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Documentation

of a Workshop on The Many Arts of Giving
held on March 30 and 31, 2018 at the Kamayut Ywama Monastery in Yangon
with the Assistance of the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation

0 Personal Note

The following text contains my personal narrative of the workshop together with the minutes taken on March 30 and 31 by a staff member of the funding agency.¹ The personal approach is justified since the workshop is “my” project as the participants attending it correctly observed. The following pages try to present an account of its genesis together with some illustrations shedding light on its topic – the many colours and faces of the art of giving in Myanmar. This descriptive style fits the whole undertaking situated in the intercultural sphere where western and Myanmar ways of looking at things mix. This special blend defies rigid “German style” systematizing because it is set in a context of a very fluid relationship of the two worlds meeting here both with regard to the topic and its contemporary context of Myanmar’s situation vis à vis the world that is difficult to define precisely and has undergone many changes in recent times.

In addition to my narrative and the minutes, a number of appendices added might be helpful to better understand the complex web of factors and perspectives related to the many ways of “giving” in Myanmar. This material comprises much of what we can know about *dāna* in Myanmar and different ways of assessing this phenomenon. The problem is of course that such a “we” is just a very abstract entity. The workshop can be regarded as a tiny materialisation of an imagined “We” of common knowledge about the particular “Myanmar way of giving”. It is evident that “giving” is a universal notion that however might have a very different impacts on societies of various cultural-religious and historical backgrounds.

In my perception, the following narrative indicates that the “Myanmar case of giving” discussed at the workshop calls for paying more attention to the differences with regard to the motivational base of any social action in countries of different cultural historical background. Otherwise the cooperation might be based on fundamental mutual misunderstanding.

I have tried to tell the story of the workshop as truthful and as personal as possible. I have avoided to use the names of most of the people that took part in this adventure in order to direct the attention more on the issues all of us represented than the individuals who represented the issues.

Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation of all people who did participate in the enterprise in manifold ways.

1 Introduction

The workshop under review here goes back to the year 2011 and a previous workshop entitled “Myanmar Perspectives of the Social Economics of Myanmar” jointly organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (FES), Myanmar Egress and the Myanmar Women Entrepreneur Association (MWEA). Working group 1 – of five groups dealing with different topics –

1 For the workshop review of the FES see <http://www.fes-myanmar.org/e/giving-from-the-heart-dana-and-the-welfare-state-in-myanmar/>.

discussed the impact of donations (Pali: *dāna*) in a society influenced by Buddhism and concluded that further research was needed on a number of topics as:

1. Flow of donations
2. Donations and investment behaviour
3. What do monks teach on wealth/business? What can they extract from Buddha literature to teach about wealth/business? How to link sound spiritual/ mental health and success in business?
4. Effectiveness of monk's activities on local communications
5. What do religious organisations do?²

Since no follow-up of the workshop took place, these and other questions raised by the participants were not further investigated by the three organisations. However, the issue of *dāna* was discussed in recent academic articles added to works on the topic already written half a century earlier (see the summaries in Appendix 1). The recent works support the impression that *dāna* still is a central factor influencing present Myanmar society not just in terms of economics but also with regard to social services, disaster relief etc. The position of Myanmar as the “Most generous country in the world”³ heavily contrasts with the country's low scoring in most other rankings.

On this background, it seemed interesting to have a look into the practice of “giving” as a key element of Myanmar society not just with a focus on the impact on the economy but on other societal sectors as well. As in 2011, this required a joint investigation of “insiders” and “outsiders” to get a broad overview on the many aspects of the *dāna*-phenomenon. The result was a research proposal aiming at a long term investigation starting with a kind of “systematic brainstorming” by a limited number of people to identify focal sub-topics and ways of how to deal with them (see Appendix 2).

Alexej Yusupov, Country Director of the FES's Myanmar office since April 2017, found the proposal interesting and worth to support it financially. Concrete preparation started in October 2017 during my last visit to Myanmar resulting in the plan to hold a workshop in March 2018 as a first step to – maybe – further initiatives like a bigger meeting discussing different aspects of *dāna* that was prepared in some more detail based on the proposals suggested at the March workshop. My metaphor for the undertaking was a “systematic brainstorming”.

The following parts of the narration will deal with the preparations (2), the procedure (3) and my evaluation (4) of the workshop.

2 Preparations

a) The format.

I had conceived the format of the workshop as an open discussion of people from Myanmar and foreigners based just on the experiences and insights of the participants, not on any theoretical concepts. The reason were the assumptions that some of the writings on the topic

2 Lucas Brandau et. al. 2012 *Trade, Trust Tradition. Documentation of a Workshop on Myanmar Perspectives on the Social Economics of Myanmar, Held in Yangon, 24-26 November 2011*: 26.

3 https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/cafworldgivingindex2017_2167a_web_210917.pdf?sfvrsn=ed1dac40_10

that I had come across (see Appendix 1) were almost exclusively products of western scholarship and that it was necessary to look for people who represented and were ready to express the “Myanmar views” on *dāna* as a counterbalance to what had been written about such views by foreigners. The main objective therefore was to find potential participants interested in the topic and willing to sacrifice time – and thus in a way offering *dāna* - to engage in the workshop as a starting point of further investigation. Since I did not know any existing “*dāna*-network”, I had to rely on my personal contacts.

b) First steps to contact prospective participants.

