates the Buddhist logic by which progressive stages of purification practices (*dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā*) lead to the penultimate goal of *nibbāna*. But in this version, a righteous and prosperous

society first depended not on charitable giving (especially toward the sangha) but on the redistributive functions of the government. Claims to socialist-style redistribution were contradicted, both by the overall diminishment of economic resources and by the conspicuous accretion of the remainder in the hands of those in or close to the military. The second measure of failure came to be represented in the popular claim—taking the form of a mass revitalization movement, with discernible structural features reinforcing its interpretation as just such a claim—that the government was being remiss by relinquishing its duties to be chief patron to the sangha and protector and propagator of the faith. Thus, as I have described in chapter 1, a mass lay meditation movement with new institutional features arose among the majority Buddhist population to compensate for the role of the state or king in the classical triple order of sangha, state, and laity.

Recognizing that the new, closer alignment between the sangha and the laity represented a threat in political and economic terms, the government reversed itself and began participating in the Buddhist revitalization. Starting by availing itself of its classically endowed authority to purify the sangha—and note here that the regime's authority derives from pre- or extrastatist sources—the military government sanctioned the resolution of the sangha into nine official sects. It disrobed monks who refused to conform to this division. Laity who had taken to residing on lands they had donated to specific monks, thereby avoiding government taxation and repatriation, were forced off these properties, and the government undertook to control lay Buddhist institutions by placing military officials on their guardian committees.

As of this writing, although the military government has come to fulfill its kingly role as chief donor and supporter of the *sāsana*—and I will recount how succession to leadership within the regime is often marked by rituals of Buddhist coronation or the pretending to it by various means—the regime's authority is yet not secure in statist terms. The centerpiece of the state's ideological claims is embodied in its attempts to legitimize its authority in Buddhist monarchical terms.

*Burmese Rulers and Pretenders to the Throne:  
A Postindependence Sequence*

It is reported that between 85 and 89 percent of the people of Burma are Buddhist, and the majority of these are ethnic Bama or Burmans. U Nu, Burma's first prime minister (from 1948 to 1962), sought legitimacy in terms of the classical function of Burman kings. This meant supporting the Buddha sasana by sponsoring, protecting, and purifying it through his role as chief patron of the Sangha of the Four Quarters. Purifying involved, among other actions, removing from the sangha monks who did not adhere to the disciplinary code (vinaya). U Nu was also obliged to be foremost among the laity in providing the requisites for the sangha (lands, monasteries, robes, and food) and to propagate the teachings and convert populations he had conquered for the benefit of all beings.

As world renouncers, members of the sangha officially remain outside of politics, but they nevertheless stay involved in many aspects of worldly life. Sometimes, they do so through their direct engagement with the sources of their material sustenance. But there is also an abstract, necessary, and paradoxical linkage between monks and worldly life. This engagement stems from the fact that in Buddhist cosmology, renunciation is a source of moral authority and cosmic potency. The state draws from this source of potency to legitimize its political authority in moral and cosmic terms. Where U Nu was concerned, veneration of and donation to Buddhist institutions helped him accumulate his merit stores as a "king." (And the king, with his access to resources, is afforded much greater leverage in being able to undertake meritorious acts that eventually [by the law of kamma] return the fruits of his good deeds in this and future lives.) Undertaking meritorious actions directed toward the sangha was, therefore, a way for U Nu to balance the scale against the demerits that his role as ruler eventually required of him.

Whether the historical facts of prior eras bear this out or not is less important than the fact that U Nu perceived the sangha as constituting the main source of a king's actual worldly power. Colonialism

may have interrupted this political pattern with the introduction of an administrative bureaucracy organized around the goals of extracting resources and administrating a peaceful colony. But the principles that organized the potency and hence the moral and practical authority of a king/ruler were interpretable along these lines in the postmonarchical arrangement as well.

By the time of independence in 1948, the prospect of restoring kingship as the legitimate form of government was viewed as a clear impossibility. Yet, as U Myo Myint, an eminent historian at the University of Mandalay, once commented to me, “Kingship is always at the back of Burmese politics.” For U Nu, who sought to establish a society based on Buddhist moral principles (and who himself had made a vow to become a bodhisattva<sup>8</sup>—as was quite typical for classical Buddhist kings), national unity was to be accomplished by purifying the citizens of their moral impurities and wrong views (*miccha ditti*). Only then could Burmese society approximate the mythical state of Mahasammatha, the first king, who was unanimously elected by the mandate of the people; they recognized him to be the most morally pure and noble human being among them and therefore their rightful ruler. In fact, the word for president is *tham-mada*, the Burmanized form of the Buddhist Pali Mahasammatha. It should be noted that the rise of Mahasammatha occurs when the people are no longer capable of self-governance because of a general increase in craving or greed, which, by mythical accounts, is the cause for the decline in World Ages.

The mythical ideal of the rightful ruler and the historical idea of Burmese kings also participate together in another theory of kings. This is the theory of the nature of moral decline in the World Age as part of the natural process of moral devolution and evolution that makes up the wheel of *samsāra*, or the endless cycle of death and rebirths to which all sentient beings are chained. From the Burmese Buddhist perspective, bad kings are a given. They are categorized as one of the five great evils, along with flood, fire, thieves, and enemies.<sup>9</sup> It is important to recognize in our consideration of native conceptions of political authority that a continuum of ideas about

authoritarian rule already exists. At one end of the spectrum, the king functions merely to keep the citizenry in line with their own lay, moral conduct (especially the layperson's five precepts); at the other end of the spectrum, where a king rules unjustly and arbitrarily and without concern for the populace, he rules over and only for his own aggrandizement.

U Nu fashioned himself in the role of a cakkavatti king (a king destined for Buddhahood), but despite his aspirations and conceptualization of the nature of political authority, he nevertheless was very explicit about the fact that the age of kings (*min win*) had come to a close and could not be resurrected. In its place, he imagined a society structured more on the Mahasammatha model. For U Nu, society required moral purification and unification in order that the citizens might become responsible participants in *democratic* society.<sup>10</sup> U Nu's demand that one person from every village should practice meditation at MTY is an example of how he sought to transform the nation-state into a like-minded country where democracy could flourish on the basis of a shared set of societal goals.<sup>11</sup> Unity would be achieved not through conquest and conversion but by "turning the wheel of dhamma"—that is, by allowing truth (dhamma) to transform society through self-realization. In this version, U Nu's conception of democracy was not premised on the sovereign will of a people made up of independent-minded citizen individuals. Rather, democracy was the end result of having already unified and established shared norms and values—especially Buddhist universal, causative, objective, and self-evident moral values.

