

Buddhist Social Engagement in Contemporary Myanmar: An Anthropological Interpretation of the Humanitarian Work of Sitagu Sayadaw

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Abstract

Sitagu Sayadaw is one of the most influential monastic leaders in contemporary Myanmar. The large-scale humanitarian work he has led represents a significant development in contemporary Buddhist social engagement. While existing scholarship on Burmese Buddhism tends to focus on historical developments, meditation lineages, political dynamics, and nationalist movements, the motivational dimensions of monastic social action and their theoretical interpretation remain comparatively understudied. This article addresses this gap by applying Max Weber's concept of social action to the humanitarian work of Sitagu Sayadaw. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, the study employs documentary and thematic analysis of Dhamma talks, interviews, and institutional publications of the Sitagu International Buddhist Academies, together with relevant scholarship on Burmese Buddhism. The findings show that his humanitarian engagement reflects Weber's four ideal types of social action: purposive-rational, value-rational, affective, and traditional, alongside traditional legitimacy and charismatic authority. Compassion (*karuṇā*) and merit-making (*kusala*) provide key ethical and cultural motivations for social engagement. These motivations are reinforced by monastic authority and institutionalized through modern organizational rationality, enabling compassion-driven initiatives to develop into sustained, large-scale humanitarian activities. The study demonstrates how Buddhist ethical values and monastic authority interact with organizational rationality in the contemporary transformation of Buddhist social engagement in Myanmar.

Keywords

social engagement, Sitagu Sayadaw, social action theory,
Buddhist anthropology, *karuṇā*

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Introduction

In Theravāda Buddhist countries, monks have traditionally been associated with meditation practice (*vipassanādhura*) and the preservation and transmission of the Buddha's teachings (*ganthadhura*). In Myanmar, however, the role of monks extends beyond these religious functions. Monks serve as moral exemplars, community leaders, educators, and mediators in the country's cultural, ethical, and political life. Since the late twentieth century, this role has expanded further, with monks increasingly participating in humanitarian work, social welfare programmes, and international peace-building conferences. Among contemporary senior monks, Sitagu Sayadaw is one of the most influential figures in Myanmar. His philanthropic projects exemplify contemporary Buddhist social engagement in the country. These humanitarian activities include the construction of charity hospitals, the provision of water supply systems, disaster-relief missions, international Buddhist education networks, and interfaith dialogue programmes. They have attracted broad public trust and veneration, strong lay support, and substantial donations. At the same time, due to the scale and enormous impact of his work on people, regardless of race and religious belief, there have been scholarly discussions about the relationship between religious authority, social engagement, and the role of the monk in modern Burmese society. It is undeniable that the role of Sitagu Sayadaw is multidimensional, and existing scholarship has examined the place of senior monastics within Myanmar's broader political and ethno-religious dynamics, including monastic engagement with the state and with public moral discourse beyond the humanitarian domain (Kawanami 2009, 218–20, 230–33; Schober 2005, 117–22). However, this article does not attempt a comprehensive account of these debates. Instead, it focuses specifically on the institutional and motivational structure of his humanitarian work through Weber's theoretical framework.

Despite the prominence of Sitagu Sayadaw's humanitarian work, scholarly research on Buddhism in Myanmar has generally focused on monastic discipline (*vinaya*), meditation techniques, Buddhist nationalism, and political engagement. There remains a notable gap in studies examining *how contemporary monastic leaders exercise social influence through humanitarian action* and how such action can be interpreted within sociological and anthropological frameworks. This article seeks to address that gap by analysing Sitagu Sayadaw's social engagement through a combined theoretical lens: Max Weber's Social Action Theory and contemporary Buddhist anthropology. Weber argues that social behaviour should be understood in terms of the meaning individuals attach to their actions. He identifies four ideal types of social action: instrumental-rational, value-rational, affectual, and traditional. Applied to religious contexts, this framework helps explain how different motivations shape social behaviour. Buddhist anthropology, meanwhile, provides essential insight into the dynamics of Buddhist social engagement in Myanmar.

The methodology applied in this study is a qualitative case study, drawing on Dhamma talks by Sitagu Sayadaw, institutional reports, secondary academic literature, personal interviews,

and ethnographic observations documented by scholars of Burmese Buddhism. Through this approach, the article evaluates how Buddhist ethical concepts, especially *karuṇā* (compassion), function as moral frameworks that guide and justify humanitarian action. At the same time, it explores how modern organisational strategies, international partnerships, and technological infrastructures reflect Weberian instrumental rationality. This research contributes to the sociology of religion by showing how a contemporary Buddhist leader negotiates traditional religious expectations and modern social needs through distinct patterns of social action. It also contributes to Buddhist anthropology by showing how humanitarian work becomes a site of merit-making, ritual practice, and cultural value formation.