During my visit to Myanmar in October 2017, I started to spread the news about the workshop both among Myanmar citizens and foreigners I knew for some time. The reactions were mixed. Most found the topic interesting, but the reactions were not enthusiastic. The research proposal that I forwarded to some potential candidates of the workshop evoked almost no immediate response. Such reluctance was however quite differently accentuated by the people I approached. The attitude towards (Buddhist) religion seemed to make the critical difference. For the average secular minded westerner as well as Myanmar individuals well acquainted with western concepts, the topic was interesting because of the potential effects of the custom of *dāna* on the material aspects of Myanmar society like economic growth. Those with a close personal attachment to religious values – mainly Buddhists – emphasised the spiritual aspect of the topic.

I still remember the meeting with Prof. Yi Yi Myint, the founder of the MWEA with whom I had had some conversations during the preparations of the 2011 workshop. She had now retired from taking an active role in the association. After I had introduced my project to her, she started to talk about her personal ‘Buddhist life’ and recommended her favourite book – “That the Buddha Taught” by the Sri Lankan monk Rahula Walpola – that contained the essence of what one needed to know about Buddhist thought. When I insisted that as a westerner I was particularly interested in the interface of the spiritual and the material worlds – in Pali terms: between *lokuttara* and *loka* – she recommended me to talk to a learned *silashin* who turned out to be very responsive to my requests and participated in the workshop of March 2017.

This experience clearly showed that very different approaches to the topic existed in Myanmar that might not be easy to bridge and was instructive in another way as well: In the absence of an existent network of institutions and individuals engaged in discussing the influence of *dāna* on Myanmar society, I had to rely on my personal contacts to find people interested in participating in “my” project. The outcome was quite satisfying and brought me in contact with a number of Myanmar people whom I had not met before whereas on the “western side” the word-of-mouth advertising – understandably - did not work so well because of the functional and in most cases short-term engagement of foreigners in Myanmar affairs.

c) Written material and the language question.

The attempt to recruit participants resulted in a valuable side effect, the acquisition of some texts on *dāna* written by Myanmar individuals as a necessary complement of the summaries of articles collected before. (Appendices 3-6). These texts allow for a comparison between western and Myanmar perceptions of *dāna*, a task that however was not intended to be undertaking yet in course of the workshop. The idea was that these texts might be useful during a later stage of the whole project in the dealing with subtopics of the very broad issue

of *dāna*. Likewise, the translation of the initial summary of texts served just a symbolic purpose for the time being. It was meant to show from the beginning that the topic was perceived very differently by “insiders” and “outsiders” and that the languages used to communicate various perceptions to a high degree influence the understanding of the issue to be explored. If English is used as the basic language, the international conceptualisations of the topics of discussion will prevail. The observation of the translator of the summaries of texts confirmed this assessment. He stated that a number of terms could not be translated into Myanmar.

As a consequence of such linguistic observations, one aim of the project would be to strive for a bilingual synopsis of the various meanings of *dāna* according to their Buddhist-Myanmar background and their counterparts in English (“giving”) together with the congruent and distinct connotations. Since this was obviously a very academic exercise, I invited a Christian Myanmar citizen to the workshop and asked him to give a Christian view on *dāna* (see Appendix 8).

d) Organisational issues

Most of the work to invite participants and to get access of material on the Myanmar views on *dāna* had to be communicated via the internet since I do not live in Myanmar. However, I had a talk with a Mon monk teaching his mother tongue at Berlin’s Humboldt University who wrote two texts (Appendix 5 and 6) and introduced me to a shopkeeper in Yangon who contributed some reflections on my expose (Appendix 3) and some Myanmar texts on the topic (Appendix 4). The distance between my home office and the office of the supporting agency caused some problems that could be managed however as the search for a proper venue of the workshop shows. Here, the assistance of my long time supporter who had already helped to organise previous projects – including the 2011 workshop – and knew many of my Burmese contacts was extremely important. The FES had agreed to pay her for her services in contacting people and other workshop related tasks.

The workshop of 2011 had taken place in a ballroom of a renowned hotel near the headquarters of the MWEA and Myanmar Egress. Such a venue seemed not appropriate in my eyes for discussing a topic profoundly connected to Buddhist thought. I was therefore looking for a place with a ‘Buddhist flair’ without quite knowing how to find such a spot being both “Buddhist”, “modern” and free at the time chosen for the workshop. The Dhamma Moli International Buddhist Education Center under the supervision of the learned *silā-shin* introduced to me by Prof Yi Yi Myint, was suitable but not free at the time because of examinations. Another option was a monastery suggested by a friend of a MWEA member who had participated in the 2011 workshop and was now living in Switzerland. It might be suitable and free, my assistant told me, but I should better have a look myself after my arrival in Myanmar. Together with the FES staff, we decided to try this option and being prepared for a ‘fallback option’ at an office or so if the monastery was not convenient or available for some reason. It turned out that the place was suitable. The participants however could only be informed about the venue after they had already been formally invited (Appendices 10 and 11).

e) Final talks and preparations

The visit of the Kamayut Ywama Monastery together with the young man whose family supports the institution for a long time was one of the very interesting experiences illustrating the many contexts of the practice of *dāna* in today’s Myanmar. The young man who picked

my assistant and me up near the Inya Lake in Kamayut was a business man, did some marketing research and was deeply concerned about the preservation of Buddhist traditions. He had arranged a meeting with the Sayadaw (abbot) on a Monday afternoon after a meeting scheduled for Sunday had to be cancelled because the Sayadaw had to change his schedule because of another function. We entered a spacious compound obviously used for many purposes. Many cars parked here and I learned that this was a service for members of the local community, including business people, who in return might donate to the monastery. Around a rather modest stupa, many halls could be seen that were used both for teaching and, holding religious ceremonies and meditation training.



