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Research Article

Wishing at the Banyan Tree: Wishing-for-children Rituals in the Buddhist Scriptures and in Contemporary Practices in Myanmar and Beyond

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In the leadup to the Buddha's enlightenment, Sujātā, a woman from a wealthy family, helped break the Buddha-to-be's fast by offering him milk-rice in the mistaken belief that he was the banyan tree spirit-deity who granted her wish for a son. Wishing for children in front of special trees was and remains part of a wider popular practice of making wishes before wishing-trees, originating in the tree cults of ancient India. This paper explores wishing-for-children rituals in the Buddhist scriptures and in contemporary Myanmar, as well as beyond its borders. It pays special attention to the range of terminology used in wishing rituals and highlights the myriad of ways that a woman's act(s) of wishing for a child—whether at a banyan tree, at a pagoda, or in other spaces—helps pave the Buddhist path to becoming a mother. However, it also shows that laymen participate extensively in wishing-for-children rituals, and that monks in Burmese Buddhism may engage with tree spirit-deities, special trees, and the practice of *adhiṭṭhān*. I argue that a clear understanding of the reality of lived Buddhism will elude us if scholars continue to ignore the blurring of the lines between male and female practices and between monastic and lay practices.

Keywords: Myanmar; Buddhism; rituals; gender; Banyan Tree; children; fertility; motherhood; Theravada Buddhism; Sujātā; *Saccakiriyā*

Woman [Kneeling in front of tree, having lit incense, prays in front of the tree spirit-deity Yokkha Soe][1]
Lord Yokkha Soe, I have been married for a while.
Until now I haven't yet been blessed with a son or daughter.
Lord Yokkha Soe please, I come to wish for a child.
Please will you help me and bless me with a child?

Yokkha Soe [Appearing]
Why do you come to me to ask for a son or daughter?
You have a husband, if you want a son or daughter, why don't you ask your husband?
Why do you come to me?
You give me trouble. I am not interested in that. Oh nooooo! [Smells incense, wafts his hand in front of his face]
You give me trouble with incense.[2]

[1] I follow DeCaroli's (2004) usage of the term "spirit-deity."
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKeB9besaZA

The above dialogue is taken from an ostensibly humorous YouTube video that shows a Burmese woman offering incense to the tree spirit-deity, Yokkha Soe, and unfortunately not receiving the response that she was hoping for. These kinds of rituals are nothing new as examples of tree or tree spirit-deity worship can be found in the Buddhist scriptures as well as in early Buddhist art (DeCaroli 2004). The story of Sujātā is a scriptural example of wishing for a son at a tree. In the leadup to the Buddha's enlightenment, this woman from a wealthy family helped break the Buddha-to-be's fast by offering him milk-rice, in the mistaken belief that he was the banyan tree spirit-deity who granted her wish for a son. Such special trees were and remain part of a wider popular practice of making wishes before wishing-trees, originating in the tree cults of ancient India. Yet, scholarship on contemporary Buddhism features hardly any research on wishing-for-children rituals or trees, amid an ongoing preference for monastics and human artifacts, especially pagodas and Buddha statues. This paper addresses these absences by exploring wishing-for-children rituals in the Buddhist scriptures and in contemporary Myanmar, as well as beyond its borders, due to social media allowing people to share their stories of success and failure in trying to conceive. It pays special attention to the range of terminology used in wishing rituals and highlights the myriad of ways that a woman's act(s) of wishing for a child—whether at a banyan tree, at a pagoda, or in other spaces—helps pave the Buddhist path to becoming a mother.

Speech is a focal point for making wishes. Choy Fah Kong's (2012) in-depth work on *saccakiriyā*[3] notes how early Indian truth utterances were retained, but subtly altered, by the Buddhist Theravada tradition. She notes that generally, "speech in religion not only performs the various functions of prayer, praise, and magical spell; but also manifests itself as a supernatural force" (9). Defining "[t]rue speech" as "the total agreement between spoken words and fact" (8), she notes that saying a truth statement out loud as a preface to making a wish was, and still is, a popular approach to bringing about desired results. The "mothering path" in Buddhism often starts with a vow and/or a truth statement, followed by a wish. Pascale Englemajer (2020) located that path in the Pāli canon based on close readings of the lives of women in texts such as the *Jātaka*, the Buddha's rebirth stories. The starting point of their mothering paths is much like the Buddha's, in that a vow or wish is made in one lifetime and then, through the merit collected lifetime after lifetime, is fulfilled. A woman who chooses the mothering path often starts with a vow to wish for a child, but this child may take many lifetimes to appear. Truth statements often involve one's own morality. For instance, in the *Temiya Jātaka*, Candādevī observed the precepts without a break, and presenting this as a truth statement, she asked for her prayer for a son to be fulfilled. In Heaven, Sakka decided to give her one as a reward. Sakka then asked the future Buddha, who was a deity at that time, to enter her womb; and he did.

Scholars of ancient Indian Buddhism including Gregory Schopen (1997), Robert DeCaroli (2004) and Vincent Eltschinger (2025) have argued that monks' practices sometimes involved spirit-deities and nature worship. I have found instances in elite monastics' recent writings and conversations that spirit and nature worship still takes place in Myanmar, and that laymen also partake in wishing-for-children rituals. While there has been scholarship on Burmese *nat* (spirit-deity) worship and spirit possession, e.g., by Brac de la Perrier (2022a) and Foxeus (2022), hardly any has specifically focused on trees, tree spirit-deities, or wishing for children. This paper therefore explores these three interrelated phenomena based on both scriptural and contemporary evidence, with the latter including anthropological fieldwork as well as the collection of social-media posts and other forms of documentation.

[3] "Act of Truth."

Methods

Due to COVID-19 and the military coup that took place in Myanmar on February 1, 2021 I have not been back to the country since 2019. While some of my data were collected in the field before that point, I have since engaged in participant observation and six semi-structured interviews with members of the Burmese diasporic communities in San Francisco, Japan, Thailand, and Cambodia; conducted a short survey, so far of thirty participants, mainly living in Myanmar and Thailand; and collected relevant online evidence including but not limited to blogs, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and historical videos about pagodas. Obviously, experiences of the focal phenomena by members of the Burmese diaspora differ in some ways from those of their counterparts who remain in Myanmar. In Japan, for instance, it has become common to wish for a child in front of images of Koyasu Kannon (子安観音); and in an online Q&A with a Burmese monk, a layperson asked how one should wish in the United States if there were no banyan trees, to which the monk replied that any big tree would do.

For the survey I used snowball sampling. That is, it was sent to my social-media contacts, and they were asked to identify others who might usefully complete it based on its subject matter. Some of the respondents skipped questions, as answering all of them was not mandatory; and the surveys could be anonymous, i.e., respondents had the option of leaving their email addresses so that I could ask them follow-up questions, but not all of them did so. Two respondents identified as male and the rest as female, and most were aged thirty to forty. All identified as Buddhist apart from three, all female, two of whom were Christians. The other was a Muslim who had converted from Buddhism due to the influence of her husband. The informants I interviewed outside of Myanmar consisted of two women in their early twenties, three in their thirties and forties, and one in her eighties. Only one of them, aged forty-five, had taken the survey first.

A Burmese linguist and teacher based in Tokyo, Thuzar Hlaing, helped me to translate the survey into Burmese and the responses into English, and also assisted me with document collection. In the latter effort, we used keywords such as *tharsupan* (wishing for a child), Yokkha Soe, Sujātā, and *nyaungbyin* (banyan tree), and collected the relevant material over a two-year period beginning in 2022. A monk, Ashin Garu Dhamma, who resides in Fremont, California also helped with some translations and explained various subtleties of Burmese Buddhist culture. Following those discussions, I found that the collected online data could be divided into three broad categories. The first comprises data about sites: for instance, articles on the history of the site and/or miraculous events that happened there. It can include general narratives of why a site is popular, but not personal ones, which fall into the second category: that is, personal narratives by individuals who have made or are planning to make wishes, with or without specific site or ritual information. And the third category focuses on ritual, with or without detailed site information. In general, each online post was relatively straightforward to categorize into one of the above three types. Once they had all been grouped, I generated my conclusions using grounded theory, based on additional patterns in the data.