Ultimately, the humanitarian work of Sitagu Sayadaw provides clear evidence of the development of monastic engagement in social welfare in Myanmar. It also reflects broader transformations in Theravāda Buddhist societies across Southeast Asia. By analysing his work through sociological and anthropological perspectives, this article offers a more comprehensive understanding of the moral motivations, meanings, and implications of Buddhist humanitarianism in contemporary Myanmar.

Interpretation of *Karuṇā* (Compassion) in Buddhist Social Engagement

*Karuṇā*¹ is commonly translated into English as “pity” or “compassion” (The Committee of Masoeyein Lectures 2005, 405). Detailed explanations of *karuṇā* are provided by Buddhaghosa Thera in the commentary to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*² through three etymological interpretations:

1. *Paradukkhe sati sādḥūnaṃ hadayakampanaṃ karotīti karuṇā.*
2. *Kiṇāti vā paradukkhaṃ himsati vināsetīti karuṇā.*
3. *Kirīyati vā dukkhitesu pharaṇavasena pasāriyatīti karuṇā* (Dhammasaṅgaṇī

Atṭhakathā 1991, 237).

These passages suggest that “When there is suffering in others, it causes (*karoti*) the hearts of good people to be moved (*kampana*), thus, it is compassion (*karuṇā*). Alternatively, it combats (*kināti*) the suffering of others and attacks and demolishes it. Thus, it is compassion. Alternatively, it is scattered (*kiriyati*) upon those who suffer, extended to them by pervasion. Thus, it is compassion (*karuṇā*)” (Buddhaghosa 1975, IX, 91). In this sense, *karuṇā* is both an emotional response and an active orientation toward the alleviation of suffering.

Sitagu Sayadaw similarly defines *karuṇā* as follows: “On hearing the suffering of other beings, a virtuous person feels trembling in the heart. This is the characteristic of compassion” (Nyanissara 2011, 92). This emotional state represents the essential nature of *karuṇā* in the mind and is expressed in Burmese as *tha nar dal*. *Karuṇā* in action, *kuu nyi dal* in Burmese, refers to the practical enactment of compassion through verbal and physical actions and may be described *kāyakaṃ karuṇā*. Sitagu Sayadaw categorizes *karuṇā* into three forms: *manokaṃ karuṇā* (mentally

¹ A Pāli term derived from the roots “√kara + una + ā”, “√ki + runa + ā”, and “√kira + runa + ā.”

² A first compilation of *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*.

compassionate action), *vacīkaṃ karuṇā* (verbally compassionate action), and *kāyakaṃ karuṇā* (physically compassionate action)” (Nyanissara 2011, 98-99).

Mental compassionate action is cultivated through contemplative reflection on the suffering of others generating deep empathy and the inward wish: “May these beings be free from suffering.” Verbal compassionate action consists of articulating that wish aloud, expressing the desire to alleviate suffering through speech. Physical compassionate action involves practical engagement to relieve the suffering of others in concrete ways.

Scholarship on Buddhist Social Engagement

Over the past few decades, Buddhist social engagement has increasingly been examined through anthropological and sociological perspectives. Scholars have become more interested in forms of Buddhism concerned with social ethics, community welfare, and humanitarian action. Earlier research, however, primarily emphasised monastic discipline and soteriological concerns. Even so, scholarship focusing specifically on the intersection of monastic humanitarianism and sociological theory remains limited. Recent work on “socially engaged Buddhism” highlights the role of Buddhist values in social justice, environmental protection, economic development, and humanitarian relief. Thich Nhat Hanh³ argues that mindfulness and compassion provide the foundation for Engaged Buddhism, a movement that transforms inner spiritual practice into social action for the welfare of society (Hanh 1996, xx). Although Myanmar has a long tradition of monastic charity, scholarship on Burmese Buddhist social engagement remains relatively limited compared to work on Sri Lanka or Thailand. Monastic welfare systems, disaster relief, and institutionalised Buddhist philanthropy in Myanmar have received comparatively little sustained attention.