At the same time that U Nu looked to Buddhism as a way of unifying the country, the constraints and demands of nation-state building (communist and ethnic insurgencies, rising military power, and factionalism within his own party) led him to endorse procedural democracy. He identified three enemies of democracy in newly independent countries: (1) politicians who are elected to office but who, on finding themselves facing electoral defeat at a later point, delay or rig elections or seize power outright; (2) politicians who, recognizing they will not win votes in an election, turn to foreign

governments to support them against their own people; and (3) military officers who begin to covet the power of the politicians.<sup>12</sup> In a speech delivered in 1954, he said, “[T]he thesis of the Marxists that the last war on earth would be fought between capitalists and the proletariat was false. Instead, . . . the last war would be between the masses who loved democracy and the despots who would reduce human beings to the level of castrated animals.”<sup>13</sup>

Procedural democracy is silent on the question of what the particular moral goals for society should be. U Nu’s efforts to educate for democracy (so that “the people . . . may take democracy to heart and defend it with their lives”<sup>14</sup>) blended with Burmese Buddhist notions for a virtuous (*mingala*) society. His incorporation of procedural democratic principles into the project of nation-state building fit with Buddhist conceptions of righteous kings. Subsequent military governments turned toward other conceptions of Burmese kingship, emphasizing instead the right to unfettered power (justified as the pursuit of national unity). It needs to be remembered that the military leaders have always claimed that they would allow an eventual return to democracy once the country had stabilized—and, presumably, once they had assured their hold on authority (and not just power). The holding of elections in 1990, therefore, can be interpreted as a fulfillment of this justification to their “temporary” rule by force. It was also a vast miscalculation by the military government regarding the degree to which the populace perceived it as legitimate.<sup>15</sup>

As regards U Nu’s nation-state building project, I remind the reader of how the prime minister was instrumental in making part of the government’s task the revitalization of *sāsana* after nearly 100 years of British colonial subjugation. He helped establish lay meditation centers, monks’ universities, nunneries, training centers, and state-sponsored titles for the scholastic attainments of monks who memorized the classical texts. His *pièce de résistance* was the Sixth Buddhist Synod. At this international event, the revision or purification of the canonical (*Tīpitaka*) texts were undertaken in order to normalize the orthodoxy of the texts across national boundaries.

Buddhism was to be revitalized not only within the boundaries of Burma but also throughout the world. Presumably, the synod would also demonstrate Burma's unique role as foremost among the nations as the location and repository for the Buddha's true teachings.

In 1962, in response to ongoing ethnic conflicts and splits in the civilian Antifascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) government party and on the eve of U Nu's proclamation of intent to declare Burma a Buddhist state and grant the ethnic Shan's secession from the Union of Burma, Ne Win staged a bloodless coup and instituted military rule. The justification for this action was that the nation was disintegrating. Ne Win's plan was to rid the state apparatus of all Buddhist involvements, citing these as sources of corruption in the government.

During the first fifteen years of military rule, the government took an approach of noninvolvement in religious affairs. From 1962 to 1965, the government set out to secularize the polity. Religious legislation from the previous administration was removed, the Buddha Sasana Council was dissolved, and ecclesiastical courts and state sponsorship of the Pali Universities was curtailed. Nationalization of private and corporate ownership in sectors of the economy such as agriculture, timber, mineral production, and foreign trade in 1963 and the demonetization of large notes in 1964 eroded the economic base of the private sector. The effects of these events would be felt over the next decade in a general decline in the physical maintenance of the infrastructure of the sangha (monasteries, temples, pagodas, and so on). As political institutional sponsorship was removed, the support of Buddhism was taken up by lay organizations and individual lay devotees. Tin Maung Maung Than states:

[A]s Burmese society tried to cope with the realities of the secular socialist revolution, the post-independence trend popularizing the quest for insight knowledge appeared to reassert itself after a hiatus following the demise of U Nu's leadership. This was manifested in a resurgence of meditational practices centered around different techniques for, or doctrines on, vipassana . . . as interpreted and

enunciated by prominent teachers—who were more often than not, revered members of the sangha.<sup>16</sup>

In 1974, a constitution was drawn up and a socialist government was put in place under the military—the Burmese Socialist Program Party. The ideology of the BSPP was a peculiar blend of Buddhism and Marxism, which the military described as the Burmese Way to Socialism. Under the BSPP, the country experienced disastrous economic decline. Whereas Burma had once been known as the rice bowl of Southeast Asia, it was now barely able to provide enough rice for its own citizens. In 1974, food shortages sparked demonstrations and strikes in Rangoon. Later that year, U Thant, the former secretary-general of the United Nations, died. When his body was returned to Burma, students and monks—this was the first time in more than a decade that monks would be politically active—rallied at U Thant’s burial site. They shouted slogans such as “Down with the one-party dictatorship” and “Down with the fascist government.”<sup>17</sup> In the wake of more demonstrations, the military declared martial law and closed universities and schools.

In apparent response to the unrest, Ne Win launched a project to purify the sangha from its impure (that is, political) elements. Invoking the duty of classical Buddhist kings, he set out to unify and purify the sangha according to orthodox practice, operating on the assumption that if he controlled the monks, he thereby also controlled the people. The recognition that sangha and laity could pose a threatening unity against the state altered Ne Win’s strategic outlook. Sangha-laity arrangements had bypassed government control and permitted a different kind of economic flow through a *dāna* economy tied to the black market economy, as well as chains of patron-client ties that cross-laced the state bureaucracy itself, as described in chapter 3.

Ne Win began his purification with the burning of nonorthodox books. Trials were arranged for heretical monks, and those who were convicted were disrobed and sent into hard labor. I myself was in the office of the director-general for the Department of Religious

Affairs, U Aunt Maung, when he chastised a monk for having been seen at a football game. “If it happens again,” he warned the monk, “you will be disrobed and thrown in prison.” Identity cards were issued to all members of the sangha. Ne Win established an elaborate state sangha council mirroring the sangha organization down to the village tract, so that at every level, sangha and state would be integrated and intertwined.