Background of the Study

I became interested in this topic during my Ph.D. dissertation fieldwork. While I was staying at a nunnery in Sagaing, Myanmar in 2018, two of my Burmese friends, a married couple, came to visit me and asked if I would like to accompany them to a place called Kyauk Kalay, literally "Stone Baby," which was known to grant wishes to those wanting children. However, my nun hosts informed us that we would not need to travel so far, as there was a pagoda for the same purpose, known as the Thirty Lions Pagoda, just up the hill. I had gone up to it a few times, but had not previously understood its purpose. The nuns also informed us that a clairvoyant *thilashin* (Myanmar Buddhist nun) lived at the nunnery next door and might be able to predict whether my friends would have a child, or explain what they needed to do to achieve their desired outcome.

The next day, we went up the hill to the Thirty Lions Pagoda. As its name suggests, thirty small lion statues are located around its tiers. There, as they had been instructed by the nuns and then by the pagoda guardians, my friends placed nine different kinds of fruit as offerings before the Buddha statue at the front of the pagoda, then moved to a lion holding a baby at the back, poured water over it, and re-collected some of the same water and drank it.

It was difficult to find information about the history of this pagoda, which led me to think that such history does not play a strong role in people's reasons for wishing there. I requested that the nuns ask the abbot in charge about its history, but they told me that he was quite young, and the senior monk who had the relevant knowledge had died without passing it on to him. I later found a video on pagoda history in which this pagoda happened to be featured. It recounted the belief that the pagoda was originally built by a minister of King Kyansittha (1084–1112/13) who took care of the king's daughter, Shwe Einthi. Subsequently, in the Mohnyin era (1426–1439), two Sri Lankan monks brought five relics to install in the pagoda, and remodeled it in the Sri Lankan style while staying at a nearby monastery. During that time, a couple who wanted a baby came to see these visiting monks, and the monks told the couple that if they wished at this pagoda, they would have one. The wished-for baby was born, and thereafter the Thirty Lions Pagoda became a famous site for wishing for children—although the pagoda's capacity for wish-granting was not limited to this one purpose. According to the narration, a plaque at the pagoda dated Burmese year 1381 (2019), shown in the video, had recently been donated by a couple who owned a betel nut shop. After wishing there about six years earlier, it said, the wife had become pregnant and given birth to a son.[4]

Figure 1: Lion holding a child (photo by the author).

After coming back down the hill, we visited the reputedly clairvoyant nun at Ayemyo Chaung, a nunnery which was established in 1908 and known for its monastic discipline and long history of producing scholarly nuns. We were led to the fortune-telling nun's building, located on the side of a hill, took off our shoes at the entrance, and went inside. We sat down behind the nun, who was facing the Buddha in her pink robes. This nun told my friends that it might be dangerous for them to go to their original planned destination, as an evil spirit

[4] https://mrtv.gov.mm/news-146297?language=my

Figure 2: Couple wishing and offering fruit in front of an image of the Buddha (photo by the author).

might jump on them there. However, she also suggested that if they had been connected to Kyauk Kalay in a past life, then their wish might be successful, so they ultimately decided to try. In Burmese tradition, a nun or other person with the power to see the future would have gained it by practicing *samatha*, concentration meditation. Although this practice is mentioned in the Pāli canon, and many meditation masters prefer to use *samatha* meditation that will aid their subsequent practice of insight meditation, *samatha* meditation leads to *samādhi*, a deep state of concentration in which the individual can enter *jhāna* and gain powers (*abhiññā*) such as clairvoyance, knowing ones past lives, and the ability to read the minds of others. Such blissful mental states and the powers that manifest are seen by some Buddhists as a distraction and not necessary to reach the ultimate goal of *nibbāna*.

Because we made some stops along the way, it took several hours to reach Kyauk Kalay, which is located in Myaung Township near another famous site: a large natural rock formation shaped like a *nāga* (serpent), discovered by a monk prospecting for jewels with which to decorate a chair. The neighboring "stone baby" was also a naturally occurring rock, found in similar circumstances.[5]

At the stone-baby site, we found a layman in charge. He instructed my friends about what to do, which included picking up the stone baby—which was covered in gold leaf and wrapped in blankets—and carry it around near a hanging bassinet. While carrying this object, they were to wish for a child; and if their wish came true, they would need to come back to give the baby a toy. We were shown a room filled with such toys, by way of demonstrating the efficacy of the stone baby and the associated ritual.

When I asked the layman for more details about the site and the ritual, he took pains to tell me that laypeople were practicing Buddhism as best they could, but that monks were the real authorities to ask about anything connected to the religion. I took this as a signal that he was trying to (re)direct my efforts toward a more normative reading of Buddhism, whatever that meant to him. Thomas Patton (2020) also came across these kinds of (re)directions from laypeople when researching *weizza*s, people who—like the nun mentioned above—attain supernatural powers via concentration meditation. This term is derived from the Pāli word *vijjā*, meaning

[5] https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1112301866197468

Figure 3: Hanging bassinet (photo by the author).

"higher knowledge" or "possessed by wisdom." Even though there were canonical underpinnings to these practices, laypeople and even nuns often told me that I should consult monks, who were more knowledgeable, to obtain the "right view" of Buddhism.[6] This illuminated a hierarchy of what is considered to be the right knowledge, and who has it, previously observed by Cheesman (2002), as well as my own observations that in Myanmar, knowledge is considered the worthiest kind of cultural capital one can accumulate.

The third site we visited was probably the farthest away from a normative view of Buddhism, and could even have been sought out by aspiring parents due to its unique space being so different from Myanmar's vast array of pagodas. Wishing at a pagoda (like the first site) may be considered closest to normative Buddhism in that it can be classed as worshiping at a Buddha image. Even there, however, wishing for a baby may be seen as *loki*,[7] mundane. At the second site, the clairvoyant nun, while displaying supernatural powers, performed her service to my friends in front of the Buddha statue.

Intrigued by everything I had seen, I spoke about my experience to Ashin Garu Dhamma, who was reputed to have excellent knowledge of potentially relevant matters. He explained how common it was in the Pāli canon to find instances of people wishing for children, starting with Sujātā. This monk's comments not only suggested to me that such practices were seen as having canonical justification, but also piqued my interest in them, as well as the common scriptural use of banyan trees as places for wishing, and especially such trees' modern role, if any, in these rituals. Women were not the only ones in the scriptures wishing for children. The *Dhammapada* story of Cakkhupāla Thera begins with Cakkhupāla's wealthy prospective father wishing for a son or daughter upon seeing a majestic tree, then cleaning and pouring sand for the spirit-deity (*devatā*) that lives there. In the Pāli commentary, the man says "If I get a son or daughter, I will pay great reverence to you." The narration, meanwhile, uses the phrase "*patthanaṃ katvā pakkāmi,*" "after having made the plea, he walked on."[8] Here, interestingly, it is only if the man has his wish fulfilled that he will revere the tree. In Sujātā's case, as related in the *Majjhima Nikāya* commentary, she likewise says "If [...] I conceive a son as a first born, I will

[6] In Pāli, *sammādiṭṭhi*.
[7] From the Pāli *lokiya*.
[8] Norman (1906) Cakkhupālattheravatthu [The Story of Cakkhupāla Thera]; I 3, 14-15 "*Puttaṃ vā dhītaraṃ vā labhitvā, tumhākaṃ mahāsakkāraṃ karissāmīti patthanaṃ katvā pakkāmi.*"

perform good deeds." The past tense aorist *patthanaṃ akāsi* is used in the narrative, i.e., Sujātā is said to have "made a wish/or aspiration."[9] It is followed up with "*tassā sā patthanā samijjhi,*" "Her plea was answered."

