

A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE GAVAṂPATI CULT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SLAPAT GAVAṂPATI IN EARLY MYANMAR BUDDHISM

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The Saint “Gavaṁpati” had earned a good fame in early Mon Buddhist history of Myanmar. The epigraphical evidence found mainly in Pagan and Pegu areas of Myanmar show the significance of Saint Gavaṁpati worshiped in Mon and Burmese Buddhist traditions during the 12th Century CE. Similarly, the statue of the “Fat Monk” or “pot-bellied Monk” belonging to that period has been unearthed during archeological excavations not only in Myanmar but also in neighboring countries such as Thailand. A preliminary study of this figure has suggested that the “Fat Monk” was a patron saint of the Mon people, who introduced Buddhism to Thaton, an ancient Mon Kingdom of lower Myanmar. The present study reexamines the earlier research claims on the statue of Gavaṁpati from the perspectives of both textual and archaeological findings. According to the Sanskrit text *Mahākarmavibhaṅga*, Gavaṁpati *Thera* converted people of Suvarṇabhūmi to Buddhism. The mission of the two *Theras*, Soṇa and Uttara, in the Theravada tradition is also well depicted in Mon and Myanmar chronicles. In any case, what is the relationship between those two accounts? How many saints bear the name of ‘Gavaṁpati’? And again, why is he that much important in early Mon Buddhist tradition? Our current knowledge of the so-called “Gavaṁpati Tradition” reveals that ancient Mon Buddhists in Myanmar had relations with Northern India Buddhism. On the other hand, the Buddhist school of *Sarvāstivāda* spread over Myanmar had also influenced Mon Buddhism while Theravada Buddhism was firmly rooted later. Therefore, Gavaṁpati *Thera* seems to be the first Buddhist missionary to Myanmar who influenced establishing a particular school with his appellation. Whereas the role of Gavaṁpati has been forgotten by later generations, veneration of him is active even today.

Keywords: Gavaṁpati, Mon and Myanmar Buddhism, Cult of Fat Monk