Ywama monastery's compound and the hall in which the workshop took place

We met the abbot in the first floor of one of these building. I was introduced to him, he asked some questions and then gave a lengthy talk on various topics, including the information that westerners should not think that the “anti-Rohingya monk” U Wirathu represented the who community of Myanmar’s monks. (I later learned that another Ywama monastery existed in Insein which was supposed to be a centre of the controversial Ma-Ba-Tha movement of which U Wirathu was a prominent member.)

The Sayadaw then turned to the topic of our meeting and gave his views on *dāna* which I found very interesting according to the summary that was translated by our “guide” to this place. I asked him to write down a short summary and I’m very grateful that he complied with my wish (Appendix 9).

After the friendly audience the abbot introduced us to the hall that could be use by us. It was spacious breezy and equipped with tables and chairs. There were people around used to deal with the practical requirements of functions taking place here and my ‘assistant’ immediately started to discuss details of the Saturday dinner and the tea-breaks. The abbot admonished me to learn more Burmese, half earnestly, half jokingly. If I would take the robe for three months here, I would make progress not just in this regard. I took this as an indicator that the language question in a broad sense was a crucial one not just concerning the small workshop ahead but in the general sense understanding between the two (or more) worlds represented by me and the abbot.

I had the feeling that we had found the right place for the workshop because it was “Buddhist” as well as “civil” and thus typically “Myanmar” in the sense that any clear distinctions between the “religious” and the “secular” did not make sense here. On the other hand: the choice might be risky because this venue was absolutely not “neutral”. The whole place was financed by *dāna* what caused the clever FES staff caring for the correct handling of financial matters o find a way of making a donation in a way acceptable to German standards of

accounting. On the other hand, a hotel as the workshop's venue would have been financed in principle according to international criteria and therefore a neutral place only for those who thought that there was no alternative to the many manifestations of global capitalism.

The meeting at the monastery provided an opportunity to talk a bit with the young Buddhist entrepreneur who had introduced us to the Ywama monastery. I learned that he appreciated very much the activities of the Sayadaw to spread the teaching and the practice of Buddhism in modern ways and that his interest in *dāna* was in some way connected to the anxiety of many that superficial ways of “modernising” the country might result in a severe loss of



The boys and girls receiving their meals separately

Buddhist values. During my talks with other Myanmar participants during the next days, this motif reappeared again. For the western people I talked to who had been living in Myanmar for some time already, the interest in the issue of “giving in Myanmar” was the observation that it was a core feature of many segments of Myanmar society that however as no integral part of the specific tasks they were dealing with in their daily routine. Some ‘newcomers’ found the topic ‘interesting’ in a general way to broaden their knowledge about the country.

A special highlight of my talks was the invitation of the father of the lady from the MWEA I had met some years ago who invited me to participate in a ceremony concluding a one month training course in Buddhism of 50 boys and 40 girls in a monastery some 40 km away from Yangon. The place was set in a rural area and sponsored by a number of people doing social work based on Buddhist ethics. One of the main sponsors worked in a women's organisation. In our short conversation during the meal that we were offered as the ceremony's guests of honour she emphasised the need to invest more *dāna* in social activities rather than direct investment in pagodas. The training course that had taken place here was one of such actions.

In course of the many interesting talks before the workshop I became very much aware of a phenomenon that I had not taken into consideration before: The people I wanted to talk to were all very busy. Appointments had to be changed or cancelled due to manifold reasons related to professional or private matters. Time had become a scarce commodity in Yangon and dealing with a topic that was held in high esteem but was located outside the daily routine, could not be given priority.

3 Procedure

The “time issue” mentioned above affected the workshop as well. Some people expected to participate could not come due to other obligations – one of them because of a *dāna*-ceremony in her home town. Others had to leave earlier or come later on both days. As a consequence, the intended sequence of the two days with a dual focus could not be fully



realised. The first aimed at getting acquainted to one another and to the topic; on the second, single sub-topics of *dāna* should be discussed and plans for further proceedings considered.

a) Day one

I arrived early at the monastery and had the chance to witness a *shinbyu*-ceremony being performed for two boys in the hall to be used later for our discussions. I came to the place after the young monks-to-be had been shaved their heads and got their robes. At the same time, the hall was furnished for the ceremony and the members of the party – all clad festively – sat down on the floor facing the chairs provided for the monks. Microphones were installed and two people prepared the shooting of a video and photos.

The following ceremony impressed me. I realised that here, in the midst of bustling Yangon and a rather ordinary-looking monastery a religious ceremony was celebrated in a way that was solemn and serene at the same time. Only the boys had to receive some assistance in performing their role in the long ritual, the laypeople behaved as if this ceremony was part of their daily life. *Dāna* – gifts for the monks – were an integral part of the event but the whole ceremony was an illustration of a famous Buddhist saying that *dharmma-dāna*, the gift of Buddha's teaching, was the highest gift. The whole initiation ceremony illustrated how naturally spiritual and secular elements were connected in contemporary Yangon and wondered how this self-evident cohesiveness could be properly analysed explained in a rational discourse.

With regard to the workshop, it was clear from the beginning that it would be difficult to achieve some kind of togetherness simply because there was a common interest in the topic of *dāna* but no common tradition of how to approach the varieties of its meaning.

