

## Flight to Nirvana

*(From An Ordinary Human Existence to the Nirvana Path)*

Apart from losing weight, Dr. Ba Maw had not lost his posture. His life was extended because of the exceptionally good nursing care of his daughters and relatives. One daughter was a doctor so she could take special care of her father. Dr. Ba Maw at 85 not only had the same age as former Chinese leader Mao Yse Tung, but also suffered from the same disease as the latter. It was Parkinson's disease or numbness of the flesh. Mao Tse Tung was a heavy man and Dr. Ba Maw was a lean man and that was why Dr. had more pain threshold and could live longer. When we heard that Dr. had fallen into coma, we thought he would expire within a short time but he lived 50 more days or so. The tender nursing care of his daughters was astonishingly efficient. They truly accomplished the duties of offspring.

Before his demise, Dr. had written 'Breakthrough in Burma' in English and the book was published in Europe. After writing a sequel chapter to that book, he called me and asked me to submit it to the *Sarpay Beikman*. Since the Burmese could not carry out the publication of a script in English, he was requesting the *Sarpay Beikman* to assist him with it. As was the usual procedure, I sent it to department-in-charge U Htin Gyi. That was three or four years ago.

His book was a rarity. Even he himself had only one copy. I asked him to let me read it as a special privilege and promised to return him the book in a week. But I forgot to return it. Hence, Dr. called me on the phone and lashed out a tirade of angry words including 'I will chew you to bits. I will kill you!' His son-in-law barrister U Ye Htoon who was near him at the time was scared of his wrath. I on the other side of the telephone line was having a good laugh. I said 'Oh...Uncle, You should check your anger' and that fanned his fury even more. When I met Ko Ye Htoon later, I explained to him 'Did you really think he meant it? Uncle was bored so he was just putting on airs and scolding me. It is savoury to batter close friends. Moreover, the Adipadi no longer has as many followers as before so he is bent on bullying close friends like us'.

In the British era, the first Premier was Dr. Ba Maw. Although his *Dama* Party had only 16 members, it outdid the 40-member strong *Ngar-Pwint-Saing*

Party and established the *Nyuntpaung* government. That Nyuntpaung government was felled by the Thakins and U Saw.

When members of U Saw's nationalist party later beat the Thakins with bamboo staffs, the Thakins had to unite with Dr. Ba Maw again. Hence, throughout the Japanese era, Dr. was the influential one. He had authority over Burma for a period of ten years from 1936 to 1946.

Dr. Ba Maw's political tactics can be likened to the *Sandagutta* strategy. Instead of fighting the strengthened central fortress, the environs are unknowingly brought down. I once witnessed his method. When the scholars were leaving for London, Premier Dr. Ba Maw appeared suddenly without prior notice at the Pansodan jetty. The British-trained gate-keeper, who did not realize he was the Premier, refused to open the gate. Dr. continued wearing a smile. I waited to see what he would do. He pretended not to know the gate-keeper had barred him and he conversed with some friends near the entrance. Afterwards, there were more people wanting to enter the gate and the door-keeper could no longer ask questions so Dr. smilingly mixed himself in a group and got onto the steamer. He could have used his authority but he didn't. Without harming anyone's dignity, he practised the gentle method to get his way.

During the British era, Thakin Ko Daw Hmaing had censured Dr. Ba Maw and composed these words : 'Cannot think of entrusting the golden throne.... to a water-sprinkled Anglican'.

In actuality, Dr. Ba Maw was not a water-sprinkled Anglican. His father U Kyay was a Mon gentleman. After the first Anglo-Burmese war, Rakhine and Tenasserim fell into British hands and catholic schools began to develop in Moulmein. U Kyay attended such a school and learned English and French. He later became the tutor of princes in Mandalay Naypyitaw. When King Mindon sent emissaries abroad, U Kyay had to act as interpreter. He married Daw Thein Tin, the daughter of the Ma-u-bin prison warden and had two sons: Maung Ba Han and Maung Ba Maw. The prison warden Mr. Theodore was a person of mixed parentage. But his daughters followed their mother's faith and were Buddhists. They were the famous beauties of Ma-u-bin at the time. The mother Daw Thein Tin had eighty percent Burmese blood in her veins so you can work out how much Burmese blood is in the veins of children begotten by U Kyay.

After King Thibaw was captured by the British, U Kyay became a revolutionary and Daw Thein Tin was left helpless with two young sons. Hence they were both entrusted into the care of St. Paul's orphanage. Maung Ba Han converted to Christianity but Maung Ba Maw did not abandon his hereditary Buddhist religion.

While he was in coma, his children recited Buddhist dhamma verses in the living room. In healthier days, he had the habit of enthusiastically listening to tape cassettes of Shwe Mann Tin Maung's *Buddhawin Zat*, Kyar-Ni-Kan Head Monk's sermons and dhamma lecturer U Hla Thein's lectures.

The independence in the Japanese era splendidly welcomed by Dr. Ba Maw, Ba Gyi Hmaing, and the Burmese public, turned out to be sham but it had its good points. Just like the words uttered by a Burmese damsel to a British lover who had forsaken her: 'Love, tell me in words so I can believe you. Tell me you love me', the Burmese were expecting encouraging words from the British. They did not want in actuality to join hands with Japanese fascists. But just as the word 'love' was difficult to define at the time, 'independence' was also difficult to define and during the entire war period, the British evaded the issue and just promulgated a worthless white-paper treatise.

At such uncertain times, the Japanese, whether they meant it or not declared Independence boldly and it was effective in many ways. It was a fruitful morale booster. Doubtless the river of history was flowing towards independence. This natural flow had been barred by the colonialists but now the barricade had been uprooted by Japanese bombs thus instilling the spirit of nationalism in the Burmese. '*Free ! Free ! Our land is now free !*' What kind of colonialists could stop the onrushing flow and send it back to its past?