In the article “Charisma, Power(s), and the Arahant Ideal in Burmese-Myanmar Buddhism,” Hiroko Kawanami examines how contemporary Burmese Buddhist leaders construct and enact charisma and moral authority through teaching, ritual performance, and social engagement within changing socio-political contexts (Kawanami 2009, 211-37). Similarly, Ingrid Jordt analyses modern vipassanā meditation movements as new forms of ideological discipline and spiritual authority (Jordt 2007, 14–18). Juliane Schober, meanwhile, explores how Theravāda Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia negotiate modernity by reworking traditional, cosmological and political concepts in order to develop new forms of social, moral, and institutional engagement (Schober 1995, 307-25). Together, these studies illuminate the interconnections among Buddhism, power, and social identity. However, they focus largely on political engagement, state-Sangha relations, and religious identity. A more systematic sociological analysis of monastic social welfare remains needed.

In *The Golden Road to Modernity: Village Life in Contemporary Burma*, Manning Nash argues that Buddhism in Myanmar functions as a lived religion rather than merely a doctrinal

³ Vietnamese Zen master, peace activist, and a founder of Engaged Buddhism.

system, emphasising how communal unity and social order shape everyday practices such as merit-making and ritual (Nash 1965). Melford E. Spiro, likewise, argues that Burmese Buddhism comprises three interrelated orientations: Nibbanic Buddhism, directed toward liberation; Kammatic Buddhism, focused on merit-making for a better future; and Apotropaic Buddhism, concerned with protective rituals and spirit beliefs. He shows how these dimensions coexist and serve different psychological and social needs (Spiro 1982). Nash and Spiro both suggest that donations to monks and monasteries serve not only spiritual goals but also wider social and economic purposes. Yet, these studies mainly address traditional merit-making and charity, rather than large-scale, organised projects such as monastic hospitals or disaster-relief networks.

Comparative studies in Thailand and Sri Lanka provide valuable literature for understanding institutional Buddhist charity. In Thailand, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu reinterpreted “*Dhammic socialism*” through Buddhist ethics, aligning it with social welfare, ecology, and communal harmony (Buddhadasa 1986). Somboon Suksamran, likewise, examined the changing role of the Theravāda Sangha in the modernisation of Thailand, showing how state policy and modernisation reshaped monastic structure and authority (Suksamran 1977). In Sri Lanka, scholars have paid considerable attention to Buddhist engagement in national development, peace-building, and post-colonial identity. H.L. Seneviratne traces the transformation of monastic roles in shaping social welfare, nationalism, and public ethics across colonial and post-colonial periods (Seneviratne 1999). However, the Burmese context differs significantly because of its distinct political conditions, ethnic diversity, and forms of monastic authority. Regional literature therefore cannot fully explain the particular forms of Burmese monastic social engagement.

Research on prominent monastic leaders in Myanmar remains limited and is often presented in descriptive rather than analytical form. Discussions of Sitagu Sayadaw, in particular, tend to focus on his Dhamma talks, religious contributions, or public influence, while few academic works examine the structural and sociological dimensions of his social engagement. Most available references to Sitagu Sayadaw come from institutional publications, charity reports, or biographical works produced by Buddhist organisations. While these sources document the scope of his humanitarian projects, they rarely analyse the concepts, motivations, or forms of authority underlying his work. This creates a clear gap in scholarly understanding of monastic welfare in Southeast Asia.

Likewise, the development of large-scale monastic humanitarian institutions in Myanmar remains understudied. Although monasteries have long provided education and other forms of support to local communities, the emergence of monastic hospitals, disaster relief teams, water supply systems, and international Buddhist academies marks a new dimension in Buddhist social engagement. This development reflects the combination of traditional Buddhist values with modern organisational practices, as well as a process that Weber would identify as rationalisation. Yet, existing scholarship has not fully explained how this rationalisation operates in Buddhist contexts or how moral values like *karuṇā* are integrated into administrative systems.

Furthermore, although Buddhist anthropology highlights compassion as a central moral value, it rarely examines how compassion becomes institutionalised in large-scale organisations. Anthropologists recognise *karuṇā* as a virtue guiding interpersonal behaviour, but few studies analyse compassion as a structural force in institutional settings. In the case of Sitagu Sayadaw, compassion does not remain merely an individual emotion or meditative ideal; it becomes the organising principle around which entire welfare systems are built. This transformation of compassion into institutional capacity is still insufficiently addressed in current scholarship.