Here are the **minutes of Day One** noted down by **Kimberly Pallenschat** from the FES:

Participants:

- Hans-Bernd Zöllner
- Alexey Yusupov
- David Allen
- Felix Hessler
- Carine Jaquet
- U Ye Nyunt
- Dr. Mo Li Ni
- Miss Mi Kun Cham
- Moonlight

- Daw Khin Saw Wai
- Cheng Bo

Getting the terminology right:

- Dana is not just giving money, but giving time, donation. Ahloo, Hlooo...
- HBZ – The notion of giving is universal. But Dana cannot simply be translated into “giving”, might lose some of its full meaning. As a consequence, an “encyclopedia of dana” should be compiled.
- **Question 1** which needs to be addressed: define/translate dana.
- HBZ – internationally, Myanmar is regarded as a “bundle of problems”. This is a skewed view. Dana could be viewed as an asset.

Introductory round (*dāna*-stories and questions)

Felix Hessler (Mote U Education)

- Does research on Buddhism and social engagement
- Especially interested in views/perspectives on the relationship between dana and making merit (one day leading to Nirvana). How conceptions of dana are used/not used in the social sphere (What we would broadly term social engagement). E.g. monastic schools have complained that people only donate to pagodas, not the poor children. How is this relationship conceptualised in different levels/parts of Myanmar society (Yangon vs. Mandalay, vs. rural areas).
- Relationship between religious dana and social dana.
- Dana story: Lived in a monastery in 2013. On his birthday he donated his lunch to the monks. Monk said afterwards that he would now reach the next stage in his next life.

Alexey Yusupov

- Functions of cohesion and stability, plans for future etc.
- For him, giving is not just transactual, also has a mental dimension.
- Does this social norm differ between generations? How? Will it take on new forms?
- Example: Met someone who was starting a crowd-funding platform – new forms of dana?
- Social protection in Myanmar. In Myanmar you have to be 90+ to get pension (?). The role between state and citizens is changing.

Moon Light

- Myanmar is the most generous country in the world – very surprised.
- People like to give dana but at the same time people want to avoid the taxes.
- We used to pay when it was needed. E.g. Nargis – before, people were used to paying and giving dana. More NGOs entered the country. Their mindset has influenced dana in the country.
- How is dana linked to social contribution?
- The relationship between individual dana and the state.
- Question 1: The problem of sustainability. If dana is given too freely it can be retracted. There is no guarantee that you will get dana. What is the basis of the Burmese social system?
- Question 2 – How the mindset changes between generations.

HB Zöllner

- Visited friends in a house run factory. The mother had suffered a stroke a few months ago and needed help to be able to do things. Yet, she was still the centre of the family.

- To help her, the family employed a friend to take care of her. Many people from the street came in to entertain the family.
- In Germany, HBZ had to employ a professional nurse to take care of his mother. She became a bit lonely because the personal contact was not there.
- Question – what would happen if too much of the western social systems organized by the state were established here. Would dana die out?
- Many texts make dark assumptions if the dana continues (Max Weber) alongside the influence of Western capitalism
- Question - If dana for a considerable number of people in Myanmar is an investment for the future life (this or next life), what are the effects on the mindset of people with regard to a sustainable economy?
- Q – is there any way to guess the relationship between the official budget of the state and, what we guess is what makes Myanmar the most generous country in the world - the amount of dana?

Carine Jaquet – the role of Dana in Nargis

- Dana and social engagement
- Nargis – how people from different lay organizations understand this concept.
- What are the narratives and the intentionality of dana.
- Dana in the social fabric. State has been absent and not taken care of the people.
- The most striking dana experience: Formerly worked with the election committee in NPT. 4 days of total silence during which the election commission participated in dana, right in the middle of elections. Fascinating because none of this was discussed, but it was hoped that it would have an impact on the election.
- The political aspect of dana. Powerful people perform dana, but not just about giving.

Dr. Mo Li Ni

- Normally English words are not sufficient. The Pali dana is more complex. Not just donation.
- Cause and effect in Buddhism. Lack of dana → effect.
- Dana is a very noble action.
- We must share with others – materially, mentally, vocally, sharing education...
- Dhamma dana – highest form of dana.
- Went to a female prison to give dana. Was very sad to see so many young women. A young woman was telling her about all the things she couldn't experience. Automatically Dr. Mo Li Ni thought about how she can give all this to her.
- Noble minded – share with others
- Always thinking about dana.
- Spiritual and mental aspect of is more important than materialism.

Khin Saw Wai

- Got familiar with dana from a very young age.
- Parents and parents in law: Dana means we have a lot of donations etc. but I think the ageing people have given a lot. When her parents died, she took care of them.
- Can give time, love, care – big part of Myanmar culture.

Mi Kun Cham

- Works in a bazaar in Tamwe. Every day many nuns/monks come to collect, and she makes a money donation, or sometimes gives them shade or water.
- Donation makes both donor and receiver happy → dana creates happiness. Feels peace and satisfaction after giving.
- Basic step – giving (dana) leads to prosperity.
- Dana is related to every aspect of life. Sometimes I think it is based in tradition. Her question is related to different kinds of donations?
- Questions raised: Do all the shop owners give dana? Why do they give dana?

