JGSB: Jurnal Gerakan Semangat Buddhayana
Vol. 4, No.2, Oktober 2026, Page. 67-81
DOI: https://doi.org/10.60046/jgsb.v4i2.348
E-ISSN: 3031-1985
https://ejournal.stiab-jinarakkhita.ac.id/index.php/jgsb/index

Sky-Blue Buddhism in Myanmar: Doctrinal Reform, Monastic Resistance, and State Suppression

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(Received: 26 August 2026, Accepted: 27 October 2026, Published: 30 October 2026)

Keywords:
Present Karma Buddhism;
Sky-Blue Buddhism;
Buddhist revivalism;
Secular Buddhism;
Religious Suppression;
Moe Pyar Buddhism.

Abstract

This study is about Present Karma Buddhism (the Sky-Blue or Moe Pyar sect) which represents a radical reformist movement in Myanmar that reinterprets Theravada doctrine into a strictly "this-worldly" psychological framework (Pyissouppān-kamma-wāda), triggering decades of severe state suppression and official charges of heresy (adhamma-vāda). Moving beyond existing scholarship centered primarily on founder U Nyāna, this study investigates the overlooked biographical trajectories and survival strategies of key co-founders, monastic scholars, and female practitioners who sustained the movement. Utilizing a qualitative, historical-biographical research framework, the study analyzes ecclesiastical court archives, state legislation, internal sectarian literature, semi-structured oral history interviews, and digital ethnographic media from online public channels. The research identifies major empirical outcomes regarding the movement's socio-intellectual adaptation: monastic entryism, wherein co-founder Venerable Guṇavanta readopted traditional saffron robes after 17 years to retain social influence while maintaining Present Karma views; underground dissemination, through scholar Venerable Ñāṇindālaṅkāra's secret publication of banned treatises from within orthodox monastic institutions; elite intellectual defense, demonstrated by top-ranked Dhammācariya scholar Vicittasārābhivaṃsa authoring apologetics and continuing lay preaching; and gendered resistance, as scholar nun Venerable Dhammaviharini Jana bypassed state bans on female higher ordination by adopting 311 Bhikkhuni Vinaya rules, confronting dual accusations of doctrinal heresy and institutional patriarchal resistance. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that despite headquarters seizure and severe legal persecution, Present Karma Buddhism persists through strategic concealment, digital platforms, and political defiance against military rule, highlighting the resilience of subaltern religious movements under authoritarian regimes.

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Introduction

Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar has maintained a zero-tolerance approach to doctrinal deviation every single defendant in the cases that have reached the national State Special Vinicchaya Committee level has been found fully or partially guilty, with no opportunity for appeal (Ashin & Crosby, 2017). State Special Vinicchaya Committee (SSVC) is a committee organized by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (MaHaNa) which was founded in

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1980 to handle such doctrinal disputes at national level while minor disputes are handled at local township or divisional levels.The Sangha courts that enforce the behavior of the monastic organizations are enforced by state law enforcement, where imprisonment is the punishment for noncompliance, and there is no way to appeal. According to the Law Relating to the Sangha Organization of 1990, the Buddhist monks cannot organize themselves except for state-approved monastic orders, with violations resulting in criminal punishments and immediate defrocking (Humanists International, 2026).

According to the research "Heresy and Monastic Malpractice in the Buddhist Court Cases (Vinicchaya) of Modern Burma (Myanmar)" of 2017 by Venerable Janaka and Kate Crosby (Ashin & Crosby, 2017), seventeen major cases involving accusations of heresy (adhamma) and monastic malpractice (avinaya) have been formally handled by the State Special Vinicchaya Committees (SSVC) at the national level (Ashin & Crosby, 2017). However, there are three more major cases involving accusations of heresy (adhamma) against several meditation tendencies including Aung Lan Sayadaw Sandimar also known as Venerable Candimā (State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, 2022) and Ariyamaṇḍāiṅ Venerable Suriya (State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, 2025)

The Vinicchaya court case of Sky-Blue Buddhism also known as Present Karma Buddhism was one of such major cases and it is by far the most oppressed reformist (revivalist) movement. Sky-Blue Buddhism (Present Karma Buddhism) transforms the traditional Buddhist concepts into an entirely this-worldly framework. Present Karma (*Pyissouppān-kamma-wāda*) believes that the workings of karma are confined only to this life. It discredits the traditional view that current economic difficulties or affluence of individuals are the result of deeds done in a previous life. This view holds fatalistic implications which disempower. Besides, it neither denies rebirth nor attaches any importance to it. It views the traditional concept of 31 planes of existence (realms of heavens, hells, ghosts etc.) as purely psychological and emotional conditions enacted socially. For example, a "demon" (*bhīlū*) is just a person driven mad by anger, whereas "god" is a peaceful person who actively saves others. Hell is the state of immediate anguish, sorrow and anxiety caused by a bad deed in this life itself. It criticizes the traditional practice of making large donations to rich monasteries in return for gaining merit for future lives. Instead, if there is anything extra in the hands of an individual, it should be donated to the poor, the underprivileged and the destitute in order to make the present world better rather than trying to make a fictitious heaven. Additionally, it also rejects the traditional merit-making ritual practices of mainstream Theravada, the veneration of Buddha statues, astrology, and spirit mediums as it holds a secular insight that knowledge is always to be verified through empirical experience.