Tin Maung Maung Than observes that the regime initially sought to avoid direct sponsorship of Buddhism. The approach was to create an environment of self-purification and perpetuation by the sangha and lay devotees through such indirect pressures as reinstating honorary state titles for achievements of members of the monastic order. At the same time, it was intended to project “the power and authority of the state in such a way as to rid the *sāsana* of unscrupulous elements as well as dubious doctrines and to act as a deterrent against further encroachments by undesirable elements.”<sup>18</sup>

In commemoration of the unification of the sangha, a feat that had not been accomplished since King Mindon in the 1850s, Ne Win built a pagoda, thereby establishing himself through having performed the function of classical kings.

In 1987, I observed:

Ecclesiastical courts have been re-established, monk identification papers issued, the sangha has been hierarchically organized to the village level to mirror the political body of the BSPP, the *sangharaja* (*tha-tha-na-baing*)—an institution I am told has not existed since the time of the British—has been reinstated; government-sponsored religious exams and titles have been reinstated.

The political success and social consequences of the sangha purification movement are significant. Nine sects were legitimized and all the others abolished. Their members have been forced to join legitimate sects, renouncing any “wrong views” held previously. Ecclesiastical courts worked with a lay government-sponsored purification council. Decisions were made at least at face value by the monk courts. However, it should be noted that the Deputy Minister

of the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs, U Khin Nyunt, was also the head of Military Intelligence. It is clear that the government prefigured the outcome by means of their selection process of monks to the State Sangha Council, and through directing the points of investigation by having lay advisors to these committees. (In fact, the people I have spoken with at Mahasi feel that the “government monks” are the military’s puppets and they hold little regard for them.) The court’s decisions are enforced, e.g., the army has routed thousands of people living on monastery grounds in the Rangoon area because it was against the vinaya that monks and the laity should live so closely together. The government, of course, fears the close contact between the monks and laity. Several monks told me that the especially close contact between monks and the laity began during WWII when urban monasteries took in thousands of people who felt they would be protected from bombings if they were sheltered by the sangha. There grew up a very close relationship whereby lay houses came to be built on monastery grounds in exchange for the laity overseeing the worldly tasks monks could not perform for themselves. The laity in turn received advice and protection from the monks they supported. The government is forcibly emptying these places and is resettling the people in the new settlements on the outskirts of Rangoon. However, I understand that even while this continues, the people are slowly returning to the monasteries.

On April 5, 1980, the Congregation of the Sangha of All Orders for Purification, Perpetuation, and Propagation of the Sāsana was held, and the unification of the sangha was declared to have been achieved. Nine sects were officially recognized, ecclesiastical courts were established, and registration and identity papers for all monks were completed. Some of the other tasks implemented for the purification of the sāsana included

facilitating the removal of laymen from the monastic premises with the co-operation of the organs of state power; . . . investigating, prose-

cuting and disrobing bogus monks and monks who had committed serious viniya offences with the assistance of local authorities; . . . scrutinizing applications from monks who wished to go abroad; . . . evaluating existing government-sponsored religious examinations and, when necessary, proposing revisions of syllabi and procedures for conducting lessons and examinations; . . . drafting a comprehensive Pariyatti education scheme involving a structured, modernized sangha educational system with provisions for different levels from the elementary introductory course to the international postgraduate level culminating in the formation of State Pariyatti Sasana Tekathos or Buddhist universities at Rangoon and Mandalay; instituting training courses and multiplier courses for viniyadharas, abbots or heads of monasteries and Sangha Nayaka members.<sup>19</sup>

In 1984, Buddhist culture examinations were established, and over one hundred thousand youths and children participated in more than a hundred towns. Ten years later, I was told by a Religious Affairs bureaucrat that the government was still actively encouraging these “culture classes” (which, incidentally, are also held at MTY during the one-month school break) in order to morally prepare the Burmese people for the impending influx of visitors and business from the outside world with the planned opening of the country to tourism and trade in 1996.

In 1984, during my first stay in Burma, a common query I overheard questioned whether it did not, after all, seem that Ne Win had pon. As I have discussed in chapter 4, pon is a Buddhist concept describing an ineffable quality of merit, or glory. All rulers are said to possess it, and it is considered a sign of the individual’s prior meritorious action come to fruit in the present. That Ne Win was still judged illegitimate on all other counts of his performance toward the nation (corruption, crippling the economy, human rights infringements, and so forth) did not alter the fact that perhaps he was the legitimate ruler because he was beginning to act like one. Sao Htun Hmat Win of the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs and a close religious adviser to Ne Win told me:

The Burmese mentality of government is still that of the king. U Ne Win, during his 26 years, took an interest in sāsana only in the last 16 years. In the beginning, religion and state must be separate. But afterwards he realized that it is not easy to change the spiritual direction of the people. He ordained for a few months around 1975 and studied the scriptures. I was his instructor. I can tell you that he was very sincere. He learned scriptures and built the pagoda. He became the king builder, and I was in charge of the central committee. Soldier, politician . . . now U Ne Win is a religious man. You cannot bluff yourself! A Myanma [Burmese] must be like this . . . only slowly can he change.

Another telling example of Ne Win's attempt to legitimize himself in classical terms was the marriage he contracted with one of the last descendents in the line of Burmese kings, a descendent of King Thibaw. Despite the fact that the Burmese public might be willing to leave open the question of Ne Win's pon, his technical manipulations of the principle of succession in pursuit of outright kingship were ridiculed. Sao Htun Hmat Win continued:

Kingship [in Burma] is not [a matter of] verbal acts, or signs, or making mystical consecrations. It comes by blood. Your blood must be royal. But, U Ne Win is ordinary farmer blood—a peasant from Prome Village. . . . Actually speaking he cannot become a king. He can become President, Chairman, Leader . . . but not a king! No royal blood. That is what we believe. He began to realize this. U Nu and U Ne Win thought they could be universal kings, but neither could become a king. So, [U Ne Win] found a way to become a king in this country by extending his rule. He brought one royal person from England—an Anglo-Burman, Yadana Nat Mei. She was a widow with two sons from an English husband. Her husband passed away so U Ne Win had the chance to become a pretender. She was a grandchild of King Thibaw. So he had royal blood in her. He married this princess so he could become a king so Myanma people would obey him. . . . But the whole plan was a

failure! The people all just laughed that he is only a peasant and he is putting on all these airs.

Ne Win's aspirations to kingship were viewed as those of a pretender to an as yet void throne. Like every contender to the throne in the classical patterns of Burmese kingship, the pretender consecrates his legitimacy by marrying the former king's queen, thereby assuring that the issuance of his line yet partakes of royal blood.