David Allen

- Has been living in Myanmar for 12 years.
- Christian. Chemical Engineer. Worked a lot on transparency and accountability of systems in Myanmar. Focus on resources, rights and justice. Interfaith dialogue – how can different contextual theologies help us understand better dev. of country?
Story: Project in Chin state on solar lighting in poor communities. This led to people saving a little bit of money, however, instead of investing in something for their homes or saving the money, they gave bigger amounts as a donation (dana).
- Interested in the accountability of giving money. Example: A church leader in Myanmar made a poor financial decision, tragedy, reputation was lost. In a Buddhist situation, some monasteries buy lottery tickets. From a Western perspective this is a waste of money. Buddhists do not see this as an issue. Once given to a monk, it has complete accountability. Different ways of thinking of flow of money, accountability.
- QUESTIONS:
- 1- Thinking of the value of the economy and the allocation of resources. How can we measure the amount of money which is flowing through the Buddhist system which is not captured in government accounting?
- 2- Myanmar's new sustainable development plan (26th of Feb) is largely a plan of economic rationalism. Almost every aspect of this plan completely ignores the dana type economy. How does this work, when this plan is drawn up by Myanmar Buddhists, yet is completely separate from the rest of the economy? How is this going to fit into the social religious, cultural perspective of Myanmar's very complex structure?

Ye Nyunt

- Working for research company in Myanmar, Yangon central railway station, is the head of industrial research dpt.
- Dana and the economy of rural people. Rural people are mostly uneducated, do not know how to manage/allocate their income. Leading a very one-sided life. When they finish their agricultural work, they tend to engage in drinking and celebrating.
- Dana also depends on the individual perception. Someone with much money might not give that much.
- HBZ – did you ever try to measure this individual perception. Are there patterns?
- Rural people are lacking knowledge in religion and in economy. NGOs try to teach them accounting.

- In the wake of Nargis, NGOs tried to improve the lives of rural people. But without the support of the government, they cannot change the lives of the people. If NGOs just hand out money, it will come to nothing.
- This poverty cannot be solved by dana, but by the government.
- Question regarding dana and education. How can we teach dana to poor people in rural areas?

“Plato”

- Worked in China, which is mainly secular. No religious institution for the majority of people.
- In China there is not this system of people taking care of each other in the same way as in Myanmar.
- Could serve social function – family welfare.
- Question: The structure in Dana – how money is collected? Transparency?

HB Zöllner on behalf of Daw Nwet Kay Khine

- Question: How dana in rural areas or in the city is related to prestige of people who have the money to make big contributions. Dana in the different contexts of Myanmar living.

Sayadaw

- Dana is a medicine of love, it is deeper than just giving donations.
- If you give a dog food continually, they become your best partner
- Why is Myanmar the most generous country in the world when the state is so poor.
- Love is to give blindly and freely to those in need, those who are poor or religious.
- In other countries like the USA, people like to pay taxes, because the government is well-functioning. It is not seen as government money, but the money of the people, the taxes are returned to the people through social services.
- But in Myanmar the management of the taxes by the government is poor. As long as the government does not handle taxes well, dana will continue.

CONCLUSION – Main research topics

As Dana is a condition which affects all sections of life in Myanmar, it needs to be studied from different angles to capture its complexity.

1. Dana and politics
2. Dana and taxes.
 - According to the city life survey 10% of people are paying taxes.
 - Empirical question – how can we get the numbers?
 - Issue of trust: The monk is trusted, the government as an institution is not.
3. Dana and religion.
 - What do different monks who are loved by people teach them about everyday conduct of dana? What are the spiritual benefits of dana?
4. Dana and welfare.
 - Connected to dana and merit. Which concepts guide the lived and practiced Buddhism in Myanmar?
 - Qualitative research methods.

5. Dana and accountability. (e.g. the military donates other people's money to gain merit without proper accounting).

After the workshop, the participants were invited to have dinner together at a Thai restaurant. Not all were able to participate.

When I returned to my hotel, I felt exhausted. I had underestimated the effort of moderating a meeting of nice people from very different backgrounds and – to some extent according to my perception – from different worlds. Furthermore, the “language issue” had not been satisfactorily solved. I was afraid that some Myanmar participants had not been able to fully convey their perceptions and assessments. On the other hand, the basic assumption that *dāna* represented a key to understanding the basics of Myanmar society had been confirmed. After a look at my notes, I drafted a list of “*dāna-and...*” topics (a bit longer than the list of the minutes) as the starting point of the discussions of day two.

b) Day 2

There were some participants present who had not attended day one of the workshop. Here are the minutes taken:

Participants:

- Hans-Bernd Zöllner (HBZ)
- Alexey Yusupov
- Moonlight
- Felix Hessler
- David Allen
- Naing
- Dr. Mo Li Ni
- Khine Myat Thwe Aung (Grace)
- Ye Nyunt
- Khaw Siama
- Sandar Tun
- Nyein Nyein Ei
- Pyi Soe (Cedric)

Review of day 1:

- The issue of defining Dana. (Remark by **U Naing** – dana is giving something based on our good will, without expecting anything back. Social dana, dana to the sangha, meditation – this way you can reach nirvana).
- Dana is part of all aspects of life in Myanmar. To study it, it is necessary to break down into smaller areas of interest:

Dana &

1. Accountability

- military

2. Merit

3. Politics

4. Social welfare

- Community, social function
- Which concepts guide lived and practiced Buddhism in Myanmar.
- Qualitative research

5 Spirituality

- What different monks who are loved by people teach them about everyday conduct of dana.
- What is the spiritual benefit of dana.

6. Taxes

- Empirical question. Issue of trust. The monk is trusted, the government as an institution is not.

7 Education

HBZ introduced the **alms bowl** as a symbol of the coherence between materials and spiritual values of a traditional(Theravada) Buddhist society: The laypeople give material goods in exchange of a spiritual gift provided by the *pongyi/sila-shin*. The spiritual gift has a higher value. – This model however is modified in many ways in the various forms of Buddhist “giving” in different contexts that are not very much researched upon.