Venerable Nyāna (or Ashin Nyar Na, or U Nyāna, or Shin Nyāna), the controversial and defiant Buddhist monk from Myanmar, is the founder of Moe Pyar Gaing, or the "Sky-Blue Sect" (Ashin & Crosby, 2017). On April 22, 1981, U Nyāna sent his 38-page-long treatise to the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (MaHaNa), the highest governmental board of abbots, officially created in 1980 under the military regime of General Ne Win to control and "purify" the Sangha. In his treatise, he suggested a radical reform of Buddhism in terms of both morality and doctrines; criticized the traditional monastics for allowing moral corruption and spreading metaphysical myths about past and future lives of people (Foxeus, 2025). U Nyāna was arrested by the civil police in September 1981 and accused of committing the fourth pārājika (the most serious violation of monastic rules, which

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automatically results in the exclusion from the Sangha) – he declared himself an arahant. In 1983, a regional court decided to sentence U Nyāna to three years in prison. On February 10, 1983, during his trial period, U Nyāna made a step forward and took off the traditional saffron robe and put on the sky-blue shirt with baggy Shan trousers. Such a decision of U Nyāna became a starting point for the establishment of his sect; this day was called "Dhamma Wihārī Day" by his followers. Due to the color of the clothes, this sect got the nickname from the outsiders – Moe Pyar Gaing or "Sky-Blue Buddhism". The official name of the teaching of U Nyāna is *Pyissouppān-kamma-wāda-bouddha-bhāthā* or "The Buddhism of the Present Karma Doctrine".

For not conforming to the religious and political authorities, U Nyāna had spent around (cumulative) 20 years in jail within three decades. On November 15, 2011, the MaHaNa declared, through its state decree, the teaching of U Nyāna to be heretical and thus an anti-Buddhism adhamma-vāda (State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, 2011). The movement was banned according to Instruction No. 95, "Moe Pyar Land" was seized by the state, and many of his followers were compelled to sign an agreement publicly stating that they would forsake his teachings. U Nyāna was prosecuted according to Sections 295 and 295A of the Myanmar Penal Code because of his malicious and offensive acts.

Scholarship on Present Karma Buddhism draws significantly on the work of (Foxeus, 2025) and (Kawanami, 2022). Apart from them, there is no detailed analysis in mainstream academia on Sky-Blue Buddhism as a movement. However, the significance of the theory of transition of Guṇavanta into Sky-Blue movement and then back to the traditional robes has been ignored in scholarly literature. For 17 years of wearing sky-blue robes after his first arrest in 1983, he strategically adopted traditional saffron robes of Theravāda monk again in 2000. Being now named "Thein Htu Sayadaw Venerable Guṇa Wuntha," he practices in Mawbi Township, Yangon. The lack of analysis of Guṇavanta by current literature is a gap in the literature regarding “monastic entryism,” wherein individuals who are against the Present Karma doctrine stay within it but feign themselves to be orthodox Theravāda monks in order not to be suppressed by the State. In parallel with Guṇavanta, there is also a blind spot in mainstream literature about other monastics, such as Venerable Ñāṇindālaṅkāra from the prestigious Amarapura Mahagandhayon Monastery. Ñāṇindālaṅkāra secretly published several books called Saddhamma-tipabheda that were written by U Nyāna to bypass the ban on Sky-Blue literature by the state authorities. Exposed by the monastic community, Ñāṇindālaṅkāra signed an official recantation of these beliefs to save himself. Another example in this regard is Venerable Vicittasārābhivaṃsa. With his five different and very prestigious *Dhammācariya* (Dhamma Teacher) degrees, including the very competitive Pariyatti Sasanahita (Sakyasiha) Dhammacariya, Vicittasārābhivaṃsa belongs to the elite group of scriptural scholars. In additional, the biographical trajectory of Venerable Jana presents a double critique of not only state-imposed orthodoxy but also the patriarchal limitation of mainstream Burmese Theravāda. Sadly, her role in Sky-Blue Buddhism is often overlooked too. Through analyzing the life story of Jana, starting from her socio-economic background in her childhood through elite monastic education and her current position as a primary caretaker and co-communicator of U Nyāna in Bago, this research also addresses the deep gender gap in current available knowledge production.

Along with filling these gaps, this study also analyzes the ability of Present Karma (Sky-Blue) Buddhism to maintain its doctrinal unity while facing suppression by the state and monasteries in Myanmar, with an emphasis on the survival strategies of its co-founders,

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monastic scholars, and female members. In particular, this research is aimed at answering three research questions: 1) How can dissenting monks utilize strategies such as monastic entryism and manuscript circulation to survive persecution by the state? 2) How can women utilize alternative theology and observance of Vinaya to overcome heresy and patriarchy in monasteries? 3) How can digital technologies and recent political developments affect the dissemination strategy of the movement?