As briefly noted above, there is hardly any contemporary scholarship on Burmese wishing-trees and *tharsupan*, which can be translated either as "wishing for a son" or "wishing for a child." It would be reasonable to conclude from that absence that pagodas have extensively displaced trees as wishing sites. But is this really the case, or does it merely reflect the tendency in Buddhist studies to focus on human-made structures? This preference for the pagoda or the Buddha statue might be classified with what scholars have previously termed the "big tradition" associated with monks, as opposed to the "small tradition" of village practices, often by women. Scholars have used numerous other different pairs of binaries to express the same or similar sets of phenomena, including normative vs. non-normative, classic vs. vernacular, orthodox vs. heterodox, global vs. local, and universal vs. particular (Ohnuma 2012). The first member of each such pairing includes textual elite Buddhism. In Reiko Ohnuma's use of the universal vs. the particular, relinquishing the particular and understanding the universal is necessary in order to reach liberation. For instance, in the story of Kisā Gotamī, after almost going mad because her child has died, she must overcome the love of that particular child. She does this by going from house to house, on advice from the Buddha, to collect a mustard seed from a house in which no one has been affected by death. After she returns with no mustard seeds, she is able to understand the universality of death and move forward on the path towards enlightenment. In modern Burmese lived Buddhism, however, my data indicate that there is less of a stark difference between the members of these binaries than is commonly supposed.

Below, I first look at the tree as a sacred site in the Pāli canon, academic scholarship, and in lived Buddhism. I follow up with a retelling of the story of Sujātā from a Facebook post, using it as an example of a non-normative view of the Sujātā story and of *yadaya* rituals: not one in which Sujātā's mothering role towards the Buddha sets him on the path to liberation (see Langenberg 2017) but, rather, one that focuses on her preparation and offering of milk-rice to the Buddha-to-be under the banyan tree — an act that should be replicated by those wanting to conceive children. Then, I discuss examples from my documentary, survey, and interview data in the three categories mentioned above, with special attention to gender issues.

Trees as Sacred Sites for Wishing

Though scholarly work on sacred trees in Myanmar has been rare, there has been some on such trees in South Asia. For instance, Albertina Nugteren (2005) made the case that, over time, pagodas replaced trees as normative representations of the Buddha. David Haberman (2013), on the other hand, challenged the idea that modern Buddhists do not worship trees, and provided evidence that trees such as the Mahābodhi tree in Bodhgaya have indeed been worshiped as deities, or even as the Buddha, in recent times. Haberman also noted that in more than thirty *jātaka* stories, the Buddha was presented as a tree spirit-deity. This shows the interconnectedness of beings and some of the ways in which they can move throughout *saṃsāra*, the circle of rebirth, depending on the merit accumulated or lost. Stories of the Buddha-to-be as a tree spirit-deity could also have heightened acceptance of these deities—in contrast to, for example, the thirty-seven *nat*s (while easily fit into the Buddhist cosmology of the thirty-one realms) are of Myanmar origin and not mentioned in the canon. The bodhi tree and the banyan tree, even though practices surrounding them predate historical Buddhism, have been accorded space in normative Buddhism because they can be located in the scriptures at certain "opportune" times (Heim 2025: 256).

A strand of early and mid-twentieth century Japanese scholarship on Buddhism involved the bodhi tree and plants more generally (for a review, see Shimizu 2010). More recently, Yohei Shimizu (2010) provided a detailed

[9] Woods and Kosambi (1928) II 182, 19

examination of the bodhi tree as worshiped or revered in the Pāli canon and in contemporary India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Other relevant scholarship includes art historian John Guy's (2023) recent book *Tree and Serpent*, which explored the importance of its two titular figures in early Indian art, inspired in part by an earlier work with a similar title, James Ferguson's (1868) *Tree and Serpent Worship*. All these studies, along with Subramania Pillai's (1948) *Tree Worship and Ophiolatry*, stress the conceptual significance of interconnectedness: that is, serpents often lived under or in trees, and so they frequently came as a pair, with the serpent acting as protector of the tree, and later, as the protector of the Buddha. Pillai noted, in that context, that women were widely believed to be superior nurturers (i.e., protectors) of trees than men were. This could also be why today, statues of women often serve as pagoda guardians.

Scholars including Gregory Schopen (1997), Robert DeCaroli (2004) and Vincent Eltschinger (2025) have criticized orientalist scholarship on ancient India that portrayed a supposed binary opposition between spirit-deities and Buddhism, and/or the latter as a reaction against popular religion. According to DeCaroli, monastics were unlikely to have been merely trying to appease the lay population's desire for worshiping the spirits; rather, they probably had a symbiotic relationship. Far from being confined to the villages, spirit-deities were often "summoned by wealthy patrons, brahmins, kings and monastics" (DeCaroli 2004: 14–15). He also explained how some of the earliest *caitya*s (Pāli: *cetiya*) were the making of sacred spaces, by way of sweeping, piling stones, and making offerings to trees for tree spirit-deities.

More recently, Maria Heim (2025) described what she called "heritage trees" in the commentaries of the Pāli canon, noting how important events were held underneath such specifically identified trees. This included Māyā, the Buddha's mother, giving birth under a sal tree, and the Buddha reaching enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. Heim ends her essay by saying that specific trees

> occasion the "worldly and transcendent," with the idea of occasion as the opportune moment, place, or confluence of circumstances working much like our idea of affordance. The Pāli commentarial tradition seamlessly unites a grounded and "historicist" arboreal imagination (the trees are not symbolic entities in this literature) with a sense of wonder at the vast cosmic experiences they render possible. (256)

Interestingly, however, Heim's only mention of a tree spirit-deity is with the story of Sujātā which states that the banyan tree had a *yakkha*, a spirit-deity of the lowest level, and in which category tree spirit-deities fall into. This absence in the mention of tree spirit-deities could insinuate that in normative Buddhism, the tree is on its own; that there is no spirit-deity attached. In any case, apart from a few chapters in Shimizu's work, Buddhist scholarship on trees remains focused on the scriptures and ancient India, and the small body of work on Buddhist tree-worship in contemporary times has hitherto included only limited references to its relationship to fertility and *tharsupan*. This could be due to the supposed marginality of women's rituals in general,[10] which in turn has led to trees—other than those directly connected to the Buddha—receiving considerably less scholarly attention than Buddha statues and pagodas. However, the same process of marginalization could also be driven by Buddhist scholars' sense that tree-worship is more relevant to Brahminism, Hinduism, or Animism than to their own favored topic. This could be why, in Donald Stadtner's visually appealing recent book *Sacred Sites of Burma* (2011), not one tree is included as a center of worship, despite mentions of trees in artwork and on vases donated at Shwedagon Pagoda.

Ritual addressing of trees or tree spirit-deities with requests can be found in Theravada scriptures. Nevertheless, ambiguity surrounds the question of whether they are normative or vernacular Buddhism. In contemporary

[10] Iikuni's (2014) research showed how, in certain villages, women were held to have lower *hpon* (merit) than men, and thus needed to pay respect to the *nat*s (deities/spirits) of trees, mountains, and so on by bowing down to them. However, if they practiced eight precepts like a nun or a yogi instead of the five that laywomen practice, then they did not need to bow down to them.

Myanmar, pagodas are often replacements for trees as sites of worship, and although bodhi or banyan trees are found within their grounds, they are not necessarily focal points. On the other hand, the worship of *nat*s such as Yokkha Soe is widespread in Myanmar. Yokkha is the Myanmar pronunciation of the Pāli word for tree (*rukkha*) and the Burmese word *soe* can be translated as "guardian of." Such beings are considered separate from their respective trees, but as living in or near them; and multiple online sources suggest that the larger the tree, the more powerful the tree spirit-deity is thought to be by ritual specialists.

