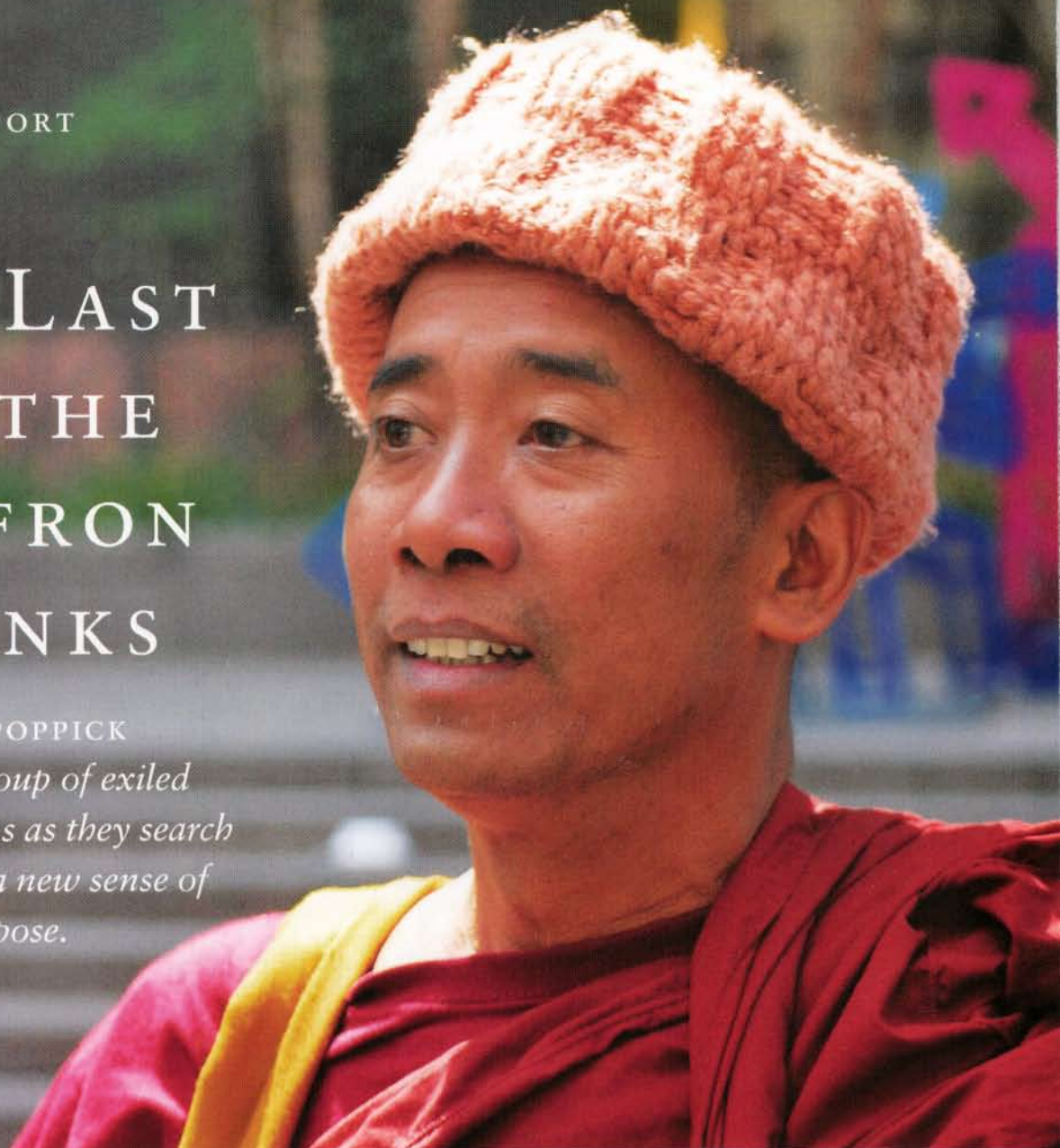


REPORT

# THE LAST OF THE SAFFRON MONKS

SUSIE POPPICK

*follows a group of exiled  
Burmese monks as they search  
America for a new sense of  
purpose.*



**M**ost mornings, U Pyinya Zawta meditates for an hour in lotus position, hands resting gently in his lap, eyes closed, feet bare, body static but for the crinkles in his maroon robe that rise and fall with his breath. Although his head is shaved, bits of silver stubble peek out over his ears, betraying his fifty years.

