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# Burmese Nissaya Literature: A Mainstream Monastic Education Learning Method and its Salient Features

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## Abstract

In some of the earliest Buddhist literature found in Myanmar, a type of translation in which each Pali word is followed by its relevant annotative interpretation, known as *nissaya*, can be found. Previous studies (Tin Lwin 1961; Pruitt 1992; McDaniel 2008; Clark 2015) only examined what a *nissaya* is and to what literary genre *nissaya* literature belongs. In this paper, I will explore the various ways in which Burmese *nissaya* literature evolved into a mainstream monastic learning method, its role in the monastic education in Burma in particular, and further investigate whether the *nissayas* can be applied more generally and what the relationship is between *nissaya* and official Burmese Tipitaka translation. Lastly, this study argues that the Burmese *nissaya* literature can be compared to be on par with the encyclopaedic compilation on a specific subject.

## Keywords

*nissaya* literature – translation – monastic learning method – encyclopaedia – Burma history

## 1 Introduction

Since the introduction of Theravada Buddhism to Pagan in the late 12th CE by Arahana Thera, a native of Thaton, Burmese Buddhism began to grow in

tandem with the flourishing Buddhist civilization. Before long the monarch and the people embraced the new faith, Pali and Abhidhamma, and learning was soon at the forefront of the populace's interests in this period (Bode 2014, 12–14). There was a wide range of grammatical treatises written by scholar monks. The best known among them was *Saddanīti*, authored by Aggavaṃsa in 1154 CE, a landmark of its kind that points to the level of Pali language and grammar skills at the time (Ruiz-Falqués 2017, 2 27). The popularity of Pali and Abhidhamma learning also extended beyond the monastic community as can be seen, for example, in a Pali language conversation between a young monk from Ava and a young mother from Pagan (Siri Sobhana 1974, 103–5).

Subsequently, Burmese literature, particularly those poetic genres such as *mo gun*: – a significant record, *pjou* – poems of epic proportion, *ei: gjin*: classical poems addressed to a royal child extolling the glory of ancestors, and *dwei:gjou*: a kind of Myanmar poem consisting of two stanzas, flourished in the late 13th century CE of Pagan and 15th CE of Ava. The motifs of early Burmese poetry were most commonly religion, royalty, nature and love (Hla Pe 1985, 4–6). Dhammasami (2018, 18, 159) asserts that Mahā Raṭṭhasāra (14681–529) and his contemporary Mahā Silavaṃsa (1453–1518) were well-known for their masterpieces of Pyo poetry in the royal court of Ava. Along with this poetic literature, it is believed that a kind of Pali-Burmese translation work developed in this medieval period, which came to be known as *nissaya*, a literary genre of commentary on Pali texts. Such a literary genre, consisting of a word-to-word translation, was already popular in Sri Lanka and found among Pyu and Mon literature. Archaeological excavation in Myanmar found that the Sanskrit-Pyu *nissaya* at Srikṣetra in the 7th CE, and Kyansittha's inscriptions at Pagan in 12th CE were the earliest forms of *nissaya*. The *nissaya* in its modern form presents different ways of interpreting and understanding Pali texts. In the traditional Burmese monastic learning method, the *nissaya* plays an important role on account of the different levels of meaning that it can extract from a text. McDaniel (2008, 131–136) calls this method of learning “lifting words” in similar monastic learning institutions in northern Thailand and Laos.

In traditional Buddhist learning, Pannabhoga (2020, 18) states that although *nissaya* is regarded as a sort of translation work, it would be difficult to categorize it as mere translation in the modern academic sense of the term because *nissaya* may offer more meanings in the monastic education system. On the other hand, standard Burmese translations of Buddhist texts have been unpopular as the language appears unnatural and not refined enough for general readers or academics. The reason is that current Tipitaka Burmese translations were obviously adopted from old *nissayas*. Similarly, Clark also (2015, 114) note that the Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyanā official annotated translation of Pali texts is nearly identical to that of *nissaya* wording; the translations are

merely reproductions or adoptions from a certain *nissaya* by simply removing the Pali words. Until today, traditional Burmese scholars who provide monastic education in institutions throughout the country consider the textbooks of *nissaya* as either guidebooks, manuals or handbooks for students and teachers alike. Modern Buddhist scholars: Okell (1965), Pruitt (1992), McDaniel (2008), Lammerts (2010), Blackburn (2010), Walker (2020) and others have noted that *nissaya* literature has been important in monastic education since at least the 15th century if not long before and continues to be so today.

The aims of this paper are to examine how the *nissaya* plays an important role in the pedagogy of monastic education as a living tradition to-date and whether the *nissaya* method can be applied to general Buddhist texts and scholarly works. To achieve the above aims, this study provides the historical background to *nissaya* with its development and training in the classrooms of monastic educational institutions based on my observations. Additionally, the study also investigates the relationship between *nissaya* and the official Burmese Tipiṭaka translation with the adaptation to old *nissayas* and compares and contrasts samples of both older and modern *nissayas* in verse as well as prose including the interpretive *nissaya* method.

## 2 Research Methodology, Scope and Frameworks

This study discusses a certain method of translation used to interpret the Buddha's teachings in Burmese Buddhist literature and an attempt is made to answer why it is so important to the development of Burmese literature in general and Buddhism in particular. As mentioned, *nissaya* literature is one of the most ancient ways of interpreting Buddhist texts found in Burma since the arrival of Buddhism in 12th CE and its continued relevance is a primary focus of this study. To meet this end, this research employs various qualitative techniques, such as interviews with experts and students, targeting specific groups of study, sorting primary literature and secondly data and my personal observations in monastic classrooms. My own observation as an individual is unique and significant as I have been a student of monastic education and received training for almost two decades.