Method

To analyze the historical development, doctrine, and biography of hidden and marginal people in the Sky-Blue Buddhist movement in Burma, a qualitative, historical-biographical research design is used in this research paper. Instead of restricting the research to the founding period of the movement, which is well-documented already, the design focuses on the life experience, strategy, and status of the hidden, marginal, and transitional people, such as monks who maneuvered within the orthodox Theravada establishment through "monastic entryism" and nuns who found ways to achieve their ordination. The empirical dataset for this study is built upon three primary pillars: primary monastic and legal documents, qualitative oral history interviews, and digital ethnographic materials.

Primary Monastic and Legal Documents:

Ecclesiastical Court Records: Official trial record and decision of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (MaHaNa). This includes the initial decision of 2011 banning Sky-Blue doctrine as heresy (adhamma-vāda) in Instruction No. 95 as well as comparative trial records at the national level of other cases of heresy, such as U Candimā (2022) and Ariyamaṇḍāiṅ Venerable Suriya (2025). State Legislation: 1990 Law Relating to the Sangha Organization and 1950 Emergency Provisions Act is used as a legal instrument of enforcement of penalty against the unauthorized monastic orders and "false views" including the Sky-Blue Buddhism. The reports of such state legislations are used. Sectarian Literature and Apologetics: Internal publications, pamphlets, and memoirs of the representatives of the movement. Such internal texts include biographical defense of the founder, composed by scholar-monk Vicittasārābhivaṃsa, the autobiography of scholar-monk Vicittasārābhivaṃsa, and the books and literature written and published by the founder of the movement Dhammavihari Venerable Nyāna.

Oral History & Interviews:

Primary Interviewee: A central biographical case is built through interviewing Venerable Dhammaviharini Jana (originally highly educated thilashin of the Theravada tradition who joined the movement of the present karma Buddhism). Interview Format and Data: The primary data consists of interviews and voice messages obtained in private from the author on August 24, 2026 and published with unlisted visibility on YouTube for reference purpose, fact-checking, and validation purposes. Existing YouTube Interviews: Primary data regarding Venerable Guṇavanta was drawn from an interview conducted by Venerable Aggadhamma, a prominent monastic figure awarded the prestigious state title *Mahā Saddhammajotikadhaja*. Wherever possible, the facts of this interview were verified and checked against the records of the trial and judgments made by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (MaHaNa). Recorded Dialogues and Media Debates: Public video and audio dialogues, mainly obtained from digital platforms like YouTube. Recorded debates and

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playlists with participation of right-wing nationalist monk Venerable Agga Dhamma, the co-founder Venerable Guṇa Wuntha (Thein Htu Sayadaw) and the founder U Nyāna.

Primary Literature:

Published and Printed Materials: A central biographical case is built through a short publication of Venerable Vicittasārābhivaṃsa (a well-educated and qualified monk-scholar with the highly respected a-bhivamsa suffix) who joined the movement of the present karma Buddhism. Wherever possible, the facts stated by Venerable Vicittasārābhivaṃsa were verified and checked against the records of the trial and judgments made by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (MaHaNa). Digital Ethnographic Materials: Due to physical restrictions and bans imposed by the state on the movement's physical headquarters ("Moe Pyar Land"), the digital platform became an essential place for teaching and interaction for this movement. Materials published online and writings of Dhammavihari U Nyāna and Dhammaviharini Janalankāra from their secluded lodge in Bago.

Data collection was carried out across document archives, direct field interviews, and online digital ethnography. Interview Protocol: Semi-structured interview data was collected from Venerable Dhammaviharini Jana on August 24, 2026, via asynchronous audio recordings, in which she recorded spoken responses to a structured set of audio-recorded questions. This interview provides information about socio-economic background of the subject and her monastic education (top results in national exams of Pāli Pathamabyan and Vinaya Vidu Honors) and her becoming fully ordained female monastic (Dhammaviharini) according to the 311 rules of the Bhikkhuni Vinaya. Digital Ethnography Protocol: Given the state-imposed physical restrictions and the seizure of the movement's physical headquarters ("Moe Pyar Land"), digital platforms were examined as the primary contemporary arena for sectarian teaching and public debate: Platforms Examined: YouTube and online messaging/media channels hosting public monastic debates and digital sermon archives.

Observation Period: Digital materials published between January 2016 (marking U Nyāna's release from prison) and August 2026 were systematically monitored.

Volume of Materials: The digital corpus comprised online sermon sets, digital PDF pamphlets from the Bago secluded lodge, public interview video recordings (e.g., the 2022 public dialogue with nationalist monk Venerable Agga Dhamma), and multi-part interview playlists featuring co-founder Venerable Guṇa Wuntha (Thein Htu Sayadaw). Selection Criteria: The digital recordings used for analysis met three criteria for selection: (a) involvement of the leaders of the movement or important other individuals in the discussion; (b) the recording focused on the basic Present Karma doctrines (denial of reincarnation, 31 planes of existence, and non-canonicity of Abhidhamma); and (c) the discussion involved issues of social equality, persecution from the state, or politics after 2021.

To transform the collected raw evidence into rigorous analytical findings, a systematic four-stage analytical pipeline was employed:

Transcription and Translation: All primary audio recordings including the August 24, 2026 oral interview with Venerable Jana and online audio/video recordings from YouTube were transcribed verbatim in their original Burmese language. Key passages and technical theological terminology were translated into English, ensuring linguistic precision regarding monastic degree titles and Vinaya terminology.