Part 1 - Dana & ...

1. Dana and accountability

- There is a difference between the Myanmar way of accountability and the Western way. Westerners would say if you donate something, you want to know what this money goes to. In Myanmar – it is based on a complete trust to the people you give the money to. People trust the monks to use it in the right way. Could this cause an issue when a Western style economy is implemented in Myanmar?
- How can we study this? The relationship between the donor and the recipient?

2. Dana and merit

- The issue of translating and defining dana and merit.
- Here in Myanmar – Kuthaw is almost something material?
- Remark by **Felix** – we need to look at the use of words in regard to merit, how meanings are shifting.

Further study: What kind of expectation/non-expectation is connected to giving in Myanmar society today?

- Methods: Qualitative investigation in order to conceptualize these concepts.

3 Dana and politics

- Political movements and political groups rely on dana.
- Is there a religious element to this?
- Politically organized dana ceremonies.
- HBZ – should/is there a political aspect of dana?

4. Dana and social welfare

- The example of Nargis.

-Orphanages, organizational work

Many people do private social dana, e.g. by taking care of the old. What would happen if a Western style welfare system was introduced and these tasks were transferred to the state?

5 Dana and spirituality

- The act of giving

- The pure spiritual dana is that you get a kind of liberation through dana. Within the act of giving you rid yourself of attachment. By liberating the mind this way you get closer to nirvana.

Research question: How is dana *really* present in the mind of people, how is it perceived?

6. Dana and taxes

- **Sayadaw** - In Myanmar, the government is not managing taxes well. When the taxes are paid, the money becomes the governments property, not the money of the people. As long as tax management remains poor (and there is no trust in the government or accountability), dana will continue.

What is the relationship between taxes and dana?

- **Khine Myat Thwe Aung** – dana and taxes are completely different things. Dana comes from the heart, while taxes are a responsibility. She has never really thought about the two together.

HBZ – in Christianity, the “toll-collectors” were despised, almost ostracized by the people. Jesus told them that they have to behave in a responsible way. From a Western perspective, we do not have the same concept of dana, hence trying to understand the connection is very interesting, because we think in the West that the government has a big responsibility. And if the people in Myanmar do not support the government through taxes, but prefer to give dana to the monastery, then the state here has a very different foundation.

-**Dr. Mo Li Ni** – the public does not know what good the taxes will do for them. In other countries, the money goes back to the people. Here not. Taxes are about give and take, while dana is about generosity, only giving. Taxes and dana are not the same. Taxes you **MUST** give. People do not have enough knowledge about this yet.

- **Ye Nyunt** – under communism, all revenues went directly to the government. The tax department existed but was not that active, everything was centrally controlled. Under the new government, we have capitalism. The government’s role is to oversee that all capitalists pay revenue.

- **Khine Myat Thwe Aung** – did research in a rural area. Every month people donated 10% of their income. However, their income did not reach the amount that they had to pay taxes. Lack of tax education and accountability. People want to invest in the next life, not pay taxes for this life. People believe they are poor because they did not give enough dana in their last live, hence they need to give more in this life. Additionally, people feel peer pressure - if you do not donate enough, you feel ashamed. Hence, there are many factors which determine why there is such a huge gap between paying taxes and dana.

- **Khaw Siama** – taxes can be seen as a demanded dana. If the government is good, the taxes will be spent on common good. This can also be seen as a way of dana. In the bible there is a clear reference to tax paying, but in Buddhism there isn’t.

- **HB Zöllner** – how we could subdivide this topic:

- the theoretical level – how do people understand taxes and dana?

○ the practical level – how are the statistics?

- **Nyein Nyein Ei** – the issue with this is that statistics in relation to dana are very difficult to assess. Dana only goes to those who are close, while taxes in theory go to the entire country, the common good. Still this is exactly why this relationship should be further explored. Could raise more awareness among the people.

- **Pyi Soe** – an issue for many people is that taxes will also support the military. Expenditure for military is the biggest part of government spending. This is a big concern for many Buddhists, because Buddhists oppose violence.

- **David Allan** – for many ethnic groups who still fight against the military Pyi Soe's point is an issue. So the question would be, how a positive picture can be drawn of taxes supporting social welfare. People struggle to conceptualise how their paying of taxes fits into social welfare.

- **Ye Nyunt** – there could be drawn a connection between taxes and dana. E.g in donation ceremonies, rich people give more – signify collective strength, thereby all people can get benefits.

“Survey”:

What would everyone estimate is the proportion between what people pay in taxes and what people give through dana?

- **HB Zöllner** - 1:4
- **David Allan** - 1:6
- **Khine Myat Thwe Aung** - 1:8
- **Mi Kun Cham** - 1:5
- **Khaw Siama** - 1:3
- **Cheng Bo** - 1:5
- **Naing** - 1:5
- **Nyein Nyein Ei** - 1:5
- **Felix** - 1:15
- **Ye Nyunt** - 1:15

7. Dana and Education

HBZ - There is a long tradition in Myanmar of thinking that the 67% of rural people in Myanmar are uneducated (Ye Nyunt yesterday)

- There is no all-encompassing education system which would fit the needs (would need taxes for this). However, there are private schools and monastery schools. Problem: these institutions are not coordinated, leading to a lack of cohesion in education

-How could this be organised in a way which would benefit all students?