During my youth as a novice monk, along with fellow monastic brothers, I received training in a local monastery. We were instructed to memorize a certain Pali passage and then the trainer would produce the interpretation of that passage in *nissaya* format. By this means, we fostered our monastic education through the curriculum as a foundation for knowledge. Though, I did not know if this interpretive technique would carry on after completion of higher monastic training or formal education. The *nissaya* training trend, I

now realize, would carry on for the whole of my life as a monastic education provider to new generations to come.

Pali literature is originally written in Pali with varied scripts in different languages. Pali literature is categorized into several types of writing, in accordance with its chronological development. In this research context, it includes canonical Pali texts, *Aṭṭhakathā* (commentaries), *ṭīkā* (sub-commentaries) and *Anuṭīkā* (sub-sub-commentaries), all of which are translated or interpreted using *nissaya* methods. Due to the language barrier, the texts written in Pali are inaccessible to general readers and even learners who have not yet mastered the Pali language. For this very reason *nissaya* literature exists to support one in understanding the texts. Yet, *nissaya* literature, developed in Burma, not only makes Pali texts accessible but also brings Buddhism to the masses.

This paper aims to stress the importance of *nissaya's* interpretation to Burmese Buddhism and the development of Myanmar culture. For example, in traditional Buddhist learning, although *nissaya* is regarded as a method of translation, it is not categorized as “translation” as generally understood because *nissaya* offers not only a definition but usually more than one meaning and caters to varied opinions within. Very often the *nissaya* authors consult various relevant texts of *Aṭṭhakathā*, *ṭīkā*, and *anuṭīkā* mentioned above to interpret the Buddha's words. In much of the curriculum of the monastic education system in Burma, *nissaya* methods can be found. We not only learn through this method but re-contribute and re-transmit our knowledge through this means. In this context, I argue that *nissaya* literature is something more than translation and no less than an encyclopaedic source of knowledge available today.

### 3 Burmese Nissaya Literature: Background

#### 3.1 *Nissaya Origin*

Theravada Buddhist literature has developed throughout history from as early as the 3rd century BCE in India and subsequently translated into Sinhalese known as *Sinhalatṭhakathā* in the 1st CE. According to Malasekera (2014, 11, 38), the Pali literature of Ceylon reveals that the extended Pali commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*) today were re-translated from Sinhalese commentaries by Buddhaghosa under the supervision of the Mahāvihāra monastery, the base and birthplace of Theravada literature and civilization. The works of anthology on Pali literature were largely attributed to him and later to Elder Dhammapāla and Buddhaddatta.



The Pali term *nissaya* denotes a concept found in the Mahāvagga Pāḷi of the Vinaya-piṭaka texts as a requisite rule for the newly ordained novice and nun (Oldenberg 1879, 58). In this sense, *nissaya* is a “guidance”. A newly ordained monk or nun is required to live under the “guidance” of his or her preceptor (*upajjhāya*) for a minimum of five years. During this period, the preceptor is to instruct the new monk in the teachings (*dhamma*) and train him in the monastic regulations (*vinaya*). If the new monk loses his preceptor, he must seek *nissaya* from a teacher. Until one is mature enough to live independently, one must seek two mentors, and one who will act as a preceptor (*upajjhāya*) and as a teacher (*ācāriya*), and live under their guidance and advice.

According to the Pali-English Dictionary of The Pali Text Society (David, 2004) and A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms: with Sanskrit and English Equivalents and a Sanskrit-Pali Index Society (Soothill and Hodous 1996), the Pali term *nissaya* is equivalent to the Sanskrit, *nīśraya*, but corresponds in meaning to *āśraya*, “to sit on, or that on which anything depends.” The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism (E. Robert et al., 2014) defines the Sanskrit term *nīśraya* as “requisite,” “reliance,” or “support,” in the sense of a basic possession required by any monk or nun. In the Mahāvagga Pāḷi of Vinaya-piṭaka, the disciplinary monastic rules describe four basic requisites which are allowed for use by all monks and nuns: (1) food acquired through alms gathering (*piṇḍiālopabhojana*); (2) a robe (*cīvara*) made from collected rags (*paṃsukūlacīvara*); (3) dwelling at the foot of a tree (*rukhamūlasenāsana*); and (4) using fermented urine as medicine (*pūtimuttābhesajja*). During the ordination procedure, when new ordinands “go forth” (*pabbajita*) as novice monks (*sāmaṇera*) or nuns (*sāmaṇerī*), they will be apprised of these four requisites and encouraged to be content with them for the rest of their lives (Oldenberg 1879, 58).

As explained above, the concept of *nissaya* as a “guidance,” a “reliance,” a “support” or a “mentor” is likely to have come from the uses of the Mahāvagga Pāḷi of Vinaya-piṭaka and found its way into the Pali literature in general. It has been noted by previous studies (Tin Lwin 1961; Pruitt 1992; McDaniel 2008; Clark 2015) that *nissaya* refers to the literary genre of word-to-word translation of either canonical Pali or Aṭṭhakathā texts, which is a popular form of Buddhist monastic interpretation. However, they are not simply renderings of the Pali, rather they are meant to provide various interpretive resources in a compact encyclopaedic style. For instance, modern *nissayas* such as Bhāsāṭikā-s titles are some of good examples by the late Ashin Janakābhivamsa (1900–1977)<sup>1</sup> who is popularly known as monastic education reformer of the 20th century. This is perhaps due to the orientation of monastic learning and focus on

examinations, whereby Janakābhivamsa carefully crafted his *nissayas* to meet the students' needs.