Ne Win's originally secularist government had, by 1988, become thoroughly entangled in *sāsana* projects. Under the current regime, SLORC/SPDC, this has been all the more the case, and the regime's engagements have drawn skeptical attention from the people. As a Rangoon University professor told me, the SLORC/SPDC government "more than any other post-independence government is trying to legitimize itself through the sangha." The signs of this are everywhere. The Department of Religious Affairs has doubled in size from the time of U Nu. The state sangha coparticipate with the civil justice system in determining legal cases related to monks and monk-lay disputes. Patronage of Buddhist scholarship includes offering monks honorary titles with special state privileges (such as riding for free on trains and steamboats and, for the most venerable and learned, airplanes). A state censorship committee regulates the orthodoxy of discourses on Buddhism presented by monks traveling outside the country on dhamma proselytizing tours.

#### THE BUTCHER OF RANGOON: SEIN LWIN

The next landmark in modern Burmese political history occurred in 1988, when antigovernment demonstrations precipitated the fall of the Ne Win government. On July 23 of that year, Ne Win resigned from his post as BSPP chairman and designated Sein Lwin, a lieutenant from the Fourth Burma Rifles, as his handpicked successor.<sup>20</sup> Sein Lwin was universally hated and feared, having been responsible for carrying out the Rangoon University massacre in 1962 and for violently suppressing the demonstrations in March and June, a

few months earlier. For the latter, he had earned the moniker “the Butcher of Rangoon.” It is also worth remembering that Sein Lwin had been the main inspirational and organizing force for the thathana thanshin ye (the purification and unification of the sanghas movement) that took place beginning in the mid-1970s and culminating in 1980.

It was widely understood that despite his announcement that he was stepping down as BSPP chairman, Ne Win did not intend to renounce power. By selecting the public’s most feared and hated military personage to succeed him, he signaled that the military’s hold on power would only be tighter and that there would be zero tolerance for antigovernment demonstrations. In his resignation speech, he warned: “In continuing to maintain control, I want the entire nation, the people, to know that if in the future there are mob disturbances, if the army shoots, it hits—there is no firing in the air to scare.”<sup>21</sup> In the days following his assumption of power, Sein Lwin had been making a very public and conspicuous display of offering dana to the important monasteries and meditation centers in the Yangon area. He was also known to be consulting with astrologers, presumably to align his actions with auspicious times and to undertake various dark rituals. The effect these actions had (at least on the Yangon public) was sensational. People speculated that Sein Lwin was up to something that would secure his power, and there was much gossip, rumor, and intrepidation. People flocked to consult with their *bedin sayas* (fortune-tellers), waiting in lines outside their residences for up to four and five hours. One client explained that people wanted to know if their family members would be safe in the upcoming days and what they should do with their economic resources in the event of new government policies.<sup>22</sup>

I was present in the days leading up to what was planned as a peaceful popular protest against the government, to take place on August 8, 1988, a date deemed auspicious for its repeating eights—8/8/88. Meanwhile, U Nu had been placed (I was told) under heavy surveillance.<sup>23</sup> U Thaw Kaung, Rangoon University’s chief librarian, came, at my invitation, to the house where I was staying for a visit

on August 6, only to learn immediately on arriving that the military was in the process of locking down the university, where he lived. He apologized and at once turned around to hurry home before he could be locked out. Everyone I spoke with anticipated that there would be trouble, and I was encouraged by my hosts to leave the country,<sup>24</sup> which I did on August 7, 1988.

A few days before the demonstrations turned to massacre, Sein Lwin had the streets in his residential neighborhood cordoned off, and he commanded that everyone was to stay indoors, with their shutters closed. At an auspicious hour, he dressed in the full regalia of a Burmese king. He took nine steps from the front of his house and awaited a sign. An unseasonable clap of thunder is said to have occurred, thereby giving the sign that he would come into power. Later, many Burmese were asking and verifying to each other that this omen had in fact taken place.

Sein Lwin was essentially prefiguring his rule and creating an advance prophecy for it. The prophetic act served as the source of a rumor to presage his incumbency. (It was contested when people said, "No I did not hear the clap of thunder.") My own source for knowing about this event was Sein Lwin's doctor, at whose house I was staying at the time and who, during this period, needed to render close medical attention to Sein Lwin because he was having heart troubles in the days leading up to August 8, 1988. I was told that in the absence of nongovernmental forms of public announcement, the BBC was forecasting and organizing the event. The repetition of eights in the date selected for the gathering (8-8-88) lent an air of auspiciousness to the occasion.

Lintner (1989) provides a full account of the 8-8-88 massacres, which ended in the estimated slaughter of over two thousand peaceful demonstrators, many of whom were university and high school students. In 1994, my Burmese friends recalled how, after firing on demonstrators, the government barricaded the downtown area and declared a curfew. With anguish, they related that families were not permitted to claim their dead, and how for days and nights trucks came and went to take the bodies away for burning.<sup>25</sup>

Despite all of the ritual of prophecy surrounding his coming into power, Sein Lwin was able to hold that power for only seventeen days, for he was widely despised. The unanimous hatred motivated SLORC to remove him—he wasn't stabilizing anything. On the day after his reign ended, on what would have been his eighteenth day, Sein Lwin enrolled in the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha. He did so, at least in accordance with a Buddhist interpretation, to balance the debits in his merit store, which he had accumulated via the recent events. This was the typical custom, it is said, of Burmese kings who were sometimes required to undertake unwholesome acts on behalf of the state. They would perform meritorious acts to raise the balance of their merits for purposes of continuing their ability to have power as well as for soteriological purposes—to lessen the kammic consequences of their actions.

The “VIP room” at Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha happens to be located in the foreign men's building. I had an Australian acquaintance who was practicing at the same time as Sein Lwin. This yogi related to me how pious and mindful Sein Lwin was in his meditation. He stated that the image was etched on his mind of the way in which the recent oppressor and murderer of innocents would, in privacy and with the utmost of care, release mosquitoes from his mosquito net so as not to destroy them and invite further bad kamma.