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Thematic Narrative Coding: Transcribed narratives and digital text materials were coded using thematic analysis. Coding categories were organized around two central axes: Biographical Trajectories: Monastic entryism (e.g., Ven. Guṇavanta's transition back to saffron robes in 2000), secret manuscript dissemination (e.g., Ven. Ñāṇindālaṅkāra), and gendered resistance (e.g., Venerable Jana) through non-standard ordination.

Doctrinal & Ideological Concepts: Reinterpretation of karma as purely "this-worldly" (Pyissouppān-kamma-wāda), psychological redefinition of cosmological realms, and secular criticism of merit-making (dāna).

Cross-Source Triangulation: To ensure historical accuracy and mitigate subjective bias, oral history accounts and digital claims are systematically cross-verified against official court records and secondary scholarly literature. The information that cannot be verified is stated in Discussion section for transparency.

Integration with Secondary Scholarship: Historical and sociological literature on modern Burmese Buddhism was employed to develop a theoretical framework for qualitative coding. The empirical results were interpreted within the context of existing theories, including theories of state-sponsored monastic orthodoxy, gender theories, theories about women's ordination, and theories about ecclesiastical trials.

In light of the very serious security concerns that arose after 2021 in Myanmar, the research methodology ensured the safety and privacy of all participants. First-hand data on the oral history of the Venerable Jana was collected using asynchronous audio with explicit informed consent, whereas digital ethnography was limited to publicly accessible archives to prevent any forms of surveillance.

Result and Discussion

Result

Dhammavihari Venerable Nyāna: the Founder of Present Karma Buddhism

The most immediate collaborator associated with the movement during its formative years is Venerable Guṇa Wuntha who was a monk since childhood at Amarapura Mahagandhayon Monastery. After studying for the *Pathamapyan* exams in his youth under the most Venerable Maha Gandayone Sayadaw Janakābhivaṃsa, he enlisted to practise *Vipassanā* meditation at Mahasi *Vipassanā* meditation centre. After spending a few months meditating at Mahasi Vipassanā meditation center, he decided to visit Amarapura Mahagandhayon Monastery and decided to become a forest tradition monk (Wuntha, 2025).

Venerable Guṇa Wuntha collaborated with Dhammavihari U Nyāna to prepare a 38-page document on reform and presented it to the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (MaHaNa) on April 22, 1981. The presentation of the document was the immediate cause of the adverse reaction from the monastic authorities, which resulted in the arrest of both U Nyāna (Foxeus, 2025) and (Wuntha, 2025) . Venerable Guṇavanta donned the sky-blue robes of the Present Karma Buddhist sect for seventeen years after being arrested for the first time in 1983. However, in 2000, he gave up the sky-blue robes and adopted the saffron robes but retained most of the beliefs of the Present Karma sect. After that, he moved to places inhabited by many Burmese diasporas and migrants, such as Mae Sot and Myawaddy. He now lives in Mawbi Township, Yangon and is usually called "Thein Htu Sayadaw Venerable Guṇa Wuntha". While he does not wear sky blue robes anymore, most of the followers of

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Present Karma Buddhism still regard him as an entryist monk of the Present Karma movement in the Theravada tradition. He mainly uses the slogan "A World of One Heart and One Mind" while preaching his interpretation of Buddhism and focuses mostly on unconditional love aspect (*Mettā*) of Buddha's teaching (Wuntha, 2025).

Vicittasārābhivaṃsa: From Saffron to Blue Robe; From Blue Robe to Layman

Venerable Vicittasarabhivamsa, an extremely well-educated and qualified monk-scholar (with the highly respected a-bhivamsa suffix) is one of the key players in the Present Karmic Buddhism since early 2000. Under the layman's name "Maung Myint Aung," he was born on a Wednesday in the month of June 1963, specifically, June 19, 1963 in the town of Nanmar in Mohnyin Township, Kachin State, Northern Myanmar. In 1980, he was seventeen years old when he listened to the sermons preached by Myoma Sayadaw U Nyāna of Nanmar town. He learned from the preaching that poverty, suffering, and lack of education were because of the lack of merit in the past (kusaḷa pāramī). He thought that a life at home would not let him practice Dāna, Sīla, and Bhāvanā. Observing his unique motivation for joining the Sangha compared to ordinary novices, his village preceptor (*Upajjhāya*) bestowed upon him the monastic title "Vicittasārā" (Vicittasārābhivaṃsa, 2026).