Burmese *nissaya* literature was and still is the mainstream of the monastic education learning method, the method that developed within the Burmese tradition and serves as a pivotal guide for Tipiṭaka studies. Yet, relying on *nissaya* alone, as well-known scholar and learned monk, Ashin Janakābhivamsa (2000b, 594) has pointed out, is not enough; it is necessary to go beyond *nissaya* for further studies, especially the Sutta studies. His recommendation for how *nissaya* should be used and studied is by following these eight steps:

1. First, a word-to-word translation such as *nissaya* interpretation should be produced for the beginner.
2. When students can produce good *nissaya* fluently, they should translate every word from Pali into Burmese as prose.
3. Those with adequate translation skills can translate the prose of the texts without using all Pali words.
4. Students should only focus on specific meanings of the Pali word, then try to summarize and expand the context.
5. Then, those who can handle the text up to this level should focus on specific words and read the Pali slowly and carefully (without *nissaya*).
6. Those who can read up to this level will be able to compose Pali sentences, mastering verse and even well-spoken Pali.
7. When students reach this level, they are not only able to compose Pali but devote their faith, wisdom and energy to the Buddha's virtues, and qualities.
8. As mentioned in the level 3, when the Sutta Pitaka has been translated, it will be of great benefit to Burma and the whole country. Both monastic and lay lives will attain a higher level for the promulgation of the Buddha *Sāsanā* (Janakābhivamsa 2000b, 594).

The emergence of *nissayas* in Burma was prior to the modern phenomenon of proper Burmese translations and it is to a certain extent true that the existence of *nissayas* precluded the development of standard translations (Clark, 2015, 114). According to McDaniel (2008, 119), a similar genre of Pali literature also developed within Theravada Buddhist countries, i.e., in Sri Lanka, as *sannaya*, and in Thailand and Laos as *nissaya*, *namasadda*, and *vohāra* in contemporary periods. The Sutrānipāṭa-sannaya, a Pali-Sinhala word-to-word translation written in the 12th CE, is the earliest example of a *nissaya*, or *sannaya* literary

1 See Janakābhivamsa's self-authored two autobiographies: *Tabhava Thāthanā* ("One Life in *Sāsanā*") (2003); and *Tabhava Thanthayā* ("One Life in *Samsāra*") (2000c).

genre found in Sri Lanka. Along with *sutra-sannaya*, several *sutras* translation into *sannayas* followed (Pruitt 1992, 278).

According to John Okell (1965, 186–227) *nissaya* is a linguistic analysis with special emphasis on Pali grammar features in the Burmese language. Since its early development in the late Pagan period, Burmese has been heavily influenced by Pali grammatical syntax. Although the two languages are primarily distinct in language patterns, much of Pali's morphology and syntax have been adapted to Burmese. Burmese was greatly influenced by *nissaya* literature on the one hand and that of Pali grammar on the other.

It is, however, almost impossible to state with certainty when the first Pali-Burmese *nissaya* was written. Tin Lwin (1961, 5–11) claims that the oldest extant *nissaya* in Burma is the *Khuddakasikkhā Nikāya nissaya*, written by Mahākassapa during the reign of Narapatisithu (1174–1211). In his unpublished master's thesis, Tin Lwin also classifies *nissaya* as: canonical works, non-canonical works, secular *nissaya* works, other types of written *nissaya*, and the place of *nissaya* in Buddhist Education in Burma. According to Lwin, the development of *nissaya* can be dated back to before and after 1448 and he considers that they originate as Pyu *nissaya* (Srikṣetra), Mon *nissaya* (Pagan), Sinhalese *nissaya* (*sannaya*) and then Burmese *nissaya*. Pyu King Vikrama founded the Pyu kingdom at Srikṣetra in 637 CE. A prehistoric excavation (7th CE) by the Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Culture, found a Pyu *nissaya*, consisting of an interpretation of a Sanskrit passage at Srikṣetra, near modern Pyay, 260km north-west of Yangon (Tin Lwin 2014, 14–15; 43–49). According to the archaeological excavation, the Pyu kingdom has been identified as Mawza, 8km, southeast of modern Pyay. If this finding is to be accepted, the claim that “the *nissayas* have been known to Burmese scholars at least for the last five centuries” (Tin Lwin 1961, i) is certainly not overstated. Ruiz-Falqués (2015, 10) states that when it comes to grammatical literature in Burma, “*nissayas* are later than the Pali grammatical texts. We actually have no record of grammatical *nissayas* from the Pagan period (Ruiz-Falqués 2015, 10).” We can only assume that *nissaya* became popular from the 15th century, as Tin Lwin suggests, although we need further study.

Walker (2020, 678) supports the view that Pali-Burmese examples of *nissayas* are extant from the late thirteenth century and several Sanskrit-Burmese bitexts are listed in an inscription from 1442. The date of the Thaungdwing governor's inscription contains a very interesting and lengthy list of Pali and Sanskrit works together with their *nissayas* which the pious governor and his wife offered to the monastery that they built and dedicated that year. The list enables us to fix the dates of Pali and *nissaya* works and to clarify some points such as authorship and their popularity.