Although, as noted above, trees and tree spirit-deities may generally be considered part of the "little tradition," monks, even as quite recently have written and spoken about trees, demonstrating their ongoing importance in Myanmar and for Burmese communities abroad. A YouTube video by a follower of the monk Thit Ta Kar Sayadaw, posted in 2023,[11] stated that worshipers at each of the ten banyan trees around Shwedagon Pagoda should offer betel nut directly to Yokkha Soe at each tree as a gift, so that he will be happy and spread his happiness and protection to all. It added, however, that anyone who is wishing should also bring certain items that Yokkha Soe will then offer to the Buddha, who cannot collect them himself. In other words, as well as being a protector, Yokkha Soe acts as an intermediary between tree-worshipers and the Buddha.

Thit Ta Kar Sayadaw's disciples learn detailed offering rituals, *adhiṭṭhān*, to banyan trees. In general terms, *adhiṭṭhān*[12] are a type of vow or resolution made by a person who is wishing. In this case, the all-day ritual includes traveling to the ten different banyan trees around the Shwedagon Pagoda, making offerings to them, making the same wish at each tree, and chanting certain *gāthā*s: verses with special power.

Rituals that seek Yokkha Soe's help with matters such as conceiving a child may be considered *loki* (Iikuni 2014). However, it should be borne in mind that wishing at a pagoda or before a Buddha image may also be considered *loki*, depending on what is being wished for. One monk even suggested to me that any wish other than for *nibbāna* is *loki*.

In one episode from a video series called *Dhamma Vinaya Q&A*, a layman asks a monk whether it would be better to wish for a child at a banyan tree or at a pagoda. The monk replies that it does not matter; rather, it is one's wholesome deeds or good past karma that will affect the outcome of such a wish.[13] The layman's uncertainty and hesitation suggest that he thinks the monk has the right answer, highlighting the perceived hierarchy of knowledge I alluded to earlier. Indeed, this exchange may have been published online specifically so that the monk's *right view* would be spread more widely.

A book written by a famous monk who went by the pen name Rawe Htun (2015) is also in a Q&A format with laypeople asking questions and the monk answering them. In one of his answers regarding the merit one can accrue by worshipping a pagoda or banyan tree as a living Buddha, as they are considered a type of *dāthu* (relic) of the Buddha, he states that it is meritorious to water these trees, and also explains how to differentiate between a bodhi tree and a banyan tree, which can be difficult.[14] The same book deploys Ledi Sayadaw as an example of a great monk who practiced every day in the vicinity of a bodhi tree, this practice known in Pāli as *bodhiyaṅgaṇa*. By using a Pāli term, Rawe Htun reinforces his view of the canonical legitimacy of this practice.[15]

Other examples of monks' ritual involvement with trees include their giving of bodhi seeds or saplings to other monks. In the San Francisco Bay Area and in Saitama, Japan, I have noticed how monasteries' cultivation of plants native to Myanmar helps to keep the communities connected to their country of origin. In Myanmar, too,

[11] ဂန္ဓီရ ပညာရှင် Channel, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFRI5BTyX7Y.
[12] *The Pāli Text Society Pāli-English Dictionary* (1921) 28 defines it as: adhiṭṭhāna (nt.) [fr. adhi + sthā] decision, resolution, self-determination. *A Dictionary of Pāli* (2001) I 88 gives: support, basis, standpoint, abode, determination, resolution, fixing the mind on, determining, controlling producing (by supernatural power); taking (formal) possession of, designating.
[13] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLhBnFtPj3s
[14] It is important to note that species of bodhi trees are different for each Buddha.
[15] For more on Ledi Sayadaw, see Eric Braun (2013).

Figure 4: Monk giving another monk a bodhi sapling (photo by U Garu Dhamma).

I have seen the importance certain trees are assigned by even those considered to be the most knowledgeable monks.[16] Given how much attention anthropologists in particular have accorded to *nat* worship, an exploration of tree rituals in Myanmar in general, and those involving Yokkha Soe in particular, seems warranted.

Figure 5: A young bodhi tree sits next to a Jizō statue outside of a Burmese monastery in Saitama, Japan (photo by Ma Thuzar Hlaing).

The Story of Sujātā and Carrying Out the Correct *Yadaya*

I found an interesting version and interpretation of the Sujātā story in a Facebook post by someone giving their name as Aung Nameik (အောင်နိမိတ်, "Sign of Success"). It said that when wishing for a child, before one considers trying many *yadaya*, one should listen to the story of Sujātā and follow her example, because often the rituals do not work. *Yadaya* and *adhiṭṭhān* are sometimes hard to differentiate, but in the *Myanmar to English Dictionary*, the former is translated as "something done [in] keeping with an astrologer's advice to avert impending misfortune or to realize what one wishes." The author of the post continued:

[16] Other important practices that concern trees, but which are often overlooked in scholarship, include devotees pouring water on them after a libation ceremony, which brings merit to those who do it. Shizumi (2010) identified multiple instances of this in the Pāli canon. In addition, the Bodhi Tree Watering Festival is held on the full-moon day of Kason. Among other activities, devotees on that day give water to a bodhi tree in commemoration of the Buddha's enlightenment, which occurred under this type of tree.

> Husbands and wives can only be called parents when a baby is born. Similarly, a teacher can only be called a teacher when they have students. When the couple wants a child, but they can't have one, they ask the fortune teller [*beidin saya*], who instructs them to perform many *yadaya*. However, the *yadaya* often do not work. Why? Let me present an example from the time of our Lord Buddha.
>
> The rich daughter Sujātā could not conceive a child. She asked a brahmin [B: *poṇṇa*] and he instructed her to perform *yadaya*. The *poṇṇa* said, a thousand cows should be gradually fed [...gives detailed instructions] so that they produce very pure milk. She then needs to offer the milk to Yokkha Soe and wish for a child. Sujātā also wanted a son, so she planted a kind of grass which produces juicy, sweet flowers [...]. First, she fed the cows. From there they searched and took the very stout cows.
>
> She listened to the *poṇṇa* very carefully and became tired but was full of *cetanā* [here, it is the Burmese vernacular meaning *karuṇā*, "compassion or good will," and not "volition" as in the scriptures] [...A]t the time she offered the milk at the banyan tree, the future Buddha was there. At the time he had just finished *dukkhacariyā* [extreme austerities or extreme fasting]. It was time for him to become the Buddha. Because of her *pāramī* [accrued virtue] she was given the chance to offer to the Buddha. After she offered the milk-rice to the future Buddha, at the same time he took forty-nine mouthfuls and subsequently became the Buddha. This is due to the karma of the past, previous merit, the *pāramī*, *yeset*, where they can connect in this time.
>
> To make your *yadaya* completer and more successful, you first need to get back your [hidden] past karma. So offer milk to the Buddha sitting under the *nyaungbyin* [banyan tree]. This is used as the teaching: you bring the milk which you cook yourself and bring yourself to the Buddha sitting on the throne under the *nyaungbyin*. After that you can proceed with the other *yadaya*.
>
> May you have a pleasant family that flourishes with precious children.

In the above passage, all three narrative categories that I mentioned previously—site, personal narrative, and ritual—combine: the site being the place in front of the banyan tree, the personal narrative being Sujātā's (albeit told through a third party), and the ritual is quite detailed. Though I cannot be sure what further sources, scriptural or otherwise, may be in play, the text appears to want to give advice on an ideal way to wish for a son, and that trying "other *yadaya*" will be fruitless until one performs this ritual first.