His day continues according to a strict routine: a small breakfast of

oatmeal before 8 A.M., then a second and final meal that must be eaten before noon. Over today's lunch—rice and chicken curry—U Pyinya describes the four cardinal rules he must follow to remain a Buddhist monk. "I must not kill or steal," he says. "I must remain abstinent . . . and I must not exaggerate my powers as a monk in order to mislead people." Then he motions for me to pass him a fork.

When I comply, I'm careful to keep our hands from brushing. Beyond

the four basic tenets, a host of lesser principles require monks to rely on supporters to prepare their food and to avoid all physical contact with women—a tricky condition, as U Pyinya Zawta is a frequent guest in my parents' home.

This challenge is relatively new for U Pyinya. He became a novice monk in his home country Burma (known officially as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar), when he was just eleven and has spent most of his life within the all-male confines of a monastery.

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But since 2008, U Pyinya has been a political refugee living in the United States, where he sometimes must bend the monastic rules to accommodate life in America. Because he held a leadership role in the 2007 Burmese pro-democracy “Saffron Revolution” marches, he frequently is invited to speak at schools and public forums around the United States. There, he describes the ten years he spent in Burmese prisons and his role in the Oscar-nominated documentary *Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country*. He has written columns, assisted by a translator, for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Huffington Post*. His newfound role as a public figure has demanded that he become more comfortable shaking hands with female acquaintances and eating an hour or two late while on the road.

Nevertheless, U Pyinya Zawta believes he is lucky: Despite the compromises, he can remain a monk. He and two other refugee monks rent the lower floors of a two-family brownstone in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, from my parents. I live upstairs with a roommate. Before moving to

Brooklyn in the summer of 2010, U Pyinya and his companions rented a government-subsidized apartment in Utica, New York. The sizeable Burmese immigrant community there—about 3000 people, including nearly 350 Buddhists—helped support the monks, providing daily meals and cash donations. In Brooklyn, supporters continue to make weekly visits from the New York region and from places as distant as Allentown, Pennsylvania, and Fort Wayne, Indiana. When the monks travel, families around the country—including my father and my mother, who was born in Burma—have hosted them. Over the last two years, these families also have supplied them with donated laptops, cell phones, two used cars, and a small but crucial cash cushion that allows them to live as true Buddhist monks who spend their days studying, presiding over religious ceremonies, and managing their home as a provisional monastery open to the community. But the supportive network U Pyinya Zawta and his partners have built is unusual.

Of about forty exiled Burmese monks who helped lead the 2007 Saffron Revolution, faced government persecution, and won political asylum in the United States, only

a small handful have been able to maintain monastic life in America. In addition to himself, two fellow monks in Brooklyn, and one still living in Utica, U Pyinya knows only of two others living in Dallas and one in Oakland. The remaining exiles have had to abandon the monkhood to seek paying jobs, an endeavor that has met with mixed success. Some former monks, slowly assimilating into American society, find themselves enjoying a layman’s independence and leisure activities for the first time in their lives; some even consider the prospect of eventually marrying. But most feel distraught by their circumstances. Since adolescence they have focused on spiritual and intellectual pursuits and depended on others for food and shelter; now, ill-prepared for menial jobs in restaurants and factories—if they’ve been lucky enough to find them—the former monks feel like souls adrift.

“The purpose of a monk’s life is to achieve enlightenment and share that with others,” U Pyinya explains. “Monks are lost without communities, and communities are lost without monks.”

Integrating these two groups—refugee monks who need support and Burmese communities that miss their



presence—is one of U Pyinya’s many goals. In the past two years he and his fellow monks have begun fundraising to support themselves and other refugees and establish a trust to finance a U.S. temple and monastery for Saffron Revolution monks. They have saved up about \$30,000 in donations so far. On a fundraising tour of the West Coast in February 2010, U Pyinya took another crucial step: He began to identify Burmese communities that want, but lack, monks.

“Every follower has to promise he or she will respect the three gems: Buddha, Buddhist teachings, and Buddhist monks,” U Pyinya Zawta calls out in Burmese.

He sits facing fifteen Burmese families, a microphone and donation bowl at his feet. The families have gathered at the Salt Lake City home of Zar Ni, an old friend who met U Pyinya during Burma’s 1988 democracy movement. All have seated themselves on the rec-room floor, which is cleared of furniture and covered with a patchwork of rugs. For many in the audience, this meeting marks the first time they’ve seen a monk since they left Burma.