### 3.2 *Nissaya and Pali Literature Development*

Whatever the date of *nissaya* or *sannaya* may be, there is no doubt that the word-to-word translation literary genre is extremely important for Pali literature development in both: Sri Lanka and Burma. Pruitt (1992, 278) states “Sinhalese *Sanne* and Burmese *Nissayas* have been important in Pali studies in the West.” Two well-known scholars from Burma, namely Shwe Zan Aung (1871–1932) and Pe Maung Tin (1888–1973), also used the *nissaya* method to translate *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* (1910) and *Aṭṭhasālini* (1920) from Pali into English for the Pali Text Society (Pruitt 1992, 294ff). Pruitt states, “[the] texts are given word-by-word translation into Burmese, a Tibeto-Burman language, in the texts called *nissayas*”. According to Erik Braun, *nissaya* is a Burmese text that translates and explains Pali works, often on a systematic word-by-word basis. He also points out that most translations of Pali to Burmese took place particularly through word-by-word translations called *nissayas* (Braun 2013, 67–174). Along with many literary genres, such as Pali grammar, poetry, Abhidhamma and several other *aṭṭhakathā* and *ṭīkā* compilations developed in the medieval period during the Ava kingdom which is when Burmese culture and literature reached their peaks.

King Thalun (1629–1648) was the first to introduce a curricular system of monastic education and formal examination (Dhammasami 2004, 11). This was the time when Burmese *nissaya* and literature developed more widely, as they became more necessary for educational purposes. Nevertheless, *nissaya* literature produced during this reign rely more on Vinaya texts than sutta or Abhidhamma. Dhammasami (2004, 21, 43–77), who studied monastic education from the 17th century to the present, explains that “the works on the *nissaya* literature were produced in almost all the reigns from the time of Thalun which indicates that there were students learning religious texts, because a *nissaya* was mainly, and still is, for students rather than scholars”. In this period, the *nissaya* works on Vinaya, the disciplinary rules of monastic order are more prominent. For example: the *nissaya* on *Shin-kyint-wut*, the disciplinary rules for *sāmaṇera* (novice monks), were compiled more than 30 times (Dhammasami 2018, 21).

### 3.3 *Nissaya Interpretation Versus Standard Translation*

Clark (2015, viii) observes that a word-for-word Burmese language *nissaya* translation bears similarities to the text of an annotated English translation with critical reference to the text’s primary commentary in Pali. He also gives examples of how Burmese translation is related to *nissaya*:

The official Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti Piṭaka Burmese translation of the *Apadāna* so frequently reproduces the interpretation of this *nissaya* with identical, or near identical, wording that it might be supposed that its translators partially based their publication upon it. From time to time, I also made use of this translation. My translation is annotated throughout with footnotes which discuss semantic content and aspects of the translation.

CLARK 2015, 114.

Pruitt (1992, 278) also points out that from the available Pali-Burmese *nissaya*, only a slight adjustment is needed to bring it up the level of translation as seen in the Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti Piṭaka Burmese Translation. The current standard translation of the Tipiṭaka in Burmese language clearly derives from the original *nissaya* with a minimum of adjustment (see figure 3 & 4 with English translation). For instance, as we can see in the Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti Piṭaka Burmese translation, if the *nissaya* has added words, called *pāṭhasesa* (“extra text”), the translation has included the additional words in parentheses.

**Translation:** At one time the enlightened one, the lord, was staying at Verañjā near Naḷeru’s Nimba tree (which is occupied by a Demon) with a great company of five hundred monks. (By that time), a brahmin of Verañjā heard (as will be saying): Verily, good sir, the recluse Gotama, son of the Sakyans, having gone forth from the Sakyan clan, is staying at Verañjā near Naḷeru’s Nimba tree (which is occupied by a Demon) with a great company of five hundred monks. The highest praise has gone for concerning the lord Gotama: he is indeed lord, perfected one, fully enlightened, endowed with knowledge and conduct, well-farer, knower of the worlds, unrivalled trainer of men to be tamed, teacher of devas and mankind, the enlightened... (Horner 1938, 1–2).

#### 4 Nissaya literature in Southeast Asia: Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos

As noted previously, a genre of Buddhist literature called *nissaya* texts are found not only in Burma, but also in its neighbouring Theravada countries, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Sri Lanka. Three variations of literary genres: *nissaya* (“support”), *nāmasadda* (“glossary”), and *vohāra* (“lifting words”) are popularly used in Northern Thailand and Laos as pedagogical texts while students and teachers conduct “languaging”. This is why *nissaya* can often be considered as pedagogical texts, particularly *nissaya* manuscripts, *vohāra* manuscripts and *nāmasadda* manuscripts. According to McDaniel (2008, 6),

ယေနံ သမယေန အာယသ္မတော သာရိပုတ္တဿ ဝိနယ  
ပညတ္တိ ယာစန ဟေတုဘူတော ပရိဝိတက္ကော ဥဒပါဒိ။

မှာထားချက်။ ဤပါဠိကား။ တေန သမယေန ဟေတု-ဟု  
သော နိယမနိဗ္ဗေသပါဠိကို ညွှန်ပြသည်ဟု အဋ္ဌကထာမိန့်  
သည့်အတိုင်း အနိယမ နိဗ္ဗေသအလိုငှာ အဋ္ဌကထာကိုမှီ၍  
အတ္ထုပ္ပတ္တိအားလျော်စွာ ထည့်သော ပါဠိတည်း။ ပါဠိတော်  
ရင်းမဟုတ်။ ပါဠိတော် ပါဠိရင်းကား တေန သမယေန  
ဗုဒ္ဓေါ ဘဝဝါ-အစရှိသည်တည်း။ ဤနည်းအတူ သိက္ခာ  
ပုဒ်ဟူသမျှ အတ္ထုပ္ပတ္တိအားလျော်စွာ အနိယမနိဗ္ဗေသ  
ပါဠိကို ပြုရလိမ့်မည်။