8. Dana & Economics

9. Accountability

a. military

10. Merit

11. Politics

12. Social welfare

a. Community, social function

b. Which concepts guide lived and practiced Buddhism in Myanmar.

c. Qualitative research

13. Spirituality



PART 2 – Further investigation

Which areas would everyone prefer to work with?

- Naing – taxes, social welfare, merit
- Nyein Nyein Ei– taxes, education, economics
- Felix – merit, social welfare, education
- Ye Nyunt – social welfare, education
- David Allan – accountability, social welfare, spirituality, taxes, economy
- Pyi Soe – politics, spirituality, economy
- Mi Kun Cham – merit, spirituality, education
- Dr. Moli Ni - spirituality
- Khaw Siama - spirituality, taxes
- Cheng Bo - accountability, politics, social welfare

Aim of research: To promote something which benefits the people, not merely academic research.
“Action Research” (Bottom-up)

Question - What kind of sources which already exist might be tapped to get more material to deal with these questions?

- Ye Nuynt highlights that the issue with the research his organization is conducted, is that it is based on the clients’ wishes, thus focusing more on the economy and lifestyle of rural people. The two cycles of thinking between the Myanmar logic (dana) and Western clients’ logic about how things *should* work in Myanmar (economy, welfare) do not meet.

Question - how could HB Zöllner get access to what the monks are preaching on the streets? How are these topics related (or not related) to dana?

-Dr. Mo Li Ni explains:

- Sometimes people can request that the monks talk about certain topics
- The topics also depend on the occasion
- Some Dhamma preachers focusing on social welfare inform people which cause the donations collected at the event will go to (e.g. eye survey, research, education...)
- Dr. Mo Li Ni argues that this kind of information is important, because when people have knowledge about what their dana is going to they are more satisfied.

- **HB Zöllner:** How can we know exactly what they teach? This knowledge would be useful because we could tell foreign NGOs etc. that if they donate money they could donate it to a certain monk to reach a certain cause.

- **Pyi Soe:**

- Speeches and texts in English and Burmese from Myanmar can be found at <http://www.dhammadownload.com/AudioInMyanmar.htm>. Some talks are in English.
- Some focus more about how to practice the religion to reach nirvana, how to see the body and the mind.
- Politically active monks may share political views, however, most focus on the Buddhist religious aspects, how to make donations in the right way, e.g. if you treat your friends for a dinner, you should not hand out alcohol, because then you encourage your friends to be sinful. Thus the speeches have a practical aspect for people's everyday conduct.

Question - what would you expect from Western NGOs/investors?

- **Pyi Soe**

- They should take note of big events in Myanmar. E.g. if local staff ask for permission for leave during a religious festival, or for example Thingyan, foreign companies should have more knowledge and awareness.
- Due to foreign influences, people change their habits and their ways of thinking. Many people get a different perspective on dana, practice it wrongly.
- Corporate social responsibility is very popular here. To **Pyi Soe**, this is also dana, although many companies do not realise or think about it this way. E.g. KBZ bank: You can find on their website on CSR works, for instance by providing free funeral services, shine home corp., etc.

- **Dr. Mo Li Ni** – every full moon in March the government gives an award to those who have donated the most. Organizations have to apply to this award and must provide a receipt of donation to apply. The award leads to the material benefit of the donor, but this is not real dana. For instance, a lady from a big organization donated much money to build/renovate the monastery, but wished to remain anonymous. This is real dana.

- **Khaw Siama** – agrees, real dana is when you do not mention the name, and do not expect anything in return. By handing out this award, the government encourages dana. Receiving this award relates to social prestige. This should not be the aim of dana, it should come from the heart.

- **Ye Nyunt** – In Myanmar there are many influential people, such as famous actors, who in case of a crisis, might throw an event to raise funds for a certain cause.

Open question – would it be useful to propagate these different kinds of dana? E.g. to publish a booklet of different dana stories, of ordinary people, for people to get a better understanding of this special facet of Myanmar life?

Due to the time constraints of the participants, the workshop ended after lunch around 1.30 pm before the discussion about further procedures as scheduled in the agenda could commence. The “open question” mentioned at the end of Kimberley’s minutes will remain open for some time.

As the minutes further show, the discussion on the relation between tax payments and *dāna* was particularly vivid. It had been the monastery’s Sayadaw whose input had stimulated this discussion. His dry remarks revealed an interesting dichotomy between the government and special people, first of all monks. The latter are trusted, the former not. This can be connected to the estimation of the participants on the ratio between the amount of tax and *dāna*. In all estimations, more money was given for *dāna* than taxes paid. The 1:15 guess in favour of “gifts” was commented as including time spent without payment. For me, this was a confirmation of the observation that Myanmar’s popular political culture was based on a mistrust towards government. This notion is expressed in a popular saying listing the “five enemies of the people”. The third enemy, after fire and water, is “government” (in the traditional wording called *min* - king). This proverb was mentioned in the summary of the Sayadaw’s talk provided by the young man who had introduced me to the monastery. (see Appendix 7). Here the “five enemies” are mentioned in the list of benefits of *dāna*-givers: Their property will be protected from these evils. Furthermore, the proverb was present in the *shin-byu* ceremony as well. The young boys had to recite – with the abbot’s assistance – the Awgatha, the most common Buddhist prayer that contains the wish to be protected from the “five enemies” as well.

On the other side it was interesting that many participants named “merit” and “spirituality” as the topics that should be further investigated in relation with *dāna*. A short version of the open questions at the end of the workshop could therefore worded “Money and Spirituality” - or the other way round.