Utah’s Burmese refugee population has grown by more than a thousand since the government crackdowns that followed the 2007 Saffron Revolution. New immigrants, accustomed to their homeland’s tropical climate, sometimes step off the plane in T-shirts and flip-flops, only to witness their first snowfall. While organizations such as the International Rescue Committee often help place refugees, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also has stepped in to provide warm clothing, food, and—increasingly—spiritual support. The church, which claims more than half of Utah’s population among its members, organized a Mormon congregation for Burmese immigrants in the summer of 2009 and has since baptized more than one hundred new members.

Although the assistance of the Mormon church is often indispensable to Burmese refugees, many of whom lack the language or job skills to support themselves once government-issued resettlement stipends run out, some immigrants fear the church’s proselytizing is chipping away at their traditions.

Shwe Ba, who came to Salt Lake City in 2007 with his wife and four daughters, says that, without a single Burmese monk in the area, his and other Buddhist families lack spiritual support, and this has driven some to convert to Christianity. Monks are essential, he says, for funerals, weddings, house blessings, and birthdays.

“My children know they are Buddhist, but if they never see monks or learn Buddhist teachings, what can ‘Buddhist’ mean to them?” he says. “It is very sad that they don’t have what I had, what my parents and grandparents had, back in Burma.”

Eh Mu, another Burmese immigrant living in Salt Lake City, also worries that her two-year-old son is missing out on a proper Buddhist education. “It’s tradition for young boys to spend at least two weeks as a novice monk,” she says. “He needs a mentor for that, a monk who will teach him the rules of meditation.”

Speaking before Eh Mu, Shwe Ba, and the dozens of other immigrants, U Pyinya appeals to their sense of tradition as he describes his plans to build a new monastery.

“Some people may not have enough money to give,” he says. “That does not mean they are lesser Buddhists, as long as they find other ways to do good deeds. But for those who can give even a little, this is a chance to support your monks.”

What he doesn’t spend much time explaining is just how badly the monks need that support.

Myat Saw Ko, who came to the United States in August 2009, knew only monastic life before his arrival: He’s thirty-one and became a monk at ten. Today he lives in Georgia.

Because no monastery in the state had the resources to take him in when he arrived, he had to rely on sympathetic families to provide food and shelter. He quickly realized that this was not a sustainable life.

“Because I was the only monk in the community, living with all of these families, I had to take on responsibilities which are normally not permitted,” he explains over the phone, as my mother translates. “It was difficult to observe my daily monk’s routine while having to cook for myself, shop, and mix with lay-people. I wasn’t able to keep up with all of the requirements.”

Just months later, Myat Saw Ko reluctantly decided to leave the monkhood. Today he works six days a week making sushi at a Japanese restaurant in Athens, Georgia. He still hasn’t adjusted to life outside a monastery, he says, and he feels isolated without close friends or family.

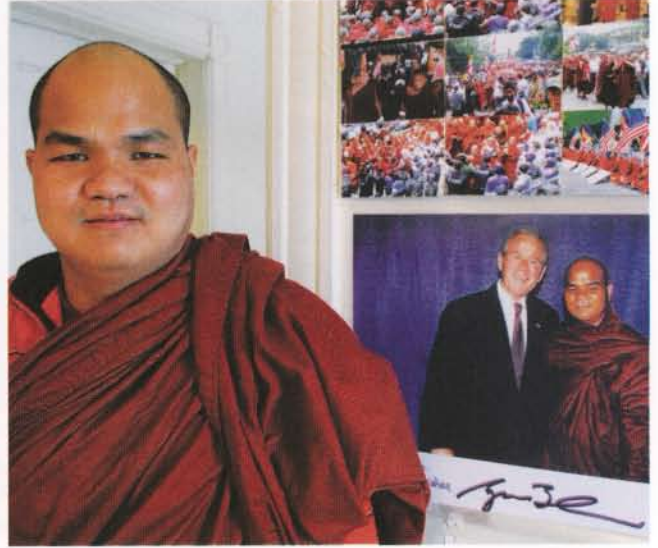
“Because I haven’t been in the country very long, I actually don’t really know how to enjoy myself on my day off,” he says. “The fact that I don’t speak English very well doesn’t help.”

Not knowing where to go or how to get there, Myat Saw Ko says he usually just stays home, worrying about the future. “My job is not going very well, and I could become homeless at any time,” he says.

Such fears may not be unfounded. Former monk U Zeye came a few months earlier, found work at a window manufacturer in Clarkston, Georgia, and then lost his job after orders began running low. Despite an ongoing search, he has not found another.

“Right now I have no choices, no money for rent,” he says. It’s another world from Burma, where “even if you are homeless, you can always find shelter at a monastery.”

Like most of the other refugee monks, U Zeye was given no choice about where he would live. Resettlement agencies work with the U.S.