I showed this story to two native Burmese, one monk and one laywoman. Both noted that its language was unclear and that the story itself was questionable, i.e., it didn't follow the scriptural account accurately. Each provided me with a somewhat different interpretation of it, highlighting different aspects. The monk said that *yadaya* would work, i.e., give one a child, but only if one had enough wholesome merit. The woman, on the other hand, told me that one should follow what Sujātā did by making milk with a good mind and offering it at a banyan tree, conceived of as a form of the Buddha. Her interpretation accorded with the above-mentioned view of the banyan tree as a living relic. What is interesting is that both these informants found ways to bring what was being described back to a more normative interpretation vis-à-vis the Pāli canon. Certainly, the Facebook story's sequence is non-scriptural, for in the scriptures Sujātā has already had her son, whereas in the post she is still wishing for one when she encounters the Buddha-to-be under the tree. In any case, wishing at the banyan tree is highlighted as a "Buddhist" practice.

Narratives of Sites, Persons Involved, and Rituals

Along with the above-quoted Facebook version of the story of Sujātā, I found a variety of online narratives regarding *tharsupan*-related sites, persons, and rituals. The first section below illustrates the importance of

history in the making of sacred sites. In addition, it includes some interesting maternal imagery and evidence of *weizza* worship alongside that of the Buddha. I will also examine the most popular site for this purpose, the Child Holding Brahmā image at the Shwedagon Pagoda, as well as an image of a Shan queen and a famous Hindu temple. The second section presents examples of personal narratives, one from a family of traditional dancers, another from a famous actress. And in the third section, I take a closer look at rituals, including *yadaya* and *adhiṭṭhān*.

Site Narratives: Intermediaries, Historical Legacies, and Keeping in Time

Bo Min Gaung and Tamote Shinpin Shwegugyi Pagoda

YouTube's Myanmar Ghost Channel describes miraculous or otherwise strange places and events. One of its segments, titled "The History of Popa Bo Min Gaung and Donating Clocks at the Buddha to Wish for a Child," focuses on two sites, both noteworthy for their encasing of multiple Buddha statues.[17] There are examples of this, albeit rare ones, throughout the country. Often, the outer layers of these statues or temples have been damaged in an earthquake or some other disaster, such that people then can see their internal materials (Ko Myo 2015). One such site in Kyaukse, called the Tamote Shinpin Shwegugyi Pagoda, has three layers of statues. It is believed that the inner Buddha was built in early eleventh century CE; the second one, toward the end of the same century; and the third, in the thirteenth century CE (Ko Myo 2015). According to Ko Myo (2015: 11), the reasons for these encasings include

> that they will last for 5,000 years [i.e., until the time of the next Buddha], to make bigger and more elaborate than the previous donors, to be a new builder or donor, to protect from the natural disasters and vandalism, [and] to enshrine getting the meritorious deeds [by the previous donor.]

According to the same video, the second Kyaukse Buddha image is believed to look like a mother hugging or protecting her baby from harm: i.e., the outer image is leaning over the inner one. This interpretation of the Buddha as two Buddhas, one mothering the other, is a complex and interesting one. But, as noted by Ohnuma (2012), there are places in the scriptures where the Buddha is described using maternal terminology, e.g., as giving the *Dhamma* as a mother gives milk to a baby.

Another influence on the making of these sites was Bo Min Gaung, a *weizza*. Among his other supernatural powers, he is thought to be immortal, or at any rate able to extend his life to the point that he will still be around at the time of the next Buddha. And, upon meeting the future Buddha, he is expected to reach *nibbāna* quite quickly. Due to Bo Min Gaung's influence, objects that are donated to these sites include clocks, which are said to represent "good timing." That is, when dealing with karma—as in many other areas—one needs good timing to achieve a good life-rhythm; and here, more specifically, to achieve the success of "male and female fitting together." Wall clocks are especially likely to be donated, reflecting a belief that because a wall is strong, a baby obtained via such an offering will also be strong.

Indeed, in Myanmar and South Asia more broadly, timing is held to be of extreme importance: a belief rooted in astrology or what the Burmese call *beidin*, a word derived from the *Veda*s. It is considered critically important for events such as ear-piercing ceremonies and monks' ordination ceremonies to happen at the right times.[18] In addition, however, we should be aware of a play on words involving the Burmese terms *nayisiwa* (နရီစည်းဝါး) and *naryi* (နာရီ). The former refers to the musical instruments *si* and *wa*, which are fundamental to traditional Burmese music. If they are absent or not in time, the whole song is thrown off. Examples of these instruments can often be seen among people's donations at wishing sites. *Naryi*, on the other hand, means "clock" or "time," but *nar* can also be taken to mean "pain," while *yi* means "to laugh." According to disciples of Bo Min Gaung,

[17] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvFORo6uhyY
[18] For more on the importance of time in Myanmar, see Coderey (2022).

he was/is a believer in laughing your pain or troubles away, as part of his desire to relieve people's suffering. Thus, the power of these sites is governed not only by their historical legacies, but also by new rituals that have taken hold: in this case, via the addition of Bo Min Gaung as a kind of intermediary. The Brahmā image discussed below also serves such a function.

Child Holding Brahmā

The Child Holding Brahmā image at the Shwedagon Pagoda is perhaps the most famous site of *tharsupan*, with Brahmā here seeming to act as an intermediary. Physically, at any rate, he is positioned between the one who is wishing and the most famous pagoda in Myanmar. To his right is a Buddha image. It is also possible to interpret his holding of the child as impermanent: i.e., that he is depicted in the act of giving it to the wisher. The statue on the right is generally thought to be for wishing for a boy, and the one on the left (not pictured), for a girl. The same site is also a popular one for bringing sick children. The author of one online account mentioned being taken there as a boy and encountering a traditional-medicine doctor who ended up curing him of some kind of disease. In my survey data, this site was mentioned more than any other, either as a place the respondent had heard of or had actually gone to. One middle-aged woman respondent said she had wished for a boy "with beautiful eyes" at Shwedagon Pagoda, because her first child was a girl and because she had heard from others that wishes made at this pagoda were often fulfilled. She also said that her wish came true, and that she believed it was because of her strong desire and past karmic connection with the particular baby that ended up in her womb.

Figure 6: Child-holding Brahmā (photo by April Ko).

Burmese artist Thant Myat Htoo transformed an image of the site into a protest against the killing of children in a village on March 7, 2021 (Fig. 7). Instead of Brahmā giving the child to its future parent, he can be seen with tears streaming down his face as he receives it back as a lifeless body.

Queen Saw Mon Hla: Pagoda Guardian or Powerful Buddhist Devotee?

Another intermediary is an image of Queen Saw Mon Hla that can be found in a pagoda near Mandalay called Shwe Sar Yan. Along with Mya Nan Nwe, Saw Mon Hla is one of the two most celebrated pagoda guardians or *thaik nan shin* (Brac de la Perrière 2022a: 78). Shwe Sar Yan holds one of the biggest pagoda festivals in the Mandalay region. Popular for wishes of all kinds, the Saw Mon Hla statue is especially sought out by those

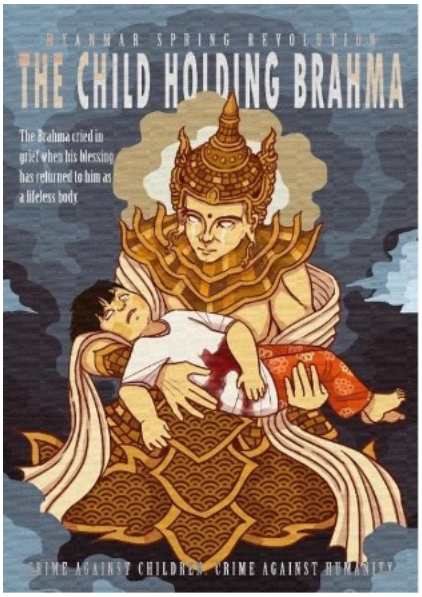

Figure 7: Artwork by Thant Myat Htoo.