#### THE TOOTH RELIC, REFURBISHING SHWEDAGON, AND WHITE ELEPHANTS: PERFORMATIVE ACTS OF LEGITIMACY

In 1996, a tooth relic of the Buddha was taken to Burma from China. In a chariot drawn by a caparisoned elephant, the relic was carried to the government's pagoda and then all over the country, giving people the opportunity to revere it and make merit. This performance recalled the obligation of a Buddhist king to provide his subjects opportunities for merit making.<sup>26</sup>

The refurbishing of Shwedagon, the most revered pagoda in the country, was an undertaking of elaborate proportions. It was com-

pleted in April 1999. Nearly half a ton of diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and other precious gems adorned a spire made of 0.21 tons of gold. A seventy-six-carat diamond rested at the center of the orb. Much of this precious material was newly donated, and it was set in place by the senior general of the SPDC and Secretaries 1 and 2 (as the two military regime chiefs are known), among other dignitaries. Renovation of Shwedagon represented the regime's intent to prolong the teachings of the Buddha for thousands of years. This, too, is the work of kings. When the military rulers had first announced their intention to restore the *ti* (the umbrella, or finial, that adorns the utmost top of the spire), many were apprehensive. Such work, it was thought, was the obligation and privilege of true kings alone. Should a pretender to the throne undertake such cosmically important work and not be legitimate, natural calamities would be certain to ensue.

The pagoda restoration culminated with the final hoisting of the *ti*, which entailed removing the *ti* placed by the last king (King Mindaon, from the late 1800s) and replacing it with that of the new ruler. During the days following the ceremony, residents of Yangon told me that a collective hush settled on the city as people waited to see what would happen next. When no earthquake shook open the foundations of the land, rumors began to circulate that perhaps this government was legitimate after all. "And all the worse for the people of Burma!" as one person put it to me.

The work on Shwedagon had even greater ramifications than conferring on the military regime merits and domestic legitimacy. Shwedagon is held to be the property not just of Burmese Buddhists but also of all human beings. From a Burmese Buddhist standpoint, this gives a special kind of international legitimacy to the military regime. Burma is held to be the last repository of the Buddha's unaltered teachings. As Mary Douglas has explained, the alignment of the truth claims of an institution with the nature of the universe confers on the institution an ultimate seal of legitimacy.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, once the institution itself is regarded as valid, the particular position of those claiming authority and of the means they use to exercise that authority can be confirmed.

In another recent example of the regime seeking cosmological endorsement, the government announced in 1997, 2001, and 2002 that it had captured three white elephants in western Burma's Arakan State. For hundreds of years, white elephants have been regarded as symbols of royalty, power, and prosperity in many Southeast Asian Buddhist countries.<sup>28</sup> One might add that the parading of these symbols, accompanied by the lavish donation fests from poor as from rich, furthered the quest to incorporate minority populations into the Buddhist and, hence, the central state fold. The military government employs elaborate means to convert non-Buddhist minorities to Buddhism—again, an act emblematic of kingship. Conversion statistics are kept.<sup>29</sup> The proselytizing efforts could only be enhanced by the red carpet pageantry of the elephants, the tooth relic, and the heaps of gold plastered onto Shwedagon, which could not fail to impress the people, perhaps in the manner that the magnificent spires of medieval churches struck a kind of awe in the residents of the towns and cities of the age.

### *Other Ways of Knowing Legitimate Authority*

The performative efficacy of the regime's symbolic actions is certainly open to interpretation. Ko Thar Nyunt Oo, a member of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions' Foreign Affairs Committee, explains: "People who still believe in the monarchy believe in white elephants. The junta tries to use the white elephant as a sign of coming prosperity for the people of Burma, but I think the white elephant just has damaged skin."<sup>30</sup> Rumors that one of the white elephants drowned itself by holding its trunk in a bucket of water, that one animal was really more gray than white, or that the tooth relic donation extravaganza was, in fact, concocted as a strategy to combat inflation by taking currency out of circulation are worthy of note as counterdiscourses to the regime's claims to legitimacy. Interestingly, the dissident students themselves frame their opposition in Buddhist monarchical terms. As Mya Maung observes:

Evidence of how those opposed to the military rulers also think and behave in terms of the Burmese kingdom's traditional political framework can be found in the choice of pseudonyms used by many dissident student leaders involved in the 1988 political uprising to hide their identities . . . specifically, their *noms de guerre* often incorporate the word *min* (king), which both signifies opposition to the reigning military junta and symbolically positions the students as rival kings with the potential to usurp the throne. Indeed, the use of a peacock insignia on the flag of student opposition organization, the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), is an explicit reference to the peacock throne of the ancient Burmese kings.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, we can see that the regime renders its actions in what may be referred to as epistemic claims, insofar as they are organized according to a system of knowledge familiar to both the regime and the populace; indeed, the counterdiscourses themselves acknowledge the potential validity of such claims.

The discourse of Buddhist kingship is but one way of deciphering the regime's (and its resisters') activities, however. The efforts the military expends in hardening its statist authority take place along various channels and entail, I would argue, different ways of political knowing and being.<sup>32</sup> To get at this notion, I must refer to the epistemic practices in government ministries, which are longer-lived than the present regime but have been staffed and commandeered to suit the regime's program of rule. These practices also sometimes mirror Buddhist values and hierarchies of relations. However, they independently reveal the prevalence of certain self-evident truths not borne of the regime's attempts to incorporate Buddhist cosmological and monarchical principles as legitimating discourses. What this means is that the practices and organization of the bureaucratic ministries (of welfare, land, religion, education, and so forth), with their long history of structured relations based on internal patron-client ties, serve to substantiate specifically Burmese moral-political conceptions of influence (*awza*) and power (*ana*),<sup>33</sup> independent of the military regime's co-optation of religious and monarchical (and

religious monarchical) discourses. The key lies in my departure from “discourse” as the sole analytic field in which the question of legitimacy is to be determined. Epistemic practices of ministry officials can, in this case, reveal a separate domain on which to base the discussion. Let me explain by way of two examples.

There is a system of practices in the ministries that could be referred to as that of the “big elephant.” Tambiah observes this as a value orientation in Thai bureaucracy: “Hierarchical status is inherently valued,” he notes, and there is a pervasive “personalism, that is, reliance on the value of a limited circle of personal relations (the antithesis of relations in the legal-rational bureaucratic model).”<sup>34</sup> The big elephant organizes, in the dynamic configuration of patron-client obligations, a retinue of underlings who have loyalties to their superiors rather than to the goals of the bureaucracy. Thus, in the mid-1980s, when the tax minister and his subordinates together donated the tax ministry building to an allegedly enlightened monk—an act independent of the system of goals one would ordinarily associate with a civil bureaucracy—what was really being asserted was a merit hierarchy establishing relations of obligation and patronage around an individual with great personal influence. Influence converts to power on the basis of such demonstrations of personalism that are recognized as the expression of larger moral-causal (that is, kammic) realities.

