

Who are Burma's Monks?

By Sarah Buckley, BBC News

Monks command such respect in Burma because some 80-90% of the country's population is Buddhist, and even those who do not choose to become a "career monk" usually enter the orders for short periods of their lives, giving the monasteries a prominent role in society.

There is a monastery in every village, according to Myint Swe of the BBC Burmese service, and monks act as the spiritual leaders of that community. They give religious guidance and perform important duties at weddings and funerals.

Burma's monks have a history of political activism. In return for these duties, they are given donations by laymen. As they are forbidden from handling cash, they are completely reliant on these handouts. Each full moon day, they are also given donations such as robes.

If they refuse these handouts, they are denying the donor the potential to earn spiritual "credit" - "the strongest possible penalty that can be expected from a Buddhist", said Myint Swe. That is why the announcement by the monks currently protesting in Burma that they would refuse all donations from the ruling military - most of whom would be Buddhist themselves - was so powerful, he said.

"The government wants the image that they are pious and helping the monks," he said.

There are 400,000-500,000 professional monks in a country of about 50 million people, but many more laymen worship alongside the monks for a few weeks at a time throughout their lives in order to earn spiritual credit.

Myint Swe said he had himself entered the monasteries three times in his adult life, on each occasion for just a few weeks.

"Buddhism is very individualistic - you have to work for your own liberation," said Aung Kin, a Burmese historian.

A monastery not only provides spiritual guidance, but also fulfils a practical role in Burmese society.



Entering a monastery as a child - or novice - is a cheap way of gaining an education. Although education is free in Burma, extras such as uniforms may still prove a struggle for impoverished families. And some parents choose to send their children during the school holidays, while they are out at work, Myint Swe said.

Those who choose to adopt Buddhism as a career often do so for financial reasons, Mr Aung Kin said, with donations collected by the monks shared with family members.

In return, however, prospective monks have to pass religious exams and agree to adhere to more than 220 restrictions.

Burmese monks not only play a spiritual role, but also have a history of political activism. They have been at the forefront of protest against unpopular authorities, from British colonial power in the 1930s to the last pro-democracy campaign in 1988.

Their political role stems from the days of the Burmese monarchy, which operated until the late 19th century, under which monks worked as intermediaries between the monarch and the public, and lobbied the king over unpopular moves such as heavy taxation, said Mr Aung Kin.

They became more confrontational during colonial times, in protest at the failure of foreigners to remove their shoes in pagodas, he said.

But the historian stressed that only about 10% of Burma's monks are politicized, and many of the monasteries may be unaware of the scale of the agitation currently under way in the country.

If fully mobilized, however, the monks would pose a major challenge to the military, and their moral position in society could embolden many more people to join the protests.

The Concept of Creation in Buddhism

According to the scriptures, in his lifetime, the Buddha refused to answer several philosophical questions. On issues such as whether the world is eternal or non-eternal, finite or infinite, unity or separation of the body and the self, complete inexistence of a person after nirvana and then death etc, the Buddha had remained silent.

One explanation for this is that such questions distract from practical activity for realizing enlightenment. Another is that such questions assume the reality of world/self/person.

In Buddhist teaching there is no single universe in which every living being resides. Rather, there are many universes of experience, and every living being exists in its own universe. In other words, if I am born



with a man's body, then of all the possible experiences offered by the universe, I am limited to the experiences that are possible for a male.

This means that I can't become pregnant, have a menstrual cycle or experience menopause. Conversely, a woman cannot grow a beard (usually) or possess the same potential for muscular development as a man.

Furthermore, an American's experiences of the universe are different from those of a Mexican or Australian, and the reality of someone born in the twenty-first century will differ from that of someone who lived in the eighteenth century.

However, there is one scripture in which the Buddha does appear to give a highly detailed answer to this issue. This is the Aggañña Sutta, found in the Pali Canon, in which the Buddha, speaking to the monk Vasettha, a former Brahmin, states the following:

“There comes a time, Vasettha, when, after the lapse of a long, long period, this world died. And when this happens, beings have mostly been reborn into the



Realm of Radiance [as devas]; and there they dwell, made of mind, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, traversing the air, continuing in glory; and thus they remain for a long, long period of time. There comes also a time, Vasettha, when sooner or later this world begins to re-evolve. When this happens, beings who had deceased from the World of Radiance usually come to life as humans... now at that time, all had become one world of water, dark, and of darkness that maketh blind. No moon nor sun appeared, no stars were seen, nor constellations, neither was night manifest nor day, neither months nor half-months, neither years nor seasons, neither female nor male. Beings were reckoned just as beings only. And to those beings, Vasettha, sooner or later after a long time, earth with its savours was spread out in the waters, even as a scum forms on the surface of boiled milky rice that is cooling, so did the earth appear.”

What's the Difference?

- **Reformed Theology**

1. Authority of scripture

- > The Bible is God's Holy Word.
- > The Bible is our rule of faith.

2. Open Bible

- > The Bible should be in the language of the people.
- > People should be encouraged to read the Bible for themselves.

3. Two sacraments

- > Communion
- > Baptism



4. God is a living and sovereign God

5. Celebration of God's glory

- revealed in the created order
- > Creation was pronounced good by God.
- > Misuse of creation is evil.

6. Justification and Sanctification

- > We are all sinners.
- > We cannot save ourselves.
- > Christ died an atoning death for us.
- > We are saved and forgiven through faith in Christ.
- > God strengthens the faithful so that we might bear fruit and to lead more Godly lives.

- **Common faith temptations** which can lead us astray in our quest for ultimacy.

- « We want to be in control.
- « We tend to create God in our own image.
- « We crave understanding of those things which are beyond our understanding.
- « We want to do something in situations where there seems to be nothing we can do.
- « We love ritual.
- « We don't like to change—even if we changed things to the way they are now.
- « We want to differentiate ourselves (favorably) from other people.
- « We like to have an easily understood set of rules to follow.
- « We're fascinated by secret knowledge, secret truths, secret plots, secret writings, hidden meanings, and alternative explanations.
- « We believe almost anything that backs up our pre-conceived notions.
- « We don't want to die, and we want to be certain that we'll have a positive afterlife.
- « We like to question others, but we don't like others to question us.
- « We want the path to be easy.
- « We consider our brain to be the one brain ever created that can judge all faith doctrines perfectly.
- « We tend to think that everyone should be more or less like us.
- « We want those close to us to be saved.