wishing for children, due to the reputed fulfillment of many wishes made at it. Foxeus (2022) mentions this statue as part of the "treasure-trove" pagoda cults that blossomed starting in the 1990s when Myanmar's ruling military "established a limited market economy and promoted Buddhism" (182). In 2011, the market further opened up, and with the popularity of social media such as Facebook in the country, many of these spaces further expanded in size, popularity, and quantity of donations. Foxeus does not mention the site as a popular place for wishing for children, only that it and other similar places are associated with spirit possession and what he and others have termed "prosperity Buddhism," e.g., possessed mediums often report on future lottery numbers. He also notes that "these cults are seeking to create what is perceived by many Burmese people as a Buddhist identity of a higher status by differentiating these cults from the traditional cult of the 37 Lords" (168). One of my collected online articles articulated the beliefs that Queen Saw Mon Hla had *dago* ("power"), and that the *nat*s loved and protected her. Some other accounts, meanwhile, stated that this queen was a strong devotee of the Buddha, and "not a pagoda guardian" or *nat*, thus hinting that she was more worthy of worship than the latter. Again, this points to a view that the more closely related to the Buddha something is, the more worthy it is, and that *nat*s can be viewed both positively and negatively in different contexts.

It is worth noting that the above-mentioned prosperity cults are thought to bring about immediate results (Foxeus 2022: 168–69), which might be why they are popular both among lottery players and people wishing to get pregnant. Also, however, "many of these cults [...] are closely linked to institutional Buddhism (pagoda compounds, the sangha, etc.)" (169).[19]

Hindu Priests and the Pilakat Hindu Temple

Hindu priests can also act as intermediaries. My collected data include multiple online videos showcasing a popular Hindu temple, Pilakat, that has operated near Yangon since 1861.[20] It is popular to wish for a baby

[19] According to legend, Saw Mon Hla, from Shan country, married King Anawratha for diplomatic reasons. She was very beautiful, and the other queens and concubines were terribly jealous. She had an earring that contained a relic of the Buddha and when people in the palace saw it shining colorfully, they came to believe she was a witch, and she was ordered by the king to return home. While on her way there, she dropped the earring into a river, but it did not sink and sparrows began circling it. She then retrieved the earring and placed it in a pagoda that she built (Takatani 2000). That pagoda originally faced in the direction of Shan country. When the king heard about this, he was furious, and sent his soldiers to confirm that it had happened, but when they arrived, the pagoda was facing Bagan and not towards Shan. https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/locals-embrace-heat-shwe-sar-yan-pagoda-festival.html.

[20] https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=621165318425641

there, not just among local Hindus but also among people of varied religious backgrounds and from outside Myanmar. Originally, those wishing for a child would tie a cradle to the banyan tree there, but after a point there were so many cradles that the temple ran out of space for them. Nowadays, people instead hold baby dolls at a different altar featuring Hindu gods, and make their wish followed by offering the dolls and placing ash on their own foreheads. If they then have a baby, they must return to the temple. According to Hindu priest U Aung Min Aung, some wealthy people with "diamonds, gold, silver, precious things" nevertheless cannot have a child. "Therefore, many come to wish at this temple as they believe it will bless them with a child." He said that he supported them in this, based on the "customs of the Hindu religion." Interestingly, despite Hindu gods being worshipped instead of the Buddha in these rituals, the banyan tree remained central to them until the site's popularity mandated a change of venue within the temple, as explained above.

In one of the videos I collected, a person shown wishing at Pilakat says she came to wish for a baby after she saw information about the site on Facebook. Based on that information, she bought white cloth and a doll before visiting. In the same video, another says she had a baby boy but then wanted a baby girl, so came to this temple to express that wish. Later, an ultrasound revealed that her next baby was a girl. Five months after she gave birth for the second time, she came back to the temple to show the baby, shaved its head, and made offerings. Like Queen Saw Mon Hla's statue at Shwe Sar Yan, this temple is popular for fulfilling any kind of wish, and not just specifically wishes for babies.

Personal Narratives: Dreams, Karmic Connections, and Visiting Multiple Sites

I found extensive evidence that people go to multiple wishing sites, especially if they have trouble conceiving. The following quotation is from a web post written by a man whose wife had been having such difficulty.

> Yesterday in the afternoon up on Sagaing Hill near the Shinbinkine Myatswa Paya [famous Buddha image], we went and paid respect to the Thirty Lions Pagoda. The main purpose of going to worship at this pagoda is that one wants to have a child. After getting married, my wife and I went to Yangon for our honeymoon and we went to worship at the Shwedagon Pagoda. There, we went to the *tharsupan paya* for the first time. After one year of being married, even though we wished for a baby, we were unsuccessful. After almost one year, we went to Thardawyapaya in Mandalay. There, again, we wished for a baby. It was rare for us to stay together due to work so we decided to remain together for three to four months. Then, however, because of business matters we had to separate again. When my dear wife arrived again, we tried wishing for a child for a third time, at the Thirty Lions Pagoda. We offered nine different fruits, offered drinking water, took the Five Precepts from a monk, and offered money. We poured water on the lion statue that is holding a baby and drank the water that comes down. Because of these good deeds of taking the precepts, offering fruits and money, may we get a good son that has all his body parts and takes care of the *sāsana*. Whoever hears this, in the *nat* realms, human realm, Brahmā realms, may they all recite *sādhu sādhu sādhu*.

Among other things, this narrative illustrates the multiplicity of sites people may travel to for this purpose if they are initially unsuccessful, and echoes my friends' experience of going to multiple sites in Sagaing over the course of just one day. It is worth highlighting that the above-quoted post was written by a male—to my surprise, not uniquely. It is also worth highlighting the traditional form of this narrative, in which a truth statement, "because of these good deeds of taking the precepts, offering fruits and money," is followed by the wish "may we get a good son."

Traditional Dancers' Narrative

One of the personal narratives of *tharsupan* that I collected, in this case from a YouTube video, is ascribed to a family of Burmese traditional dancers who traveled throughout Myanmar.[21] It says that when they wanted a son, they first went to Shwedagon Pagoda and then to Indawgyi, resulting in the wife conceiving and giving birth to a boy. This, it says, was also after she had many interesting dreams. For instance, shortly after the first time she worshiped at the pagoda and she had been pregnant for five months, she dreamed she was looking at a goldfish when a dragon started emerging from the water. She initially thought the dragon was going to hurt her, but then it looked like it was paying respect to her baby. The reason this couple gave for wishing for a son in particular was that many of the men in the father's family were dancers and that, although the father would have loved a baby girl just as much, he preferred a boy who could continue the family's dancing business. The boy they had was also featured on the program, and hailed as a very talented dancer despite his young age. The family expressed a belief that this boy had, in a past life, been Shan State's regional governor, due to a physical resemblance that people around Indawgyi often remarked upon.

Actress Supan Htwar

Another personal narrative was provided online by one of Myanmar's famous actresses.[22] She married on Valentine's Day and soon afterward, her husband suggested that they try to have a baby. However, she refused on the grounds that she did not want people to think she had only married because she was pregnant. The husband saw the wisdom in this, and after six months, he asked her again. They then tried, but were unsuccessful, and therefore went to Bagan to visit the Alodawpyi Pagoda, the name of which literally means "wish-fulfilling." While they were there, a monk asked them about the nature of their wish. The husband said they wanted a baby, but the wife said she wanted an Academy Award. Then, the husband said, "No, we want a baby." The monk told them that they needed to agree with each other on just one wish. The next year, they went to Bagan again, and this time, they both wished for a baby; and as soon as they came back from Bagan, the actress became pregnant.