အနက်ကား-ယေနသမယေန၊အကြင်အခါ၌။အာယသ္မတော၊  
ရှည်သော သက်တော်ရှိသော။ သာရိပုတ္တဿ၊ အရှင်သာရိပု-  
တြာ၏။ဝိနယပညတ္တိ ယာစန ဟေတုဘူတော၊ ဝိနည်းပညတ်  
ကို အရင်းဘုရားအား လျောက်ထားတောင်းပန်ခြင်း၏ အ  
ကြောင်းဖြစ်၍ ဖြစ်သော။ ဝါ၊ ဝိနည်းကို ပညတ်စိမ့်သောငှာ  
ဘုရားရှင်အား လျောက်ထားတောင်းပန်ခြင်း၏ အကြောင်း  
ဖြစ်၍ ဖြစ်သော။ ပရိဝိတက္ကော၊ အကြံသည်။ ဥဒပါဒိ၊ထင်ရှား  
ဖြစ်ပြီ။

၁။ တေနသမယေန၊ထိုအခါ၌။ ဘဝဝါ၊ ဘုန်းတော်ကြီးသော  
ဗုဒ္ဓေါ၊ မြတ်စွာဘုရားသည်။ ဝေရဉ္ဇာယံ၊ ဝေရဉ္ဇအမည်ရှိသော  
ပြည်၌။ နဋေရုပုစိမန္တမူလေ၊ နဋေရုအမည်ရှိသော ဘီလူးဘုမ္မ  
ရိုးသည် လွှမ်းမိုးသိမ်းဆည်းအပ်သော တမာပင်၏အနီး၌။မဟ  
တာ၊ဂုဏ်အားဖြင့်မြတ်သော။ ဝါ၊အရေအတွက်အားဖြင့်များ  
စွာသော။ဘိက္ခုသံဃေန၊ရဟန်းတို့၏အပေါင်းနှင့်။ပဉ္စမတ္ထေဟီ  
ဘိက္ခုသတေဟိ၊ ငါးရာအတိုင်း အရှည်ရှိသော ရဟန်းတို့နှင့်။  
သဒ္ဓိ၊ တကွ။ ဝိဟရတိ၊ လျောင်း၊ ထိုင်၊ ရပ်၊ သွား လေးပါး  
ဆုရိယာသာယာ၍ပျော် နေတော်မူ၏။

ဝေရဉ္ဇာဒိ။ ။ဤတွင် ဝေရဉ္ဇာယံပုဒ် နဋေရုပုစိမန္တမူလေပုဒ်တို့၌  
အဋ္ဌကထာ ဆိုတိုင်းသာ အနက်သမ္ပန်သည်။

FIGURE 1 Sample of *nissaya* with *pāthasesa* (inserted terms), *Pārājikān Nissaya* text, Chatthasāṅgīti Edition. [Image: Author.]

the *nissayas*, (supports), were used by monastic teachers in the pre-modern period from the 16th to 19th centuries in Thailand and Laos.

Unlike in Burma, McDaniel explains (2008, 131), in Thailand and Laos *nissaya*, *nāmasadda* and *vohāra* genres overlap in style, pedagogical methods and social use. He describes how the *nissaya* and *nāmasadda* manuscripts are characterized by close, word-for-word glosses, whereas the *vohāra* cite longer



၁။ အခါတစ်ပါး၌ ဘုန်းတော်ကြီးသော မြတ်စွာဘုရားသည် ဝေရုဇ္ဈာမြို့ နဋ္ဌေရုမည်သော (ဘီလူးသည်သိမ်းဆည်းအပ်သော) တမာပင်အနီး၌ များမြတ်သော ရဟန်းသံဃာ ငါးရာနှင့် အတူ သီတင်းသုံး နေတော်မူ၏။ (ထိုသို့ နေတော်မူသောအခါ) ဝေရုဇ္ဈပုဏ္ဏားသည် (ဤဆိုလတ္တံ့သော အတိုင်း) ကြားသိရလေပြီ။ “အချင်းတို့ သာကီဝင်မင်းမျိုးမှ ရဟန်းပြုသည့် သာကီဝင်မင်းသား ရဟန်းဂေါတမသည် ဝေရုဇ္ဈာမြို့ နဋ္ဌေရုမည်သော (ဘီလူးသည် သိမ်းဆည်း အပ်သော) တမာပင်အနီး၌ များမြတ်သော ရဟန်းသံဃာ ငါးရာနှင့်အတူ သီတင်းသုံး နေတော်မူ၏။ ထို အသျှင် ဂေါတမ၏ ကောင်းသော ကျော်စော သတင်းသည် ဤသို့ ပျံ့နှံ့၍ ထွက်၏။

FIGURE 2 Sample of Burmese translation by Chatṭhasaṅgīti Pitaka Burmese Translation. *Pāthasesa* or inserted terms which are not in the original Pali texts shown within parentheses. [Image: Author.]



FIGURE 3 A session of *nissaya* class with instructor and a repeater (*zāso*), second from left, followed by student-monks interlineating *nissaya*'s interpretation in their printed textbook. Veluvan Monastery, Taunggyi, Shan State. [Photo: Author.]

passages of twelve to twenty-five words from Pali source texts and offer extensive and creative vernacular translations and commentaries. Generally, *nissaya* fall between the two genres and often cite four to ten words before offering glosses and creative asides.