He holds five distinct Dhammācariya degrees awarded by various institutions, ranging from state-sponsored bodies to highly respected monastic organizations, such as Pariyatti Sasanahita (Sakyasiha) Dhammacariya, Cetiyaṅgaṇa Pariyatti Dhammācariya Gaṇavācaka, Pariyatti Saddhammapāla Dhammācariya, Sudhammā Pariyatti Dhammācariya Visiṭṭhapākaṭa, and Sāsanadhaja Dhammācariya (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2010). Each of these Dhammācariya degrees stands for different forms of knowledge required for a Dhammācariya (Dhamma teacher). Pariyatti Sasanahita (Sakyasiha) Dhammacariya is a long and prestigious test in Pariyatti (scriptural) studies conducted in Mandalay by the (Sakyasīha) Pariyatti Sasanahita Association. Cetiyaṅgaṇa Pariyatti Dhammācariya Gaṇavācaka is a title and certification granted to scholarly monks upon successful completion of the special teaching class (*Gaṇavācaka* level) of Cetiyaṅgaṇa Pariyatti Dhammānuggaha examination which takes place annually at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. Pariyatti Saddhammapāla Dhammācariya is the honorary Dhammācariya degree usually awarded through Myingyan scriptural examinations and religious pariyatti courses. Sudhammā Pariyatti Dhammācariya Visiṭṭhapākaṭa is an educational title and honorary designation denoting achievement of success in the Dhammācariya level along with distinction or prominence (*visiṭṭhapākaṭa*) through scriptural examinations of Sudhammā Nikāya, one of prominent traditions in Myanmar's scriptural religious affairs and Buddhist literature. The last one, Sāsanadhaja Dhammācariya, is a monastic title and degree granted by the Myanmar Government to monks passed the state Dhammācariya examinations (Khemacara et al., 2019).

Despite obtaining the highest academic titles in Theravada scholarship, he candidly acknowledged that he had not attained true spiritual realization (Ariya Magga, Phala, *Nibbāna*). From 1998, he systematically sought spiritual realization through Four Noble Truths meditation at Mohnyin Maha Satipatthana East Monastery, conducted 7-day meditation retreats during the Thingyan festival, practiced forest asceticism on Pyet-kha-ywe Mountain close to Kume, Myittha Township, and studied the meditation techniques of Mogok Sayadaw from literature. Since he could not realize any transcendental states till 2004, he came to know that he was trying to find Dhamma in nonexistent places with the help of non-Buddhist ascetic (*Titthiya*) practices. Using an analogy of tasting a single drop of

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sea water he claimed that meditators all over Myanmar were also unable to attain Lokuttara Dhamma due to engaging in practices that do not align with true Buddha-Dhamma. Around 2000, he met U Soe Aung, who introduced him to Sayadaw Shin Nyāna and his books, namely Taṇhā Shin-tam ("Exposing Craving") and Paṭiccasamuppāda Kamma-Thabaw-Taya. He noticed that Buddha had taught Paṭiccasamuppāda with reference to present rounds (*Kilesavaṭṭa, Kammavaṭṭa, Vipākavaṭṭa*) rather than 3-life model (past, present, future) which he claimed was introduced by the commentators Venerable Anuruddha and Venerable Buddhaghosa. On June 19, 2005, on his 42nd birthday, at Abbot Training School, Myitkyina, after studying U Nyāna's book "*Nibbāna* and Today's Buddhism" and doing research into the original Suttas (*Poṭṭhapāda Sutta*, *Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta*, and *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta*), he found that Buddha had deliberately avoided answering the 10 questions of philosophy (whether the soul/world is eternal or non-eternal, finite or infinite, and whether there exists any entity after death) since they neither lead to good behavior nor to dispassion nor to *Nibbāna*.

By interpreting the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta, he claimed that human birth is caused by three physical things, namely parental union (*Saṃvāsa*), fertility window of the mother (*Utunī*), and father's sperm (*Gandhabba*) rather than karma of past life (pubbekatahetuvāda). From this he concluded that various concepts used in traditional Theravada such as 31 external worlds, life transmigration in past/future life, 40 Samatha/Vipassana methods which lead to *Arupajjhāna* are concepts invented by Venerable Buddhaghosa. After that he started preaching his newly discovered doctrines. At a funeral sermon for U Myint Than in Myitkyina, he preached that the belief in next life after death is a wrong view (*Micchādiṭṭhi*) which was not taught by the Buddha, and created an uproar among local monks and villagers. In April 2007, he resigned from his principalship of Abbot Training School in Myitkyina. Monks of Hopin have filed formal charges of Adhamma against him before State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SSMNC). He has submitted a written defense of 400 pages according to the Suttas, Vinaya, and four Mahāpadesa criteria. Knowing the SSMNC would rule against him and order his arrest or forced recantation, he officially submitted a letter permanently resigning from Theravada Buddhism and the SSMNC structure on June 19, 2008 (Vicittasārābhivaṃsa, 2026).

To avoid imprisonment, he went into hiding during President U Thein Sein's quasi-military administration. When Venerable Nyāna was arrested in 2010, U Vicittasara arranged prison support for him in Myitkyina Prison and secretly computer-typeset Shin Nyāna's books in Monywa despite failing health due to chronic Hepatitis C. From July 13, 2016, he resided at Ariya Park in Pyin Sar, Pyin Oo Lwin, wearing blue robes as a "Dhamma Vihari" within the Present Karma (*Paccuppanna Kammavāda*) movement. Having spent more than a decade hiding in the forests to avoid arrest by the authorities, he finally met U Nyāna in person following his release in 2016. Since then, he has been acting as one of the representatives of the movement ever since, having authored several pamphlets in defense of U Nyāna's "Present Karma Buddhism" and its philosophy (Kawanami, 2022). On April 18, 2020, he returned his blue robes to Venerable Nyāna, concluding that the role of Sky-Blue robe has more weaknesses than strengths when it comes to preaching, and decided to forge an independent path. Though no longer wearing both saffron robes and sky-blue robes, now living as a layperson, he continues to actively preach the Dhamma of Sky-Blue Buddhism (Vicittasārābhivaṃsa, 2026).