It is pertinent to reiterate what we have seen in chapter 3—that incipient political groupings typically spring from donation cliques. Recognizing this fact, the regime has, since the mid-1990s, stepped up efforts to solidify the institutional salience of state bureaucratic ministries according to these same criteria. The regime has sought to associate the system of patron-client networks in the state bureaucracy with the legitimate work of kings whose task it is to cajole their subjects, if necessary, toward the goal of nibbāna. They have done so by garnishing state salary workers’ pay for purposes of organizing donations from specific bureaucratic units; by constructing dhamma-preaching halls that connect the members of each ministerial unit to a place for making offerings and inviting monks

to give discourses; and through the admonishment of individuals to make offerings on their birthdays, as in the traditional folk Buddhist practice.

Other practices within the bureaucracies, however, can lead to the affirmation of values contradictory to those of Buddhist faith. For example, the father of one of my acquaintances worked as a high-ranking official during the BSPP period in a ministry that controlled a provisions cooperative. As a devout Buddhist, he was reluctant to exploit his position within the ministry to improve his family's material condition. However, even as a high-level bureaucrat, his income was insufficient to support his modest standard of living. Indeed, his superiors already understood this. The calculation of his salary took advance account of what he could "skim." On one occasion, his wife went to the ministry office on a day she knew her husband would be out: she was not going to let his pious adherence to the Buddhist five precepts impoverish the household economy. She instructed his subordinate to bring this and that item from the cooperative to her home, which he did. When the official returned home to find his subordinate in the act of delivering these materials, he was outraged with both of them and had the items returned to the cooperative. His daughter commented on the affair to me: "By keeping the bureaucrats' salaries so low, the government intentionally makes criminals of them. You have to steal and take bribes to survive."

Apart from the implication for matters of administrative economy and potential political blackmail to control functionaries, this situation also demonstrates how clientship, administrative irrationality, and indifference are likely to arise and how the regime's attempts to legitimate its authority on a Buddhist substrate may be undermined within its own bureaucracies by corrupt practices it cannot or does not discourage. The widespread public association of government bureaucracies (including, by extension, the military) with corruption leads people to put stock in the sangha and in lay Buddhist associations as alternate sources of moral-political influence.

*Situating Power and Authority within a Broader Cosmology*

In Burma, the politics of power and influence is always asserted within or against the conditions of the *sāsana*. Hence, Burmese speak of two kinds of history—of kings (*min win*) and of *sāsana* (*thathana win*). The history of kings is made sense of only in terms of the history of the *sāsana* and is taken to be the categories of ultimate reality, which is the *dhamma*. There is yet a third kind of history, *maha win*—the history of *ariya* (enlightened ones) not just in this world cycle but also beyond it, stretching both backward in history and forward into the future. U Nu had made self-conscious use of this category when, in the founding charter for the Buddha *Sāsana* Nuggaha Apwe, he proclaimed that the history of kings had come to a close but that the world now stood poised to participate in the great history, the *maha win*, the history of enlightened beings. U Nu saw the *maha win* as the history that would replace the *min win*. It would be a history of enlightenment, and democracy would be the legitimate form of political governance. This thread has been taken up by Aung San Suu Kyi, although she has not articulated her version of Burmese democracy in quite these terms.

I will turn to these considerations in light of the relations between a view of politics that is *sāsana* centered and one that is king centered. That power and politics are conceived in terms of a “type” of history is revealing, for it shows how power is never constituted outside the system within which it is acted out and made sensible. Kings cannot participate in power while neglecting the *sāsana* because by so acting, they will have neglected the conditions of their own power. Conditions of power are causative in two senses—first, in the sense that they are based on the *dhamma* as law and, second, in the sense that Burmese Buddhist society regenerates itself as spores of community that operate according to the logic of *awza* (influence) and *ana* (strength). The process of social reproduction thus always stands in potential resistance to political authority as a distinctive and separate power source.

Structurally, Burmese political authority must always be involved in political processes by which incorporation into the core is accom-

plished through capturing and mediating the activities of such moral communities. This is accomplished through controlling the community's sources of potency, as demonstrated in the logic of donation cliques. Classical paradigms of "conquer, pacify, convert," which also exists as a contemporary strategy of SLORC/SPDC, are integral to the formation of state arrangements. This is because they are implicated in a cosmology-making project that must be undertaken by the state in parallel to mass revitalization carried out by Burmese Buddhist civil society.

The theory of moral causality is outlined in principle in the Abhidhamma and especially in the Paṭiccasamuppāda text as the theory of dependent origination. For the ordinary person, it says, the full workings of physical and psychical causality are comprehended in theory alone. Only a Buddha is capable of fully seeing the conditions in the play of kammic cause and effect in their actual workings.

Another way in which the collective effect of the total environment is expressed is in terms of the cycle of regeneration and degeneration of morality and the physical conditions that arise as a result of it. As the collective condition of morality declines, so too does the material condition of the environment—poverty, droughts, bad kings, and so forth. The life span becomes shortened as moral degeneration continues, in a sort of snowball effect, until the World Age finally comes to an end in a cataclysm of the material elements of earth, wind, fire, and water. Within these larger environmental conditions and despite overwhelming odds, it is still possible for individuals to remain true to their *silā* and thereby cultivate their *paramī* and good *kamma*. Every Burman child studies the Jataka tales, the exemplary stories of the Buddha's lives as the embryo Buddha, by means of which the ideal that one's actions are always to be cultivated in relation to a transcendent morality is engendered. This morality is located at the place of one's own personal actions and mental intentions as they arise in every moment.

These understandings of moral causality must be included in any account of power and political legitimacy in Buddhist Burma. Moreover, it is imperative that the ideology of especially Ashokan Buddhist

kingship be distinguished from a general theory of moral causality. This is necessary in order to provide a better account of the creative and open-ended process in which a particular understanding of the world is constituted. As reviewed in chapter 2, ideology and all representational forms of knowledge production are communicative forms of knowledge that point or refer to more immediate practical understandings that are kinesthetically embodied as the living moment of intention arising in each moment of being. The experience of these is not profitably reduced to ideological schemata, language, signs, or an imprinting or selection between “models of and models for.”