According to Gandhasārābhivamsa, (Personal Interview, 6 February 2020) a Thai Pali scholar monk who studied in Burma for over ten years and received a higher degree, the Dhammācariya, *nissayas* in Thailand are not as influential in the learning tradition as they are in Burma. While Burmese *nissaya* include canonical texts, commentaries, sub-commentaries, and so on, Thai *nissaya* are limited to canonical texts and other commentaries. *Nissaya* texts are called





passages regarding the Triple-Gems (the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha), “*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*”. *Buddhaṃ* – the Buddha [OBJ], *saraṇaṃ* – as the refuge; *gacchāmi* – I go with, (I go with the Buddha as my refuge), is known to all Burmese Buddhists young and old. Moreover, even secular performances such as plays try to include *nissaya* expressions. *Nissaya*’s passages may be extracted to form a dhamma-talk such as in sermons delivered by monks, *Buddha-vandanā* prayers by the laity, or understanding of Pali passages as part of Dhamma studies and daily reflection among devout Buddhists. All of this constitutes a living tradition in Burma today.

Throughout this research, my analysis shows that the use of *nissayas* in monastic education is sequential. As Dhammasami states, “The students learn the *Maṅgala-sutta*, followed by the *Sigālovāda-sutta*. He memorises the *Maṅgala-sutta* in Pali first and then its *nissaya*, before learning their meaning as expressed in a few Burmese poems (Dhammasami 2004, 42).” It is clear that the Burmese monastic learning method is a memorization system and a student’s intellectual level is measured by how accurate he is able to reproduce the originality process. In typical learning the Pali stanza or text should be memorized first; then for grammatical analysis, interpretation and understanding, one should refer to the relevant *nissaya*. With regard to *nissaya*, Khamphorn observes that “As Burma is well-known and best known for grammar scholars until the present time, most monastic education still focuses on grammatical points in the exam. The concept is that Burmese pure translation is considered for ordinary and uneducated people as inferior texts. On the one hand, *nissaya* is considered a superior type of text especially for scholars and educated people” (Pannabhoga 2020, 26).

## 5 Salient Features of Nissaya Interpretative Methods

I have shown that *nissaya* literature in Burma was at the center of Buddhist literary development as it contributed to the core value of Burmese Buddhism in general and to monastic education in particular. It has also been determined that the *nissaya* literary genre of translation corresponds to today’s non-standard translation, yet is very much alive and used in everyday life. *Nissaya*’s style of translation can be found in Buddhist devotional chanting or hymns (*van-danā*), monastic education at all levels – from primary to Dhammācariya and beyond, and also in Buddhist sermons delivered by monks including several *nissaya*’s translations both in verse and prose.

Different types of *nissayas* may be employed as different methods of translation and interpretation. In other words, the word-to-word translation of Burmese *nissaya* uses a spectrum of methods. According to Kāruṇika (2008, 10), the following seven methods are commonly employed in Burma:

1. *pāṭhānusārī nissaya* method – a simple translation of Pali sentences without adding words;
2. *pāṭhasesa nissaya* method – words may be added in order to better explain the text's actual meaning. In this case, the additional words are drawn out from the original Pali text as well as previously mentioned statements, canonical texts, commentary or sub-commentary or occasionally from a Tipiṭaka authority expert. The principle is that additional words cannot be any of personal opinion but strictly from authoritative references or sources;
3. *saddattha* method – interpretation is based on the original similar to 'literal translation';
4. *sanketattha* method – interpretation follows the precedent example which is traditionally or conventionally accepted;
5. *paññatyattha* method – same as 4: focus on conventional terminology to interpret the texts for better understanding;
6. *vohārattha* method – same as 4 and 5 – focus on conventional usage to better understand the meaning of the texts;
7. *adhippāyattha* method – provide *nissaya* with direct or easily understood meaning.

Examples of the variety of *nissaya* interpretative methods are illustrated in Table 1.

As can be seen in the table, various methods of interpretation are used by different authors. In fact, there are many methods of *nissaya* interpretation when it comes to textual study.

In his dissertation, Pannabhoga explains two locally well-known monastic learning methods that exist in Burma: the Mandalay method and the Pakhokku method. The two methods are unique and differ in their approach to the interpretation of the texts. For instance, if the Mandalay method is applied, *Namotassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*, the most popular Buddha-vandanā (Buddha's homage) formula could be lectured on for months consecutively with various analyses using all available methods together with commentary and sub-commentary explanations (Pannabhoga 2020, 29). The Mandalay approach claims that when students understand all the possible meanings of the *Namo tassa ...* formula, they will be able to explore the texts by themselves. In this way, students who are capable of using *nissaya* can study

TABLE 1      Examples of the variety of *nissaya* interpretative methods.