Ritual Narratives: Yadaya*,* Adhiṭṭhān*, and Truth Statements*

Where ritual was the main focus of the media, survey, and interview content I collected, it was somewhat more varied than I expected, given that a ritual prescribed for a particular purpose within a given sociocultural and religious environment tends to happen in a certain sequence, at a certain interval, and/or for a certain amount of time, even though its actors and sites will differ. The picture was further complicated by variation in ritual formats: e.g., offering coconuts and bananas, to a Buddha image, a pagoda, or a banyan tree. One survey respondent said that they usually pray to someone who has higher morality or merit than themselves, or pray at a sacred site, believing that this will help fulfill their wishes; but that this person or site could be anyone or anything, as long as it fits those broad criteria.

As discussed earlier, rituals often consisted of *yadaya* (P: *yantra*), *adhiṭṭhān* (P: *adhiṭṭhāna*), and or/a truth statement (P: *saccakiriyā*)—or in Burmese *thissa-soe*—attached to a wish. Another word worth highlighting is *patthanā*, which is used in both Burmese and Pāli and translates as "earnest wish" (Kong 2012). Kong writes that an earnest wish cannot simply be fulfilled by a monk or even the Buddha, but requires the power of a truth utterance like the ones monks use when they give their thanks (100). Chanting the *paritta* (protective chants), or the *Paṭṭhāna*, is widely deemed as effective as they are also considered truth statements because they are supposed to be the direct words of the Buddha. The Buddha-to-be made his famous truth statement with the Earth as his witness, and Aṅgulimāla, a murderer who became a monk, is said to have made a truth statement in front of a woman who was in the middle of a difficult childbirth, thereby releasing her from her pain and

[21] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSE9GBKNR78
[22] https://www.facebook.com/MyanmarCeleCrazy/videos/292558697998499

enabling her to deliver a healthy baby. In short, one's vow and/or truth statement that prefaces a wish could be effective if made in front of various people/spirits/deities, sacred structures, or landscapes, or even in one's own home. But as the monks mentioned in this paper would argue that it is only the amount of merit that a person has that is the real prerequisite to a wish coming true.

With regard to how often such rituals take place, it is worth noting the importance of *adhiṭṭhān* as mentioned earlier in my discussion of Thit Ta Kar Sayadaw; and more specifically, the idea that a given ritual or meditation will more effectively cause one's wish for a child to be granted if one vows to perform it for a certain number of days and then does so. I had some difficulty finding literature on *adhiṭṭhān*, which has been written about much less than *yadaya* and *saccakiriyā* have. *Yadaya* may be more interesting to researchers because of its probable ties to tantric and Mahayana influences that made their way into Burmese culture (e.g., Candier 2022; Pranke 2010). Kong (2012) only writes about *adhiṭṭhān* as found in the scriptures, where it is related to the Buddha, *arahant*s, and "faithful laywomen and laymen" (184). These figures state that because of a solemn resolution (*adhiṭṭhāna*) they had made, a miracle should occur; and that the results of the wholesome karma they produced while living can occur even after death. This logic implies that certain sites with relics have the ability to foster miraculous events (178–179). One can also differentiate *adhiṭṭhāna*, as a vow to perform a type of act in the future, from truth statements which relate to acts already performed. One informant explained the following to me about wishing for a boy:

> [M]y mom wanted a boy because he was the first grandchild. She didn't push me but I know what she was thinking, I wanted to help fulfill her wish, in my memory I said if I have a chance to get a boy it would be a blessing but to be honest it didn't matter, but for other people it may be more important [...]. [T]hey make a very serious wish [...]. Since I knew I was pregnant I started to do good things, not to do bad things, I tried to be more careful. I tried to observe the Five Precepts. Even before, I tried not to break those rules, but I am very short-tempered, and [with] the hormone changes, I had to control myself. That was a big struggle. I was working in Japan and it was not easy, especially when pregnant. So I said "I will do this kind of thing, in return I want my baby to be this and this." [...]. [B]ecause of my mom she wanted her first grandchild to be a boy, because they want to do *shinpyu* because of tradition. It is culture, we have different ethnic people that might have different ways. Before I was born my mom also made a wish, that is a very different story, she really wanted a girl, so she was wishing for that, and was very glad that that came true.

The wish in this woman's case can be classified as an *adhiṭṭhān*, in that she made a vow to perform some kind of action: i.e., to practice the Five Precepts.

I was told by a monk that *yadaya* means either "instructions to offer something" or "to throw something away." Candier (2022: 191) describes it as "rituals to attenuate pernicious influence of planets and physical elements on the karma of individuals." Brac de la Perrière (2022b), meanwhile, notes that it comes "from Pāli *yantra* (technical device) or *yâtrâ*, (journey, expedition, or pilgrimage)" and defines it as "potent ritual means whose main purveyors are astrologers" (2022b: note 1). The above-mentioned example performed by Sujātā would be used for people to "get back their hidden karma." The following is another example of a *yadaya* ritual recounted by an astrologer/palm reader in a web post titled *How to wish for a child, for those who have not been able to conceive children.*

> The wife should go to the corner of the pagoda according to the day she was born.[23] If the woman was born on a Friday, she goes to the Friday corner with her husband at 9 a.m. and offers fruit and flowers. After they both worship the Buddha, they should wish for a child. Then, from the pagoda

[23] Many pagodas in Myanmar feature designated areas for people to congregate and worship at based on the day of the week when they were born.

> compound, the couple should take either a dried leaf or a small stone, and think of this as bringing back a child. Then, without saying a word to anyone on the street, the husband and wife need to go directly home. A relative older than them needs to be waiting there. When the couple arrives home, the older relative needs to ask "Did you bring it?" To this, the couple should reply, "We brought it." Then the couple takes the leaf or stone and places it under their pillow and sleeps on it until conception, with their heads facing in the direction of the Buddha statue in the house. The couple is also supposed to do good deeds for children, such as give them toys or provide them with medical treatment.

In this case, the ritual is quite complex, but retains the above-mentioned ideas that the wished-for child pre-exists; that it is spatially located at or near the wishing site; and that it can be physically brought from that site into one's home. The requirement that the would-be mother stand at the altar corresponding to her day of birth is in line with astrology, and the intermediary in this case is the astrologer providing the instructions. The Buddhist institution of the pagoda is the first destination, yet the ritual is also continued at home.

Gender Preference

Throughout this paper, I have mentioned instances where the gender of the baby is wished for. Evidence from my survey, collected documents, and interviews all support the idea that wishing for a son is more popular in Myanmar than wishing for a daughter. There could be various reasons for this, including a cultural preference for a first child or first grandchild to be male, grounded in the idea that whole families—but especially mothers—want to have a son join the *sangha* as a novice monk. This is tied to the beliefs that, if he does, even if just temporary his mother and family will receive much merit, and that his mother's likelihood of being reborn in hell in a future life is reduced. A second common reason cited for wishing for a son is already having a daughter. Conversely, wishing for a daughter often appears to be driven by already having a son or sons. While sons are important for the *sangha*, from my observations when staying in a village, traditionally daughters take care of their parents; and even married daughters (and their husbands) will live with the wife's parents for a brief period. Therefore, it seems that while a son may help their mothers and other family members in future lives, daughters may be seen as more helpful in the here and now.

One female survey respondent wrote that she wished for a boy at Shwedagon and that the reason "may be peer pressure." Two women in their early 20s whom I interviewed in the San Francisco Bay Area immediately took *tharsupan* to mean "wishing for a boy child," and both said they thought of it as a very traditional aspect of Burmese culture. One of the same women noted that her mother had gone to Shwedagon to wish for a boy because she already had a girl (her) and wanted to "give a son to the *sangha.*" Although she was clearly hesitant about this tradition, I asked her if she might do the same, and she said she probably would because she too would want to be able to sponsor the *shinpyu* (novice ordination) celebration. As Nancy Eberhardt (2006) has shown, even though it is the boy that is undergoing the ordination, such celebrations—extravagant events that can last for three days—are more for his mother and other donors than for him.