It is with this distinction in mind that I return to the Burmese Buddhist theory of power in order to suggest that the response to so-called bad kings and arbitrary, coercive, and violent power is to take refuge in the dhamma. One may take refuge through the purification of one’s own actions: “Be an island unto yourself,” the Buddha urges. Alternatively, one may take refuge in the “space of dhamma”—by associating with noble friends (*kalyanamitta*), by participating in the wholesome reflection of taking refuge in the Triple Gem, or by remaining near the radiating and potent embodiments of dhamma (relics, pagodas, Buddha images, monasteries, sima, robes, monks, and so on). In this way, the sangha and the laity have a natural affiliation and bond that ultimately may be threatening to a ruler seeking to subject his population. The sangha always holds the moral high ground, and the king must justify his power and rule in terms of the sangha or a sect within it if he is to maintain control over the population. Therefore, sangha, state, and laity can best be viewed as a ternary order in which each has some power in keeping the others in check by invoking purification as the outside condition of ultimate moral force.

The king’s will to power is always constrained not by a social contract between the state and civil society but by a moral causal law that sustains that power according to two principles: the continued production of meritorious actions for purposes of sustaining the king’s merit stores (in other words, present actions and mental in-

tentions creating the continuation of power) and the kammic relation between the *ana-baing* (the owner of power) and those under his ultimate sovereignty. This is the *kammaraja*, that is, the resultant effect of prior kammic actions taking expression in the relations between oppressor and oppressed in the present.<sup>35</sup>

Buddhas alone have cultivated the powers to discern the conditions and time span for particular acts of kamma to come to fruition. The Burmese Buddhists' general recognition of those processes that defy the evident logic of immediate kammic repercussion from unwholesome actions (the violent acts of bad rulers, for example) is situated in terms of a framework of time and event that will unfold in the future. The bad things that happen to innocent people in the present life are viewed as the rightful inheritance of that individual. But a fatalistic determinism is not part of these ideas of kamma. For a particular act of kamma to come to fruition, other factors must also be present. Since kamma is infinite and inexhaustible, the conditions for specific resultants is dependent on the rest of the conditions as a whole. History becomes a repetitive cycle of decay and regeneration based on a moral action and reaction on the collective level.<sup>36</sup>

In the pragmatic world, the individual confronts an “environment of the demeritorious,” which demands undertaking unwholesome activities as countermeasures to these conditions. This domain is the dimension in which kingly action and duty are viewed to be active. An insightful diagnostic of this logic is described in the relations between U Nu and Ne Win just prior to Ne Win's 1962 coup d'état. U Nu had decided to pass a bill forbidding the slaughter of cows throughout the country. He offered Ne Win the opportunity to sign the bill, so that he might be the recipient of the merits for this compassionate act. Ne Win refused, taking the higher moral ground by stating that *he* was willing to take on demerits on behalf of the nation. Ne Win's sacrifice—to be the kammic receptacle for demeritorious actions on behalf of the people—later constituted one of the driving logics for his moral claims to legitimate political authority. Through his military might, he would unite the country to the

benefit of its citizens. U Nu, by contrast, was looked on as an ineffective ruler who was unwilling to make personal ethical sacrifices on behalf of the country. A monk who had participated in the Sixth Buddhist Synod told me with real disdain that U Nu was merely interested in using the sangha and the state as a gigantic merit field within which he could attend to his own future life supports and fulfillment of his bodhisattva vow.

Once again we can perceive the implications for a double order of law at work. U Nu asserted political legitimacy on the basis of his personal ethics (*sīla*) as in the example of maintaining the precept not to kill through forbidding the slaughter of cattle in the country. This is the practice of *dhammarajas* (kings whose sovereignty is based on moral law). Ne Win, by contrast, invoked the logic of a *kammaraja* (king whose sovereignty is based on prior merit accumulations resulting in power). Ne Win's willingness to undertake demeritorious actions for meritorious end goals (for example, permitting cattle as a food source) shaped the logic for his rule. In Pāli textual sources, as well as in public discourse, the logic that a sovereign must undertake unwholesome actions (violently securing the borders of the state, punishing criminals, and securing animal food sources, for example) is a self-evident, if inauspicious necessity. It is precisely because members of the citizenry are not ethically self-regulating (per the original society in the Mahasammatha myth) that the sovereign must assert the forceful rule of law. Ne Win traded on this logic by inverting U Nu's superior ethic of personal dhamma morality and subordinating it to a claim for the preeminence of the people's present material welfare.

Where do laity fit into this schema? Laity situate their goals within a system of morally ranked, intentional operations in the mind as manifested in speech and action. The New Laity of the postindependence period established the outside condition from which the hierarchical framework would be oriented. Their practices came to be circumscribed within a system of meanings and values that they ultimately controlled through meditation and through preoccupations over *sāsana* purity and perpetuation. The meditation movement

is directed toward the revitalization of the total sāsana world, in which the priority is to define what the broadest dimensions and horizons of the cosmological frame are. The state is directed toward constituting a unity by creating the structures of a domination that relies on conquest and repression, even while it courts world opinion on the level of regime performance, as I will discuss shortly. Both have a place in the wider historical, metahistorical, and cosmological ideologies of the Burmese Buddha world. In the twentieth century, the mass lay meditation movement has become a resistance and a parallel construction of economy, spheres of potency, and influence that stand against the state in its militaristic unity.

### *Multiple Frameworks and Sources of Knowledge*

The push to rapid shifts of democracy everywhere, aided by foreign support of insurgency groups or financial or other threats and encouragement to hold democratic elections, is a conceit that ignores the long-held historical and cosmological conditions that domestic regimes in every country must obey in order to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of their constituencies. In a place such as Burma, where there is no palpable historical separation of church and state, in European terminology, one is not surprised to learn that each postindependence government's effort to establish grounds for its own legitimacy has been constrained by this fact. The bold confidence with which several of the governments I have mentioned set out to found a new political society based on modern principles has therefore also become commingled with Buddhist cosmology. To demonstrate this briefly, I will cite a few lines from the Burmese Socialist Program Party's *System of Correlation of Man and His Environment* to show how, even in the attempt to create the nation-state in secularist and modern terms, Buddhist phenomenological assumptions still remain part and parcel of a view of what the self-evident constitution of reality is. This Marxist Buddhist syncretism fascinatingly reveals the relationship between a Western modern pragmatism (in this instance, Marxist,

though the capitalist paradigm has been addressed elsewhere and at different times) and a Buddhist view of moral causation:

- We believe in the maxim that wholesome morality is possible only when the stomach is full.
- The programme of the socialist economy is to establish a new peaceful and prosperous society by filling the stomach of every one and raising his moral standards.
- Just as it is true that wholesome morality is possible only on a full stomach so is it true that only when men of excellent morals are in the leadership the programme of filling stomachs (in other words the socialist programme) can be carried through.
- In the study of the nature of man we find that man has inherent in himself inclinations towards such unwholesome volitions as insatiable greed [lobha].
- These unwholesome volitions cannot be killed by mere fulfillment of the needs of the material body. [Note how the Buddhist theory of the causes and conditions for suffering and their extinction (the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path) are suggested here.]
- In marching towards socialist economy it is imperative that we first reorientate all erroneous views of our people. [This statement echoes the idea of removing wrong views, *miccha ditti*, in vipassanā meditation in order to overcome delusion and achieve enlightenment.]
- Under the socialist system the waning and lessening of these unwholesome volitions may be possible only to a certain extent. [In other words, sāsana work is not the task of the government.]
- Even in a socialist society it is possible that men, tempted by lust and greed, enraged by hate and violence, blinded by

pride and conceit, and overwhelmed with self-aggrandizement, will rear their heads as and when opportunities are favourable. This can cause the ruin of a socialist society. [That is, the laity must look after their own purification in order to be moral citizens and create a just and auspicious society.]