State Department to provide refugees with residences and access to social services, and while the agencies must supply translators, there is no requirement that refugees be placed in communities with people of the same nationality. Although Clarkston has a small Burmese population, many in it come from traditionally Christian groups, with no religious obligation to support Buddhist monks. Like Myat Saw Ko, U Zeye was forced to become a layman in August 2009.

Although he feels trapped in Georgia, U Zeye doesn't have enough money to move. He lives day to day, asking the few friends he's made for help. In January 2010 a Buddhist monk in Texas sent him \$200. Although he wants eventually to return to the monkhood, U Zeye fears that leaving will have cost him the respect of his peers.

Still, he says, his faith—which emphasizes patience and resilience—has warded off depression. “Sometimes I want to go crazy because I have no job and no money, but I control my mind according to Buddhist teachings,” he says. “My religion helps me stay positive.”

A few monks turned layman wage earners have made better adjustments.

Zaw Zaw works as a sushi chef in Louisville, Kentucky. In the last few

months, after a rocky initiation into American life, he has grown more comfortable. “My favorite thing to do during my free time,” he reports, “is to watch Sunday basketball games at the local university”—a treat because Burmese Buddhist monks traditionally abstain from entertainment.

He earns enough to put aside small amounts for donations to monasteries and humanitarian causes and is even open to the idea of marriage one day. “At the present time I am busy working to support myself, but maybe in the future,” he says.

Similarly, Htay Lwin, although near tears in November 2008 when he first changed into civilian clothes and became a layman, feels moderately happy today with his job in a West Virginia chicken-processing plant. Life under the Burmese government prevented his learning about other cultures, he says; now he enjoys chatting with his coworkers at the plant—including Latino, Chinese, Thai, and African immigrants—in basic English, which he studies during his free time.

“In Burma, I was like a child locked in a room,” Htay Lwin muses. “My only view of the world was through a crack in the wall. Arriving in the United States has been like stepping out of the darkness. . . . I

have been surprised by how open and friendly everyone is.”

He appreciates, too, how relaxed a layman's life can be: He can eat when he's hungry and spend his free time as he chooses. Still, he has begun to save small amounts, hoping he may one day be able to support himself again as a monk.

In Burmese Buddhism, a former monk eventually may regain monkhood with the approval of his monastic peers, although he must return to the lowest rank of novice monk and work his way back up. Even former monks who've married or become soldiers may rejoin monasteries, as long as they swear off inappropriate activities, including sex and violence. For political refugees, the greater challenge has been staying in the monkhood to begin with.

**A**id from Burmese communities in the United States may be the most critical factor in the refugee monks' survival, and U Pyinya Zawta says he'd be lost without the help he's received from supporters in Utica and Brooklyn. He believes similar immigrant communities can help other monks.

The years since the Saffron Revolution have brought a considerable spike in the number of Burmese

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refugees to the United States. Of more than 56,000 Burmese refugees who arrived in the past decade, about 90 percent came between 2007 and 2009, according to U.S. State Department statistics.

These data not only represent a significant surge in the overall number of Burmese U.S. residents—in the 2000 census, the total figure stood at just over 30,000—but also suggest that a substantial portion have come to escape political oppression and poor living conditions under Burma's military government. Such refugees may feel duty bound to support the Saffron monks' pro-democracy stand.

Than Soe, a temporary U.S. resident living in Utica since 2007, is one of those refugees.

Sitting in the temple room of the Utica apartment that U Pyinya Zawta shared with three other monks in the spring of 2010, Than Soe explains that, as a Buddhist and a political exile, he felt a strong kinship with his monastic neighbors.

"Back in Burma we always helped monks," he says. "But the monks in Utica at this monastery were involved in the political movement in Burma, so we have to help them even more."

Some supporters of the monks are not political refugees; others are not Buddhists. Cousins Kar Rin and Met Ra Fi are Muslim Burmese immigrants. Although they have chosen not to bring religious offerings, they consider the monks friends and allies in the fight for democracy.

"The Burmese government oppresses both Muslims and Buddhists," Kar Rin explains. "We both need freedom of belief and democracy. In my village, the regime destroyed our mosque and chased us from our homes."

U Pyinya and his partners believe their duties extend beyond the religious realm: They also strive to raise awareness of the political situation in Burma, where a military dictatorship has suppressed democracy for nearly fifty years.

U Pyinya has a long personal history fighting that dictatorship. Since 1988 he's been involved in, and was arrested twice for leadership of, Burma's pro-democracy movement. He spent a total of ten years in squalid Burmese prisons, enduring solitary confinement, interrogation, beatings, starvation, and sleep deprivation, as guards tried to extract the identities of his peers.