A review of the existing literature therefore reveals several gaps: a lack of sociological analysis of monastic humanitarian institutions; limited application of Weber's social action theory to Buddhist contexts; insufficient examination of compassion as an institutional capacity; and limited integration of Burmese monastic welfare systems into broader humanitarian studies. This article addresses these gaps by applying Weber's theory to analyse how Sitagu Sayadaw brings together compassion, authority, and organisation to construct a comprehensive model of Buddhist social engagement. By associating sociological theory with Buddhist anthropological insight, the study offers a clearer framework for understanding the evolving role of monastic leaders in contemporary Myanmar.

Conceptualization of Weber's Social Action Theory

Max Weber's social action theory offers a crucial analytical foundation for understanding how individuals and institutions frame their actions within broader moral and cultural contexts. According to Weber, action becomes "social" when it is meaningfully oriented toward others and shaped by subjective interpretation (Weber 1978, 4–26). Weber identifies four ideal types of social action: instrumentally rational action, value-rational action, affective action, and traditional action. Instrumentally rational action refers to behaviour calculated to achieve specific goals through efficient means, whereas value-rational action is motivated by deeply held ethical, religious, or cultural principles. Affective action arises from emotional states, and traditional action is grounded in habitual patterns passed down through generations (Weber 1978, 24–26). These categories allow researchers to analyse how religious actors combine moral intention, emotional response, cultural expectation, and organisational planning. Weber also stresses the importance of authority in the enactment of social action. His framework of traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority helps explain how individuals legitimise their influence over others (Weber 1946). In analysing the social work of Sitagu Sayadaw, these Weberian concepts reveal the layered motivations and legitimising forces that shape his engagement in public welfare.

To place Weber's concepts within a Buddhist anthropological context, it is necessary to consider the significance of *karuṇā* not only as a doctrinal ideal but also as a social ethic embedded in Buddhist culture. In Theravāda Buddhism, compassion is one of the four *brahmavihāras*⁴ and signifies a moral imperative to alleviate suffering (Harvey 2000, 105–20). Compassion is cultivated

⁴ Four *Brahmavihāras* (Four Sublime States): *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (appreciation), and *upekkhā* (equanimity)

through religious discipline, meditation, and ethical commitment. However, anthropologists such as Melford Spiro and Manning Nash have shown that Buddhist compassion operates both as an internal virtue and as a social mechanism that motivates communal service, ritual donation, and monastic-led welfare activities (Spiro 1982, 93–113; Nash 1965, 141–56). In Myanmar, compassion is closely linked to the cultural practice of merit-making (*kusala*), through which laypeople support monastic institutions while simultaneously contributing to community welfare. *Karuṇā* therefore functions both as a doctrinal virtue and as a social mechanism for organising collective action. When Weber’s interpretive sociology is combined with this Buddhist anthropological perspective, a hybrid theoretical view emerges. This approach captures both methods of analysis that capture the internal motivations guiding monastic leaders and the external social structures that enables their work.

This integrated framework is used here to examine how compassion is translated into social action; how monastic authority emerges through a combination of moral charisma, cultural legitimacy, and bureaucratic administration, and how welfare activities become institutionalised. Weber’s theory clarifies the rationalisation processes that sustain monastic institutions, while Buddhist anthropology shows how virtues such as *karuṇā* operate as active forces in a lived religious world. Weber’s interpretive sociology is particularly compatible with Buddhism in which intention (*cetanā*) is regarded as the basis of ethical action (Keown 1992, 57–62). Although the four types of social action are analytical rather than empirical categories, they offer a powerful tool for distinguishing different layers of motivation in monastic humanitarian work. In the case of Sitagu Sayadaw, value-rational action is evident in his commitment to *karuṇā* as a guiding ethical principle; instrumental-rational action is visible in the organisation of his humanitarian institutions; affective action appears in moments of emotional resonance and relief work; and traditional action is embedded in Burmese expectations of monks as moral guardians. Weber’s typology of authority further illuminates how monastic leaders acquire legitimacy: through inherited cultural reverence for monks (traditional authority), through personal virtue and humanitarian reputation (charismatic authority), and through the bureaucratic structures of hospitals, universities, and international missions (legal-rational authority) (Schober 2005, 117–22).