Elaboration of the ways in which the regime's attempts to shore up its legitimacy are contradicted or independently supported by entrenched practices within bureaucracies or elsewhere is not beside the point I wish to make. A more specifically located study, as within a single bureaucracy, might point to a range of epistemic practices that show how the regime's aims are supported or contradicted by such systems of practice. However, insofar as I began with the assertion that the regime's attempts to legitimate its authority are coextensive with its aim to harden the conditions of statist authority, I should like, in these final pages, to consider the efforts the regime expends to constitute epistemic claims and practices relative to frameworks other than Buddhist cosmology, kingship, or, for that matter, the question of its supposed sincerity in these pursuits, to which I have devoted so much attention.

Of first note is the socialist-materialist framework, which serves as a practical justification and organizational model for a variety of infrastructure projects, such as the building of roads and bridges and the development of a tourist industry. That the nationalization of property and the recruitment of work groups end up becoming indistinguishable from the abrupt arrogation of household assets and forced labor speaks both to the regime's disregard for human rights and the bureaucratic failure of the socialist model. Nevertheless, these projects reveal the regime's intention, vis-à-vis civil society, to shore up its legitimacy also in terms of what is referred to in the political science literature as regime performance.

Regime performance as an openly comparative criterion leads us to the realization that the legitimacy of authority in terms of statehood is conferred not solely by domestic criteria—else we should be

tempted to hypothesize that Burma's statehood will be secured when the last of the minorities are either subdued or converted to Buddhism—but in conjunction with the affirmation of the international community. A few years ago, when the regime changed the English name of the country from Burma to Myanmar (Myanmar being a more inclusive appellation and thereby an incorporation claim of the still contesting minorities), this was a move directed to both domestic and international audiences in order to legitimate statehood. The unthinking adoption of what was, in reality, a renewed assertion to statehood by the *New York Times* and the United Nations, among others, conferred a wedge of legitimacy in a way that the military government had been unable to achieve by other means. Openly, it boasted in the newspapers of how the international community recognized its legitimacy as a state and as a regime.

International evaluations of a regime's record on economic development, human rights, democratic self-determination, and so forth—the criteria of regime performance—have become the fulcrum for challenging the sovereignty of regimes in specific places such as Burma, which are thereon dubbed rogue states. Aung San Suu Kyi's platform rests largely on its promise to fulfill these criteria better than the present regime. She is the icon for a democratic free country, and her legitimacy has already been "granted" by the international community of democratic nations by rights of her party's landslide election victory in 1990. The daughter of the martyred father of the modern Burmese nation-state, Aung San Suu Kyi is the living continuity of earlier struggles for freedom. And yet, in Burma, she still faces the challenge of satisfying domestic criteria for authority. Partly in response to this perception, she has undertaken meditation, which lies at the heart of Burmese Buddhist soteriology. Whereas the military leaders have sought to demonstrate their rightful claim to rule in terms of the role of ancient kings as chief patrons and supporters of the Buddha world, Aung San Suu Kyi's claim is based on a more abstract foundation. She is the meditator as witness.<sup>37</sup>

In conclusion, by substantiating the entity of the state, the regime would be able to reduce its requirement for periodic shows of force

that only serve to destabilize specific administrations and invite a moralizing backlash from the international community. The regime leaders' attempts to achieve legitimacy and establish the unity implied by the category of statehood—concurrently averting the international community's denunciation of rogue statehood—are, however, characterized by vacillation among multiple and inconsistent frameworks for thinking and action. This vacillation is driven by the requirements of the different constituencies, and it is set in the intertwined soteriological categories of understanding and bureaucratic practices that circumscribe the possibilities for reform: Buddhist kingship, the minorities, international regime performance, crosscutting patron-client loyalties within administrative bureaucracies, and so forth, not to mention differences of opinion among the military rulers themselves.

In analytical terms, these various categories of understanding and action represent what might be described as *surfaces of knowledge*, wherein the interface between experience and meaning—both primary-individual and secondary-social forms of knowledge—is imbricated but not coextensive with any other domain. By using the term *surface of knowledge*, I am trying to get at the varied yet tangible epistemic modalities that produce self-reflexivity and social reflexivity (that is, the way in which a system or holism of some kind is known by a community of knowers). The military regime's attempt to impose a single surface of knowledge for purposes of ruling more effectively amounts to an effort to eliminate opposition and difference. Its attempts to transform relations of power to relations of authority demand efficiency in the creation of hegemonic ideologies, techniques, and practices capable of subverting and replacing antecedent systems and their meanings. Yet the stripping away of the autonomy among the parts of society, such as by controlling access to labor, financial institutions, and the press, demands that the regime operate everywhere on the only single surface of knowledge production and reproduction that can contain all of these surfaces—that is, through force.

The pressures for legitimacy against the background of these multiple audiences (the minorities, the National League for Democracy,

the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], the international community) have meant that the quest for legitimacy by successive governments in Burma has entailed the use of multiple rationales. The dominant theme, however, as also characterizes the demeanor of the present military junta, has been the careful attempt to assure that no institutional forms arise that could serve as extragovernmental vehicles for airing and redressing grievances. This is, of course, especially true vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities. However, it reflects as well an ongoing negotiation with the majority Buddhist Burman population.

Mired in these instabilities, the regime indulges in the counterproductive impulse to crush all institutions with the potential to share in power. Finding sufficient support domestically, as well as among some foreign analysts, for its belief that only a domineering entity—one that can quickly implement relations of power—is capable of safeguarding the country from skidding into belligerent disunity, the regime finds a kind of de facto sanction to rule.