"One of my greatest worries was for the safety of my young pupils and followers, whom I had entrusted with my materials before I went to prison," U Pyinya says. "I spent much of my time deciding what was safe to tell the guards. I pretended to be very reluctant to give up information that I knew they would inevitably learn without my help."

After U Pyinya helped lead protests during the 2007 Saffron Revolution, the government shut down his monastery, and he fled to the countryside. For four months he used disguises to move from town to town, traveling only at night to avoid arrest. He spent six weeks hiding in a twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot room in a village outside Yangon (Burma's former capital, also known as Rangoon), meditating and reading until nightfall and then sneaking to nearby fields to call and meet with his supporters.

U Pyinya finally realized, when the government arrested his mother and siblings, that he couldn't continue his underground life in the country. Disguised as a merchant, he drove across

the border into Thailand. There he began to give interviews to the media so the Burmese government would know he had left the country—and would release his family.

Although he has not returned to Burma, U Pyinya's experiences in prison have left him determined to promote the pro-democracy movement. "What I observed is that there was no rule of law," he said. "I saw that people in prison were treated very wrongfully." Last year he learned that the regime had imposed a long prison term on him in absentia.

Buddhist monks have been active in Burmese politics since colonial times, says Georgetown University Asian studies professor David Steinberg, who has written seven books on Burma. "It is nothing new," he says, "and monks will continue to be important in Burma's future. They are a moral force in society."

Nevertheless, Steinberg doubts that Burmese monks in exile can significantly influence politics back home, and, at the time of this interview, he didn't expect the Burmese government to permit free campaigning or honest vote counting during the multiparty general elections scheduled for November 2010. "The essential issues in society will continue to be determined by the military," Steinberg says. "A lot of the opposition will say that the government is on the edge of chaos . . . but in fact the military hold remains exceedingly strong. It is a sad state of affairs."

Founded in 1983, the Universal Peace Buddha Temple of New York in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, hosts at least three hundred regular attendees at meditation sessions for adults. The temple also holds classes on Buddhism and on Burmese culture and language for children. From the outside it looks like any other mid-sized brick building on Bergen Street. A push on the

door buzzer prompts a monk to stick his head out a window a couple of flights up. Once visitors pass muster, they climb to the second floor and remove their shoes. Five monks live in this spacious monastery.

In the third-floor shrine room, monk Sayadaw Sakkinda sits cross-legged in front of a stage covered in offerings—bottles of soda, dollar bills, flowers, fruit—to a central statue of Buddha. He explains that his monastery, partly supported by donations from Burmese government officials, discourages monks from political participation.

Monks are obligated to help fellow Buddhists in need, regardless of their political viewpoints, Sayadaw Sakkinda says, but monks who are active political dissidents cannot stay here long.

“We support them and host them here, initially,” he says, “but in the end they have to find their own place. [We] don’t want political activities here.”

Universal Peace Buddha Temple’s head monk, Ashin Indaka, is seventy. He refused to take a leadership role in Burma’s antigovernment uprising in 1988, despite pleas from his peers. “Our role is a pure religious role,” he says. “We are not involved in political affairs.”

U Pyinya Zawta sits at my parents’ dining-room table wearing a red Rutgers sweatshirt—a gift presented when he spoke at the university—and a maroon sweater under his robes, even though it’s warm inside. Despite his determination to help other monks, U Pyinya himself is still adapting to life in the United States, with its seasons and strange foods and customs. He tells me he hates snow, loves hamburgers, and is surprised by how blunt Americans can be.

“Sometimes I think people speak without respect,” he says, “but perhaps that is worth it, if it comes with democracy. Sometimes I don’t like American culture, but the political



system is very good, very open.”

In keeping with Buddhist tradition, U Pyinya rarely gets emotional. Buddhists who have found enlightenment are supposed to exist in a state of calm, with feelings of neither extreme happiness nor extreme sadness. U Pyinya’s two stock facial expressions are, appropriately, cheerful and serious.

But when I ask whether he thinks Burma will ever have a true democracy, U Pyinya’s voice betrays a tone

some might find unbecoming to a Buddhist monk: passion. He pulls out a ragged notebook and opens it to a handwritten list that names most of the forty Saffron Revolution monks who came to the United States as refugees.

“These men thought so,” he says, tapping the pages. “Many of them ended up having to leave the monkhood, the most important thing in their lives, because they believed in political freedom.” **FT**