At the time, I was at a western country with other scholars. Burma was trying to unite with the Allies. But the day the Japanese declared Burma's independence, I, together with other Burmese on foreign soil, were jubilant and we celebrated the occasion. Our spirits were lifted.

Dr. Ba Maw expired on the 13<sup>th</sup> Nayon waxing day in B.E. 1339 (1977), and on the 4<sup>th</sup> Nayon waning day, the one-week-after-demise hsoon offering was

made at his house on University Avenue. Guests were treated to coconut noodles, vermicelli, kyauk-kyaw, sa-nwin-makin and coffee. I noticed that the food at his house was always palatable and the way the guests were treated was exceptionally civilized. Once when I had the fortune to eat at his house in Kandawgyi, I happened to remark 'It would be nice if you could set up a Burmese restaurant'. Dr. did not seem to like the remark. It was as if he thought 'Why do you dare suggest such a common vocation to an Adipadi like me?'

I didn't see it like that. The Burmese kings of the Tagaung era, Bagan era, Innwa era down to the kings of *sakya saki-win* race, ruled Burma for many years but had never established a Burmese restaurant of international standard. That is a shame. The void can be filled properly only by Dr.'s way of entertaining guests, Aunty's kitchen instructions and the family's neat and trim preparations.

Even when he wore a simple pinni jacket and a silk pasoe, Dr. Ba Maw's dress style could be likened to the splendour of a peacock, elegant and extraordinary. His table was laden in the traditional Burmese way and called forth the respect and appetite of guests.

The Burmese take their rice and curry mixed together. When they say King Nara Thiha Pati in his time had 300 curry dishes daily, it must have been like today's monastic meals where all the curries fed to monastery schoolboys are mixed together for consumption. It must have been difficult for the King to taste all the curries. In Europe, bread or sometimes rice is the mainstay and dishes are laid one after the other. High-standard Chinese meals are also served like that. In Dr.'s residence, the European system is practised but the dishes laid are all pure Burmese. The lacquerware bowls for hand-wash and the upcountry napkins are also Burmese products looking so neat and elegant.

Whether making acquaintances or doing trade, treating to a meal is an effective way. In the world, Chinese restaurants and Indian restaurants have reached a stage where they are internationally accepted. For the Burmese, let alone open Burmese restaurants abroad, they don't even have international standard Burmese restaurants in the country. The Philippines, Thailand and Indo-China are one-step ahead of Burma. In my opinion, Tinsa Maw and the remaining family members who have had the chance of experiencing Dr.'s and

Aunty's delicacies and trimmings should seriously consider this restaurant project.

On the day of alms-food-offering seven days after Dr.'s demise, dignitaries from the political field such as U Ba Swe, U Kyaw Nyein, U Thein Pe Myint, U Khin Mg Lay, U Nyo Tun, U Pe Khin, Thakin Chit Mg (Myan-aung), U Kyaw Min and U Kyaw Myint all came to the house. I was at the same table with U Ba Swe and we chit-chatted about the departed one.

Once when retired Colonel Khin Nyo wrote of his experiences in Oway magazine, he had accused that the earmarked day for resistance against the Japanese had to be postponed due to the indiscretion of Dr. Ba Maw. I later published Dr. Ba Maw's refutation together with the accusation. Dr. refuted in anger and in a nutshell, it was as follows : 'If I had laid bare everything I knew, you all would have been dismembered!' As proof, he showed the personal letter written to him by Bogyoke Aung San before the latter went underground. He also explained how, when the Burmese leaders fled to Mudon, the AFPFL leaders followed him in unison up to the end of the war.

Concerning this, U Ba Swe supported Dr. Ba Maw's refutation. As far as he knew, the resistance day was postponed because the Japanese found out about the movements of Burmese soldiers in Pegu. In fact, U Ba Swe himself was saved by Dr. Ba Maw under various pretences from capture by the Japanese. According to U Khant (Pantanaw), Stanley Cho, son of Education Chief U Cho dropped into Burma by parachute as an allied soldier and just before the Japanese killed him off, he was saved by Dr. Ba Maw.

In his letter to U Kyaw Nyein, Dr. Ba Maw explained 'When Thakin Than Tun was under suspicion by the Japanese, I transferred him to Toungoo as you know. I also warned Thakin Soe many times that he was in a precarious position. If I had protected even the Communists like that, how could I possibly have jeopardized the Burmese Tatmadaw?'

How the Adipadi endeavoured his best for the welfare of his countrymen were private affairs and he never bragged about them or exploited them. Depending on that, U Ba Swe judged 'Dr. Ba Maw was a politician of dignity

and character. He was a gentleman and he had discipline. He can be likened to a fair and honest boxer who does not hit below the belt to win the match’.

The surprising thing about his demise was, he had written the classified advertisement in English himself. First his name, then the date of birth and the year of death, then ‘One who soars from *small ti-heik* to *big ti-heik*’. That was all he had written. He had referred to the Roman sage Plotinus. (*The flight of the Alone to the Alone – Plotinus*). Small ti-heik means an ordinary human existence and big ti-heik means the path to Nirvana. Dr. meant he was soaring from an ordinary human existence to the Nirvana path.

In Burmese history, before the sage U Paw Oo of Amarapura era died, he had asked to stretch his hand outwards from the head of his dead body with palms open. He wanted to make people realize that a man brought nothing at birth and took away nothing at death either. Similarly, in this age of satellites, Dr., in ascending to the heavens like a rocket, meant to say he had discarded all earthly impurities of attachment before his flight to Nirvana.

Nyo Mya  
(*Sar Mawgun, July 1985*)