A personal narrative I collected from online recounted that a woman from a traditional dancing family had an abortion because she was traveling for her job and felt she lacked sufficient resources to support a child. The fetus she aborted happened to be male. When she eventually did have a child, at a time she felt was more appropriate, it was a girl. The next child she had was a boy, but it didn't survive. The next child she had was another girl. She wanted a son, but believed that because of the abortion, her karma was keeping one from being born.

As shown in Figure 8, 41.7% (n=10) of those surveyed said that the gender of the baby did not matter. The second largest group, comprising 29% (n=7), that said they wished for a boy, and equal numbers preferred not

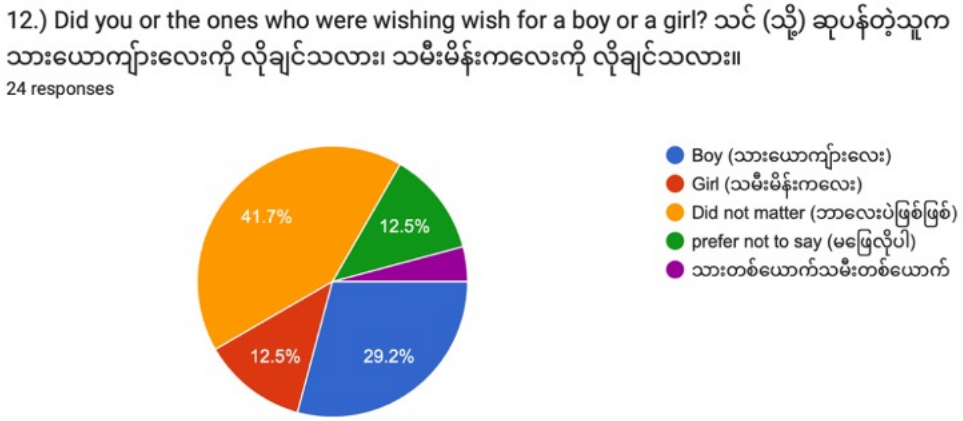

Figure 8: Survey results, baby gender preference.

to say or wished for a girl. One, whose response in Burmese is shown in purple, wished for one child of each sex.

Conclusion

According to the commentaries, Sujātā went to the Buddha-to-be to return the gratitude for her wish being fulfilled. I have extensively discussed the process of going to a sacred spot and/or person, saying sacred words, and making a wish, but have said less about the wish being fulfilled or unfulfilled. Pilgrims to wishing sites are not necessarily regular worshipers. Some who wish for children may never return, or become regulars if they conceive and, like Sujātā, want to express their gratitude. My friends who visited multiple wishing sites with me in Sagaing have not conceived, and the woman came to believe that the sites did not work. However, she chanted nightly when I stayed at her house, and told me that she had to accept her fate if she could not have her own child, and that the chanting helped calm her mind. She had a nephew that she regarded as her own child and even talked about adopting him so that she could take him out of the country when she traveled. While the ritual sites may not have worked, other aspects of Buddhism helped with the disappointment, and she found other ways to mother: that is, she found a Buddhist path nonetheless.

Taken as a whole, my data suggest a correlation between *tharsupan* and banyan trees in particular. However, the Shwedagon Pagoda outranks all other wishing sites when I ask about wishing for children. In second place, at least based on the survey data, there was a tie between praying at home on the one hand and, on the other, praying at a banyan tree or to Yokkha Soe. The other sites mentioned as likely to result in a wish for a child being granted included Kyauk Kalay; an unspecified Hindu temple (most likely Pilakat); and unspecified "powerful pagodas." When translating materials regarding these sites, I found intricate and detailed imagery and meanings from across time and space. The people wishing may not know these historical underpinnings, but only of a site's efficacy and popularity based on word of mouth, often from online sources such as Facebook or YouTube. I suggest that some wishing sites become their own kind of *jātaka* tale. Although they do not have the internal consciousness or lifeforce that ensures a physical rebirth, they are often remodeled due to their merit having grown. Of course, this could go the other way: a site could decline because of its diminishing merit and efficacy. I did identify one site whose power had waned because of controversies involving donations to it and military generals.

All the sites mentioned named above had an intermediary between the worshiper and the Buddha: Yokkha Soe, a majestic tree, an image of a Buddhist devotee, a lion, an image of Brahmā, Bo Min Gaung, and so forth. Intermediaries who were living humans, e.g., astrologers and Hindu priests, also came into play in some cases. One might even say that Facebook and YouTube, or the humans who run them, are serving as intermediaries in this context.

Narratives with/of trees were harder to find on social media, and I do not yet have a strong hypothesis as to why. Such trees as are present tend to be mentioned in conjunction with monks, such as Ledi Sayadaw or Thit Tha Kar Sayadaw. Although Facebook is popular amongst villagers and women, would-be parents wishing at a local tree might not report doing so on social media, given such stories' presumably lower interest value to other people than ones about traveling to a faraway pagoda. Perhaps each such tree is too particular; or conversely, too universal—one of many almost exactly like it. One informant told me that in Mandalay in the past, everyone had gardens, many of which included a banyan tree; and that her grandparents wished for a child at their own. They were in their 40s at the time, and their age was widely believed to be the main reason for their trouble conceiving. However, after wishing at the tree, the wife became pregnant. The couple had a boy, and he grew up to be very bright. This was credited to the tree and to the wisdom that it represented. Another interlocutor, however, told me that trees had become relatively unpopular as sites for wishing because so many had been cut down in recent years, despite the fact that felling any tree deemed to be sacred required special permission from the government, as well as special rituals. Logically, this process of felling trees and building pagodas would have an impact on certain sites becoming more popular than others. Indeed, when I was researching a particular nunnery, the nuns commented that when it was first built there were many trees, an emerald canopy, whereas now there were many buildings. Although taking care of a banyan or bodhi tree would bring merit as Rawe Htun suggested, merit is also accumulated by building pagodas, arguably a more visible form of Buddhist piety.

As briefly noted above, I was surprised to see how many men wrote or spoke about *tharsupan*. Even in the case of actress Supan Htwar, who told her own story, the process of wishing appeared to have been driven primarily by her husband. This upended my preexisting assumptions that it would be mostly women who desired a child enough to wish for one, or who would communicate about such a wish via videos and web postings. My research also revealed that a few of Myanmar's wishing sites—specifically, the Child Holding Brahmā, the Thirty Lions Pagoda, and the *yadaya* described by the fortune teller—are conceptualized as places to receive pre-existing unborn babies. Of course, narratives about such sites can differ considerably depending on the person being questioned, but more research on this conceptualization and its roots seems warranted.

A site and its supposed power can also influence the person who is wishing, and belief in intermediation—such as by Bo Min Gaung, Brahmā, Yokkha Soe, and/or ritual specialists such as astrologers and Hindu priests—can be important to that process. The sites, stories and rituals I identified, though they share various similarities, are also very rich in variations and differences. In some cases, such differences further highlight the importance of looking at Myanmar not merely as a part of Southeast Asia, but as having a close relationship with practices from both contemporary and ancient South Asia (Emmrich et al. 2023). Scholarship needs to be more inclusive of the natural elements that help inform lived Buddhism, as disproportionate focus on human-made structures has painted an unrealistic picture.

Finally, I would like to point out that wishing rituals, both in the scriptures and as practiced today, demonstrate the blurred line between the mundane (*loki*) and the supramundane (*lokuttara*); and that the ways in which wishing for a child in contemporary Myanmar and beyond is perceived, carried out, and remembered indicate that a woman *or a man's* act (or many acts) of wishing for a child—whether at a banyan tree, at a pagoda, or in other spaces—can mark the commencement of their path as a Buddhist mother or father.

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