As a single issue, one foreign participant later added that the *dāna* & - list could be still enlarged by adding “women” to it. In everyday life as in the alms-rounds of monks, mainly women are presenting the gifts to the monks and this phenomenon could be connected to the traditional belief that women can only reach Nirwana after they have been reborn as a man.

4 Evaluation

Because of the time constraints mentioned, no opportunity existed to ask for the participants’ evaluation. It is however quite clear that the workshop did not achieve its main aim to design plans for a follow-up event dealing with certain sub-topics of *dāna* in a more systematic way than it was possible at the workshop which was intended to identify such topics and ways to investigate them by way of brainstorming. The reasons for this failure are obvious. The workshop brought together a number of engaged individuals who were knowledgeable about many single aspects of the issue, but did not form a body able to start an organised research on the “many arts of giving” in Myanmar society aiming at a comprehensive picture of *dāna*’s relevance for this society. Such a task is complicated by the fact that such an investigation has to compare the many colours of “giving” in Myanmar society with the understanding of this act in western societies representatives of which have only recently started to get engaged in Myanmar in great numbers.

One may therefore say that the aim of the workshop was at least overambitious. On the other hand, however, it provides ample evidence that the basic assumption on which it was based and that was in one way or the other was shared by the participants is true: *Dāna* signifies a

core element of Myanmar society. It is present in almost all sectors of this society with regard both to quality and quantity. Consequently: Without understanding the basic significance of *dāna*, any attempt to reform Myanmar society in a comprehensive way, might not make much sense.

Such a bold hypothesis can be illustrated with two focal points of the discussion, one concentrating on the aspect of quantity, the other on that of quality. We do not know about the ratio of *dāna* given in its various forms and purposes in cash, kind or voluntary of labour in comparison to other modes of generating funds for public services. The estimates given at the workshop point to the fact that Myanmar society is primarily funded by donations and that government expenditures just cover a small portion of public services which might be very unevenly distributed given the still high percentage of public funds going to sustain the Tatmadaw. Furthermore, we do not know about the relation of the country's GDP to the "*dāna*-economy", e.g. everything that is financed with donations of every kind and how this special branch of Myanmar economy is related to other sectors. The list of such open questions related to the quantitative aspect of "giving" in the "most generous country in the world" could be enlarged by questioning about the amount of *dāna* given in various parts of the country and the different religious communities.

The "quality" of giving seems to be closely related to such quantitative issues. The link is the factor of "trust". If the Sayadaw is right – and some evidence supports his thesis⁴ – that in Myanmar society trust is not invested in the government but only in individuals, a number of consequences could be taken into consideration, one of them being the effect of the channelling of foreign funds for development aid through government agencies. But what seems quite evident that below the more or less accepted existence of a central government, Myanmar society is very much fragmented not just on political and ethnic lines, but into many smaller or bigger co-existing but not co-operating "*dāna*-entities" that have in common just the basic notion of "giving" as a beneficial attitude that – like a Chameleon – can take on a great variety of colours and shapes from pure spirituality to supporting selfish interests. *Dāna* then might contribute to hold the society together but at the same time splitting it into a variety of more or less independent units.

Another qualitative aspect concerns the relationship between Myanmar practitioners of *dāna* and their western counterparts. It is evident, that the Myanmar practice of "giving" is based on a particular religious logic that can be found – again in various forms – just in the five Theravada-Buddhist countries in which Buddhism can be regarded as the "national religion".⁵ This fact contrasts the western perception of a – more or less – strict separation of religion and the nation state as a prerequisite of a "modern" society. In practice, this leads foreign agencies to overlook the special impact of Buddhist traditions on various sectors of society and tend to perceive developments in Myanmar as heading in the same direction as what has happened at home where Adam Smith's "invisible hand" has shaped the logic of economic and social development. As a consequence, the communication between Myanmar and foreign agents

4 See the essay at the end of the documentation of the 2011 workshop: Lucas Brandau et. al. 2012 *Trade, Trust Tradition. Documentation of a Workshop on Myanmar Perspectives on the Social Economics of Myanmar, Held in Yangon, 24-26 November 2011*: 201-208.

5 In Cambodia, it is state religion according to the constitution. Burmese/Myanmar constitution acknowledge the "special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union" but guarantees freedom of religions to all other faiths as well.

might be suffering of a lack of mutual understanding because being based on different basic concepts of how a “good society” should function.

Finally it can be stated, that it is surely worthwhile or even necessary to further investigate the many issues raised during the workshop. This however must be done in a systematic way which requires to choose a clearly defined topic that – hopefully – might help to gain some insights into *dāna* as a fundamental feature of Myanmar society. As a starting point, the issue of “Corporate Social Responsibility” might be a good starting point. It could be asked how schemes introduced in Myanmar under this catchword are an amalgam of “modern” international and “traditional” indigenous concepts or maybe a continuation of traditional practises under an internationally acknowledged “trademark”.

Such an inquiry – like more research on other topics that came up during the workshop - would require money and a team of Myanmar and western experts to design a research proposal including the different conceptualisations of an ethically responsible business including a historical perspective.⁶ The main positive result of the meeting under review here could be to motivate such further investigations as joint ventures between Myanmar and foreign experts and practitioners.

6 The FES in former times supported an investigation into the Nagani Book Club that published books about a wide range of subjects before the Second World War including a translation of the later first Prime Minister of Burma, U NU, of Dale Carnegie’s “How to Make Friends and Influence People” that was prescribed as a textbook after independence. The Burmese version of the book like some others dealing with business ethics have not yet been evaluated.