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Venerable Dhammaviharini Jana: The Bhikkhuni of Present Karma Buddhism

Once being a very proficient thilashin (with the highly respected a-laṅkāra suffix for extraordinary monastic education), which refers to the Burmese Theravada Buddhist nun different from bhikkhuni, Venerable Jana now bears the title Dhammaviharini Jana. She works and takes care of the elderly master Dhammavihari Venerable Nyāna along with other laypeople. The transition of Venerable Jana from the traditional Theravada Buddhism to modern Karma Buddhism is a very interesting topic because once she can be safely considered as one of the best educated "thilashins" of Myanmar given her educational journey.

Coming from an agrarian family as the fifth of eight siblings and the eldest of four sisters, Dhammaviharini Jana was raised in conditions of considerable economic difficulty and household instability. The upbringing she received from her mother was characterized by the latter's disappointment with marriage and associated with the constant tension between spouses and the physical consequences of giving birth continuously without proper reproductive medicine. As a result, her mother continually warned her daughters about getting married, as she saw it to be the reason for women's sufferings. On the other hand, her upbringing was also characterized by strict adherence to Buddhist devotional tradition. Socialization was performed within the discourse of Buddhism, as according to family traditions, Dhammaviharini Jana learned not the usual vocabulary of infancy but rather the vocabulary of the basic Buddhist teachings: "*Anicca*, *Dukkha*, *Anatta*, Buddho". In the evenings at home, she participated in group recitation of attributes of Buddha, developing *mettā* (loving-kindness) and transferring merit. The religious socialization of the girl version of her was reinforced by her mother's patriarchal attitude toward the daughters as "the daughters of the Buddha," who would be protected in their devotion to the divine being. Following the death of her older brother, whose untimely demise had been blamed by her mother on an irregularity of milk teeth eruption, Dhammaviharini Jana was born with the very same oddity in dental development. Terrified of losing another child, her mother carried out a symbolic adoption ritual and sold her to the abbot of the village, who accepted the baby in such a manner and gave it back to its mother. Thus, the ritual displacement helped Dhammaviharini Jana to develop a dual identity, both as "the daughter of the monk" and "the daughter of the Buddha" (Venerable Jana, 2026).

It was a very difficult socio-economic precondition because she lived in great poverty with parents who attached no importance to formal education. Indeed, not even one out of her four older brothers had completed the fifth or sixth grade. On completion of the fifth grade, owing to dire economic conditions, her mother tried to take her out of school because she also had to face the hardship of traveling a two-mile distance daily. She lived under extremely poor conditions where even basic amenities like shoes to protect her feet from the harshness of the terrain were non-existent. If her sandals were broken, she used to be taught by her mother, who followed a strict fatalistic doctrine that their poverty was a result of lack of *dāna* (charity) in past births. She continued to fight against all those difficulties. She wore worn-out clothes to go to school barefoot for over an hour in both directions every day because she realized that only through secular education could she become a monastic nun. In 1988, when nationwide protests led to the closure of the schools and universities till 1990, she completed her tenth-grade examination. After facing the hardships of political unrest and fear of conscription in the army, her mother finally agreed to help her get ordained in the monastic order at the age of twenty years (Venerable Jana, 2026).

JGSB: Jurnal Gerakan Semangat Buddhayana
Vol. 4, No.2, Oktober 2026, Page. 67-81
DOI: https://doi.org/10.60046/jgsb.v4i2.348
E-ISSN: 3031-1985
https://ejournal.stiab-jinarakkhita.ac.id/index.php/jgsb/index

Even though she originally took ordination only with the purpose to achieve enlightenment and meditate intensively, she was advised to pass the strict exams of *Dhammācariya* first. She graduated *Patham Nge* (also written as *Pathama Nge*) examination, the Elementary level of the government-administered Pāli Pathamabyan examinations in Myanmar, as the national top performer with the First Prize nationwide. Then, she completed the rest of the *Pathamapyan* exams. Afterwards, she sat for the Sāsanadhaja Dhammācariya exam and graduated the degree, taking First Prize nationwide according to her. Furthermore, she sat for the Vinaya Vidu (also written as *Vinayavidu*, *Vinay Vidū*, or *VinayVidu*) exam and title which is a crucial qualifying credential for Myanmar's most elite monastics, one of the pre-requisite degrees to sit for the Tipiṭakadhara Tipiṭakakovidha. She claims to have passed the Vinaya Vidu examination with Honors in *Pācittiya* (distinction in *Pācittiya*). In addition to these highly respected monastic degrees, she is known to be awarded the title of laṅkāra for passing the *Pariyattipārakasāsanālaṅkāra* examination, a specialist examination intended to award those who are considered "Ornament of the Sāsana (the Buddha's Teachings)". Apart from all the monastic qualifications and titles, she also is a graduate of Bachelor of Arts in Geology (with Qualified grade) from University for Distance Education, Mandalay (Venerable Jana, 2026).