Pali Words	Nissaya Interpretation	Methods
<i>khīṇāsavo</i>	The one who has completed the eradication of the taints.	<i>saddattha</i>
	Arahat, or Saint.	<i>paññatyattha</i> , or <i>vohārattha</i> , or <i>saṅketattha</i>
	Venerable Sariputta or Moggalāna (depends on the context).	<i>adhippāyattha</i>
<i>dvāriko</i>	One who is associated with the door.	<i>saddattha</i>
	Gatekeeper	<i>paññatyattha</i> , or <i>vohārattha</i> , or <i>saṅketattha</i>
	Mr Mark, or Mr John, etc. depends on context.	<i>adhippāyattha</i>
<i>buddho</i>	The knower.	<i>saddattha</i>
	The Buddha or The Lord.	<i>paññatyattha</i> , or <i>vohārattha</i> , or <i>saṅketattha</i>
	Venerable Gotama, or Monk Gotama.	<i>adhippāyattha</i>
<i>karopeti</i>	Let him make.	<i>saddattha</i>
	Order him to do.	<i>paññatyattha</i> , or <i>vohārattha</i> , or <i>saṅketattha</i>
	Please do it or speak out.	<i>adhippāyattha</i>

the Tipiṭaka on their own. In this sense, *nissaya* is a guidebook, a manual, a handbook or even a teacher to guide a student on a journey of exploration through Tipiṭaka. This is how the *nissaya* has been transmitted for centuries in the living tradition of Burma. More discussion on the Mandalay and the Pakokku methods of training can be found in the Ph.D thesis by Dhammasami (2004, 134–147). Regarding the syllabus of Dhammacariya Examinations, the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree organized by the Ministry of Religious

Affairs, the Myanmar government has many guidelines for *nissaya* interpretation. For instance, the interpretation of a single Pali word, phrase or sentence can be made according to the different methods and exertion of grammatical skill applied in syntactical language.

5.1 *Examples of Nissaya Compilations*

There are innumerable *nissayas* which are relevant to Buddhist texts. For example, we may see many *nissayas* in monasteries stored on the bookshelves. The following are some of the popular *nissaya* authors with their *nissayas* widely used among the students:

Authors	Nissaya title
U Budh	<i>Bhikkhu-pāṭimokkha-pali nissaya</i>
Neyin	<i>Sīlakkhandha</i>
Nan Kyaung	<i>Kaccāyana, Padarūpasiddhi</i>
Bagara	<i>Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha</i>
Payagyi	<i>Parajikan</i>
Pyay	<i>Aṭṭhasālinī</i>
Pakhokku	<i>whole set of Tipiṭaka collection</i>
Janakābhivaṃsa	<i>Bhāsāṭikā series</i>
Ma Oo	<i>Pārajikan</i>
Moe Htee	the whole set of Tipiṭaka

These *nissayas* are generally well-known to monastic students in Burma. However, the *Bhāsāṭikā* series by Ashin Janakābhivaṃsa is widely and frequently used at all levels of student-monks more than any other *nissaya* because the author has provided clear explanation, interpretation and more additional comments. Furthermore, he also divided his *nissayas* into different levels. For example, in a compendium of Abhidhamma text like *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha*, he has two kinds of *nissaya*, one for basic level and the second for higher level. The *Bhāsāṭikā* series has served as handbooks for modern students. Other *nissayas*, may be used by a few students who reach advanced levels only.

## 6 Research Findings and Limitations

### *Nissaya Training in a Monastic Classroom Learning*

In this section I provide the actual *nissaya* training in a Burmese monastic classroom based on my observation as a monastic student for over a decade at two leading monastic institutes in Mandalay and Pegu. This will substantiate my research findings, yet with some limitations. My interest in *nissaya* goes back to the time when I was at a large monastic institution. In Burma, and also in Sri Lanka, *nissaya* authors tend to be learned monks who have received extensive training at a monastic educational institution. Such education focuses on canonical texts and Buddhist scholastic literature of various branches. *Nissaya* authors have generally been trained to master many Pali grammatical treatises such as *Kaccāyana*, *Moggalāna-vyākaraṇa* and *Padarūpasiddhi*, along with other interpretative texts. Most *nissaya* authors used to be *zāso* “repeaters” or “under tutelage” students. The literal meaning of *zāso* means poet, composer or annotator; the verb *zāte* means learning Buddhist scriptures under the tutelage of a mentor and *zāwā*-lecture is the course of learning in a Buddhist monastery. The *zāso* is someone who has acquired proficient knowledge and has mastered various genres of literature in the course of learning Buddhist texts. Learning by heart is also part of the skill set required of the *zāso*. The reason is that when the teacher introduces new methods, the pupil must already be familiar with the various areas. Thus, someone cannot become a *zāso* unless he devotes his time to it and undergoes methodical preparation. A well-known modern *nissaya* producer, Ashin Janakābhivamsa, used to be a *zāso* when he took courses in Pakokku. Having received this lengthy training, he was later able to produce many *nissayas* which are available to monastic educationists today.

In a classroom, a *nissaya* training is mainly an interaction between the teacher and a *zāso*: “the repeater”. Basically, *nissaya* classroom teaching is where the teacher leads by reading out loud and the *zāso* follows, preferably with a louder and clearer voice. One of the requisites is that a *zāso* should be clear with good voice in order to lead the classroom while assisting the teachers. At this level, there is only one teacher and one repeater reading the *nissaya* in the classroom. The other students may listen carefully and note their *nissaya*’s interpretations. This process is known as *ane’-de*: ‘marking annotation in the margin’ (see figure 3). An *Ane’-de* is a technique whereby they learn a *nissaya*’s interpretation while making notes around the available space of a Pali or an Atthakathā textbook. Furthermore, there are many learning and interpretative

techniques used in the *nissaya* training, such as *ane' kau'*: interpretation; *ane' pjan'*: translation; *ane' pwa*: extended meaning; *ane' hpwin*: definition; *ane' hpo*: elucidation; and *ane' adei' be*: interpreted meaning. Such variety of a word's interpretation and its meaning are also illustrated in the Myanmar-English Dictionary. The delivery of these interpretive methods is undertaken by teachers and assisted by the *zāso*. By this learning method, students break down the sentences and words into smaller parts in order to comprehend the meaning. For this reason, a *nissaya* composer would use the following technique:

*paṭhamam kare padacchedam, samāsādiṃ tato kare;  
samāsādo kate pacchā, attham niyyātha paṇḍito.*<sup>3</sup>

**Translation:** The wise one, first of all, should break up the compound words and, hereafter, the meaning should be brought out.