Buddhist anthropology provides the cultural and ethical grounding necessary for interpreting monastic action within Burmese Buddhist society. Scholars such as E.P. Thompson and James C. Scott argue that moral economies prioritise ethical norms over market logic (Thompson 1971, 78–79; Scott 1976, 4–7). In Myanmar, donations to monks follow such moral logics, reinforcing Weber’s categories of value-rational and traditional action categories. In this context, compassion becomes a mobilising force that links individual agency with collective solidarity. Symbolic power expressed through robes, rituals, and acts of merit, strengthens monastic legitimacy and enables large-scale humanitarian mobilization (Tambiah 1984, 335–45). Taken together, Weber’s social theory and Buddhist anthropology provide a comprehensive perspective through which the humanitarian activities of Sitagu Sayadaw can be interpreted as socially meaningful, culturally rooted, and institutionally sophisticated expressions of Buddhist compassion.

Sitagu Sayadaw and His Humanitarian Works

Early Life of Sitagu Sayadaw

Sitagu Sayadaw, or Dr. Ashin Nyanissara, is one of the most influential monastic leaders in Myanmar and is widely renowned for his humanitarian efforts and educational leadership. He entered the monastic order as a novice at the age of seven and received higher ordination in 1956. In his academic journey, he obtained the *Sāsanadhajadhammācariya*⁵ degree from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Under the guidance of the senior monk Anisakhan Sayadaw, he became an outstanding Dhamma preacher, and both lay and monastic audiences recognised his preaching ability. This reputation later became a foundation for his humanitarian leadership. In 1977, he established the *Sadhamma Sitagu Monastery* on Sagaing Hill, which later became the center from which a series of large-scale social welfare projects was initiated. In recognition of his contributions to education, religious institutions, and humanitarian service, he has received **six honorary doctorates from** universities in Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia as well as several major state honours.⁶ He currently serves as Chancellor of the Sitagu International Buddhist Academies and remains a prominent figure in Buddhist networks, interfaith circles, and compassionate social action.

Humanitarian Work

“Humanitarian work” or “humanitarian action” is commonly understood as activity aimed at saving lives, alleviating suffering, and upholding human dignity during and after crises caused by human action or natural disasters, and it is guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (OCHA 2012, 1). According to Michael Barnett, humanitarian work comprises a wide range of moral, political, and organisational practices aimed at protecting individuals from suffering, shaped over time by changing global norms and power relations (Barnett 2011, 6–7). In this study, Sitagu Sayadaw’s humanitarian activities are analysed through sociological theories and anthropological concepts.

Sitagu Education Project

To meet the need for modern Buddhist education in Myanmar, Sitagu Sayadaw founded the Sitagu International Buddhist Academy (SIBA) in Sagaing in 1994, followed by the establishment of additional academies in Yangon, Mandalay and Taungoo, as well as affiliated institutions in the United States. SIBA began with a Diploma programme in 1996 and gradually expanded to offer Bachelor’s, Master’s, and PhD programmes. This progress provides comprehensive training starting from basic Buddhist literature to advanced-level academic studies, meeting the standards of a world-class educational institution. The curriculum combines the traditional monastic education system with modern academic methods, all designed to support the intellectual and

⁵ Master in Dhamma, an academic title in Myanmar’s monastic education system

⁶ The titles of State honours are *Aggamahapandita* (1997), *Abhidhajamaharathaguru* (2016), *Abhidhaja aggamahasadhammajotika* (2019).

spiritual development of monks and nuns. However, SIBA's mission extends beyond academic training; it aims to encourage students to cultivate right attitude (*sammā saṅkappa*) and to participate actively in both religious activities and humanitarian work (Wai 2014, 101–10). Sitagu Sayadaw constantly urges his students to uphold high education standards while participating in humanitarian action to become knowledgeable and socially engaged Buddhist leaders. Now, these academies became important centres for monastic education, research, interfaith dialogue, and international Buddhist engagement (Wai 2014, 118).



Figure 1. Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, Mandalay, Myanmar.
Photograph by Dr. Dhammasara, 19 November 2022.

Beyond these educational initiatives, Sitagu Sayadaw also played an instrumental role in disaster relief, healthcare programmes, water supply projects, and other philanthropic activities across Myanmar. The establishment of the Sitagu Ayudana Hospitals, the Sitagu Water Donation Projects, disaster emergency relief programmes, and international humanitarian collaborations reinforced his reputation as a leading figure in socially engaged Buddhism.