Having spent some years on monastic examination and prestigious titles among the monastic order, she dedicated some years to become a full-time meditation practitioner seeking enlightenment and nirvana (or *nibbāna*) according to her. On 9th February 2020, Dhammaviharini Ashin Ma Jana took her vows. Her transition to a Dhamma Viharini from the traditional eight-precept nun (Thilashin) involves taking the strict Vinaya (the set of monastic code of conduct) created by Buddha for Bhikkhunis (female monks) containing 311 rules. Due to social and legal barriers in Myanmar, she cannot officially use the title 'Bhikkhuni', although she leads the life of a fully ordained female monastic with the title 'Dhammaviharini Ashin Ma Jana' (where 'Ashin Ma' denotes a female monastic).

Venerable Ñāṇindālaṅkāra: The Trojan Horse of Present Karma Buddhism inside Theravada Establishment

Despite severe persecution from the state, Present Karma Buddhism has its faithful adherents. Despite the founder wearing the sky-blue robe as an act of resistance against the oppressions, there are a significant number of followers within the Theravada monastic population. Venerable Ñāṇindālaṅkāra, who is a monk from the renowned Amarapura Mahagandhayon Monastery, marked by the prestigious alaṅkāra designation, wrote a series of books called Saddhamma-tipabheda, inspired by Dhammavihari Venerable Nyāna. Under religious pressure, Venerable Ñāṇindālaṅkāra had to sign a statement that he would stop following his views in order to continue wearing the saffron robe of Theravada monks (State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, 2011). Educated monastic scholars like Venerable Ñāṇindālaṅkāra and others are still with Theravada saffron robe despite secretly following the teachings of Dhammavihari Venerable Nyāna.

Discussion

Doctrinal Reform and Religious Legitimacy

Present Karma (Sky-Blue) Buddhism is a contemporary disenchanting reform which interprets the classical kamma and cosmology as psychological phenomena in the present life. Whereas the founder U Nyāna adopted an aggressive stance towards post-canonical commentaries for gaining legitimacy, the elite scholar Vicittasārābhivaṃsa used his

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expertise in scriptures to build inner defense from *Pāli* suttas. This theology can be viewed by its followers as true restoration of the original rational Dhamma of the historical Buddha, untainted by subsequent Hindu-Brahmanical additions. From a critical point of view, the movement is a subaltern critique of dominant merit-making monastic economies. Through allocation of donations away from rituals and to poor people, the movement constitutes a challenge to institutional and economic power of officially sanctioned monastic establishments.

Institutional Pressure and Religious Adaptation

In January 2016 at an advanced age U Nyāna was released from prison in a general presidential amnesty under the new NLD government. Having been released he did not recant his doctrines nor acknowledge the supremacy of the orthodox Sangha. It made both the Ministry of Religious Affairs and nationalist monks declare him as "internal enemy" of Myanmar Buddhism. Even the Religious Affairs Ministry headed by the Union Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture U Aung Ko threatened the followers of Present Karma Buddhism with legal actions if they published their books publicly (Zaw, 2016). On January 11, 2017, a formal statement was made by the central committee of the "Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion" (*Ma Ba Tha*) against the "Moepyar" group of Ashin Nyāna. This act was done by the nationalist monk network since U Nyāna and his followers went on propagating those principles which had been officially declared as not belonging to the Dhamma (*adhammavāda*) by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (Radio Free Asia, 2017). His continual disobedience against both the government oppressions and the condemnation of Patriotic Association of Myanmar indeed earns him a lot of respect from the population especially within the progressives and the democracy activists.

The main point of divergence between the two founders of Present Karma Buddhism is how each regards the role of the State. While U Nyāna has been openly antagonistic to successive regimes, whether quasi-democratic like that of the NLD or military dictators, U Guṇavanta has taken a practical approach, showing characteristics of an entryist. Strangely, although both claim to be enlightened and interpret Buddhism similarly, their divergent reactions to persecution have caused dissension between the two.

Venerable Guṇavanta at the moment is not recognized as a fully-fledged bhikkhu within the orthodox Theravada order because it sees him only as a novice (Wuntha, 2025). However, Venerable Guṇavanta does not care about any status in the order and behaves in a very humble manner while spreading his teachings. In contrast to him, Venerable Nyāna shows the traits of an intellectual by showing his debating skills and ability to resist any form of repression. Currently, Dhammavihari U Nyāna and Dhammaviharini Janalankāra live in a secluded lodge in the Bago area. They are now forbidden from carrying a monk identity card, but Dhammavihari U Nyāna and Dhammaviharini Janalankāra still wear their distinctive blue robes, live as celibates, and adhere strictly to the Ten Precepts (including not handling money and not eating solid food past noon). Dhammavihari U Nyāna and Dhammaviharini Janalankāra still communicate with their followers via Internet sermons, teaching meditation, and writing. Among their followers, they are still honored as more spiritually advanced than activists, being the superior, enlightened meditators who gave up their freedom in defense of a sensible, compassionate, and rational Dhamma. Upon being provoked by the right-wing and nationalist monk Venerable Agga Dhamma during his visit to Dhammavihari U Nyāna, Dhammavihari U Nyāna urged him to condemn the coup and be

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with the common masses (Shin Nyar Na, 2022) . This was indeed an act of rebellion that fetched him immense popularity amongst the citizens of Myanmar.