The following is a typical *nissaya* style gloss translation with reference to the above Pali stanza: *paṇḍito* – the wise one [SUB]; *paṭhamam* – at first (first of all); *padacchedam* – cutting the word; *kare* – should make; *samāsādo* – the combination etc. [OBJ]; *kate* – when it is made; *pacchā* – afterwards; *attham* – the meaning; *niyyātha* – should bring out (Ashin Janakābhivaṃsa 2000a).<sup>4</sup> This *nissaya* interpretation will yield the translation of the stanza mentioned above.

The point the above stanza makes is that the ancient teachers who produced *nissayas* used the previous stanza to examine passages and the structure of the sentences with enormous care and attention, dividing it into different parts before they were ready to raise it to the level of *nissaya*. According to the Pali grammatical rule in *Sandhi of Kaccāyana* (Thitzana 2016, 138–31), this verse is best understood by separating the compound words therein into different constituent parts before producing the translation and interpretation of the text. This will enable students to comprehend the text more easily by means of seeing the individual root, stem, prefix, suffix and structure of the words in their compound definitions.

In traditional monastic scholarship, whosoever wishes to produce a translation of the text must rely primarily on the old *nissayas*. For example, there have been a number of *nissayas* on the popular text of Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, the compendium of Abhidhamma among the Little-Finger Manuals.

3 *Samṃyañṭikā* also spelled as *Thanbyin Ṭikā* (1275, 2, 8–9); Ashin Janakābhivaṃsa (2000) *Abhidhammattha-vibhāvinī Nissaya*; Falqués (2015, 168).

4 This stanza appears in the grammatical text called *Samṃyañṭika* (*Thanbyin Ṭikā*). It was composed by Minister Thanbyin, a Pali scholar who served at the king's court during the reign of Narapati-sithu of the Pagan dynasty (1174–1211) (as the oldest attestation and in many other grammatical).



According to the *History of the Abhidhamma* (*Abhidhamma Tha-main Chok*) (1965, cha) in Burma, the 19th century had seen over twenty-two *nissayas* on the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha alone. There is no doubt that numerous *nissayas* were produced during the 20th and 21st centuries. This demonstrates that many *nissayas* were produced, reproduced and copied over a period of time by different authors on the single text of Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha. In this way, it became the most translated text among *nissaya* manuscripts and the most popular among the Abhidhamma manuals.

Similarly, in the history of Burmese literature scholars such as Bode and Ray (1903-1081) have pointed out that some Burmese monks, such as Ariyālaṅkāra and Tilokaguru (undated), produced several Burmese *nissayas* (interpretations and paraphrases) of Abhidhamma texts during the seventeenth century, especially in the Sagaing monasteries (Bode 2013, 49). Each *nissaya* has a characteristic explanation depending on the individual intentions of the author. For example, some *nissayas* are particularly useful for understanding the context because they explain a certain word in a particular way, much like a dictionary or a grammar manual, or they may emphasize the structure and syntax of the text. Therefore, a *nissaya* may take a unique form depending on the author's preferences and style.

Moreover, *nissaya* can be considered as pedagogical texts within the traditional monastic educational system. In the monastic educational training, a lecturer must be able to deal with the *nissaya* properly by selecting the rare and difficult vocabulary and facilitating understanding of the meaning. A *nissaya* which offers good explanations of the intricacies of words and sentence structure, controversial points of view, and so on, can be considered a good and reliable *nissaya* through which Pali text is traditionally learned. Such *nissaya* would undoubtedly become popular among students.

## 7 Conclusion

This study analyses how and why *nissaya* literature and its methods of translation are so important not only for the monastic learning community but as a living Buddhism for the masses in Burma. My observation and analysis substantiate that *nissaya* methods are applied to the monastic education curriculum practically used in classrooms, dhamma-talks or discussions and to an higher level of various scholarly works.

The study of the canonical Pali texts, alongside their relevant commentaries, sub-commentaries and later manual texts are challenging, and students receive only minimal guidance from the trainer or teacher. Therefore, *nissaya*

textbooks serve as compulsory handbooks or encyclopaedic reference. This paves the way for the *nissaya* to become a pedagogical text that can be relied on as a guideline or support to understand the canonical texts, and a point of reference for textual analysis, criticism and interpretation.

From *nissaya* development, classroom learning, methods and sampling of Burmese Tipiṭaka Translation and, more generally, Buddhist prayers used in everyday life, Burmese *nissaya* has become not only a tool of interpretation, but a resource of reference, a handbook for students, and a syntactical text, apart from merely a word-for-word translation or bitext as Walker (2020) puts it.

This study substantiates that Burmese literature, culture and society developed through the influence of *nissaya* literature and its interpretation. It explains how and why *nissaya* exists and continues to remain a popular translation method and source of reference. It also means that the widely used Bhāsāṭikā series of *nissaya* texts by Ashin Janakābhivamsa in many monastic institutions will not disappear anytime soon.

Due to the study's limitations, much remains to be done in the study of *nissaya* across mainland Southeast Asia as well as in Sri Lanka.

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