As a result of his vocal support for the resistance movement against the 2021 Myanmar military coup as well as his ongoing resistance to the Vinicchaya rulings of the courts, the regional authorities ordered local Sangha Nayaka committees to sue U Nyāna and his supporters using law 20/90 (Protection of the Sangha organization). Precisely, on 17th September, 2026, the Religious Affairs Department of the Kyaukse District has officially issued a notice regarding the dissemination of Adhammavāda (false teachings) of Buddhism through the social media. Township Sangha Nayaka members as well as local administrations are asked to cooperate immediately for arresting violators such as U Nyāna and those who are disseminating his dhamma teachings through the internet (Kyaw Kyaw Oo, 2026) , the District Religious Affairs Officer (Assistant Director). The fact that U Nyāna is still deliberately targeted during the civil war period is evidence of how the government and the conservative monastic leadership worked together to muzzle him by perceiving his doctrines as dangerous both spiritually and politically.

Gender and Religious Participation

That both Venerable Dhammaviharini Jana and Vicittasārābhivaṃsa, a sister and brother, possess exceptional intelligence and distinguished academic credentials is a profound asset to the movement.

Of all these figures, although currently overlooked, the female monastic Venerable Jana faces constant risk as her stance challenges both Burmese Theravada orthodoxy and state authority on two levels. One of the layers is participation in the Sky-Blue Buddhism movement while the second layer is her adherence to strict Vinaya (a set of monastic code of conduct) formulated by Buddha for Bhikkhunis (female monks) involving 311 rules. In a country like Myanmar, although there are Bhikkhunis in other Theravada Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, and so forth, getting a Bhikkhuni ordination even under the close supervision of influential monks from Theravada traditions of Sri Lanka and Thailand, carries imprisonment penalties. An illustrative example of religious repression sanctioned by the state on female monastics is that of the Venerable Saccavadi. She became one of the first contemporary Burmese women to become ordained as a bhikkhunī in Sri Lanka in 2003. After coming back to Burma, she was persecuted by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SSMNC) on the charge of impersonation of a monk as she refused to publicly disrobe of her higher ordination. Although she was heavily pressured by ecclesiastical authorities, she retained her ordination and consequently served five years in the notorious Insein prison and was eventually exiled (Toomey, 2016). Therefore, it can be said that Venerable Dhammaviharini Jana is at an exceptional intersection of religious oppression because she faces the double charge of heresy by challenging monastic orthodoxy and patriarchal power structures. From the standpoint of the conservative monastic community, the acts of Venerable Dhammaviharini Jana represent a breach of both ancient Burmese Theravada traditions and ecclesiastical structure. However, since she has never been prosecuted by the state and has never participated in any heresy trial, her credentials are difficult to verify independently owing to the limited access to the state-monastic examination records.

It is interesting how, in spite of the antagonistic nature of the Burmese Theravāda tradition against the founding members of the movement, they continue to be vulnerable to the

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entryist techniques of the larger Sky-Blue movement. Such a situation poses important questions on the limits of ethics involved in this type of entryism, namely whether it leads to deception and lies. If this is the case, then there is an important contradiction within this form of deception and the ideals of enlightenment held by the movement as avoiding deception is the basic tenet of five precepts.

Conclusion

This study examines how Present Karma Buddhism (Moe Pyar) in Myanmar preserves its religious identity and doctrinal coherence despite sustained suppression by state-monastic authorities. Moving beyond previous scholarship emphasizing the persecution and imprisonment of U Nyāna, the findings reveal that religious survival involves diverse strategies of socio-intellectual adaptation, covert textual dissemination, and institutional negotiation. Suppression through SSVC decrees, the occupation of religious headquarters, and criminal prosecution has not necessarily eliminated religious dissent but has encouraged flexible and decentralized mechanisms of preservation. By examining the overlooked experiences of marginalized monastic scholars and female practitioners, this study proposes a multi-actor model of religious resistance within Myanmar's state-monastic system.

Four biographical trajectories illustrate these mechanisms. Venerable Guṇavanta's return to traditional saffron robes after seventeen years demonstrates monastic entryism, enabling continued social influence and institutional access without abandoning reformist teachings. Venerable Ñāṇindālaṅkāra's clandestine dissemination of prohibited Buddhist texts illustrates how established monastic structures can facilitate underground religious preservation. Vicittasārābhivaṃsa's transition from monastic scholarship to lay religious leadership demonstrates the continuing role of scriptural authority in defending reformist doctrines. Meanwhile, Venerable Dhammaviharini Jana's pursuit of bhikkhunī ordination highlights the intersection of religious suppression and patriarchal institutional restrictions. Collectively, these experiences demonstrate that religious resistance operates through accommodation, concealment, and institutional subversion. The findings further suggest that digital platforms have become important channels for sustaining reformist Buddhist teachings and connecting religious discourse with anti-coup resistance in post-2021 Myanmar. Nevertheless, political instability and security concerns limited primary data collection to one asynchronous interview, supplemented by public media recordings and digital archives. Future research should comparatively examine similar resistance strategies among suppressed Theravāda movements in Southeast Asia and investigate the long-term role of digital platforms in preserving marginalized Buddhist traditions.

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