Sitagu Water Donation Project

The Sitagu Water Donation Project was initiated by Sitagu Sayadaw in 1980. It was the first major social welfare initiative of SIMA (Sitagu International Missionary Association) was established to address long-standing water shortages in the arid Sagaing Hills, where monks, nuns, and lay residents had depended on rainwater and often spent hours collecting water from the Ayeyarwady River. Earlier water systems established by senior monks proved insufficient because of limited electricity and poor management. Recognising this problem, Sitagu Sayadaw donated 30,000 kyats, mobilised public support, and organised two regional fundraising committees, one for Upper Myanmar and one for Lower Myanmar, each with dedicated financial and management teams. Sustained by nationwide and international contributions, the project expanded over four decades to supply water across Sagaing, Míngun, and Minwan. According to project records, 23 reservoirs pump more than 1.6 million gallons of water daily, benefiting nearly 20,000 people. Senior monks praised the project as an expression of the Sayadaw's boundless *mettā* (loving-kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion), enabling monks, nuns, and lay residents to live and practice free from the burden of water scarcity (Wai 2014, 72–6).

Table 1. Sitagu Water Donation Project across Sagaing, Mingun, and Minwan

Sitagu Water Donation Stations across Sagaing, Mingun, and Minwan	Total Number
Numbers of main stations for water supply	3
Numbers of water pumping stations	23
Gallons of water running by pumps	1.6 million
Numbers of beneficiaries of the water donation project	20,000
Numbers of monasteries and nunneries in the areas	1.451

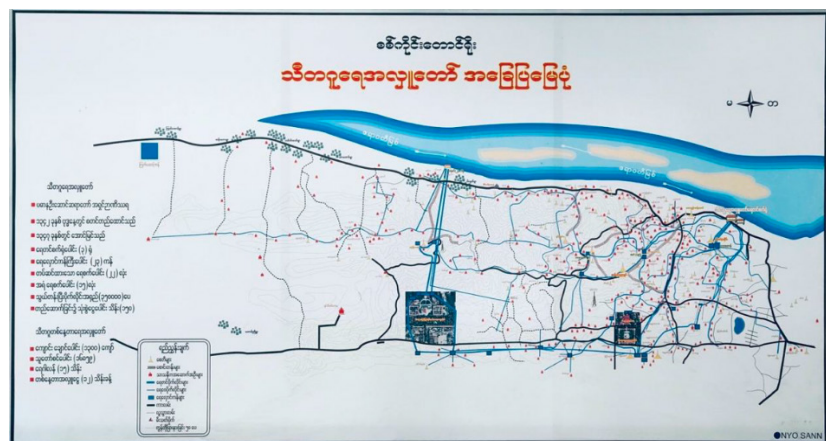


Figure 2. Map of Sitagu Water Donation Project across Sagaing Hill, Myanmar.



Figure 3. Sitagu Water Pumping Station, Sagaing, Myanmar.

Photograph by the author, 23 December 2022.

Sitagu Hospital Project and Health Care Program

The Sitagu Ayudana Hospital emerged from a tragic event: a nun in the Sagaing Hills died from a snake bite while travelling a long distance to obtain medical treatment. This incident strongly moved Sitagu Sayadaw and prompted him to establish a healthcare programme for monastics and local residents (Wai 2014, 76). Founded between 1985 and 1989 with an initial expenditure of 35 million kyats, the hospital grew rapidly through the support of the Sitagu Sangha community, lay donors, and local and international medical volunteers from countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Australia, Belgium, and Singapore. Although the hospital provides general medical services, its eye-care programme became especially well known, conducting thousands of cataract and vision-restoring surgeries. Patients and volunteer doctors consistently attested its transformative impact, particularly in marginalised regions such as Rakhine State. Over time, the hospital project expanded into 44 eye hospitals, 36 of which are currently operating, supported by SIMA and the Sitagu Cakkhudāna Mobile Treatment Programme, which provides specialist treatment in remote areas. Over 27 years, the programme treated more than 522,000 patients and the eye-care initiative restored sight to more than 100,000 people (Wai 2014, 80–99).

Table 2. Summary of donation records and healthcare services by SCMTP and SIMA.

Sitagu Eye Care Programme (1993-2020)	Contribution of Sitagu Sayadaw
Total number of Sitagu Hospitals in Myanmar (current)	44
Number of hospitals (currently operating)	36
Total value of donation of hospital equipment by SIMA	900 million kyat
Total numbers of outpatients	522,730
Total numbers of surgical patients	100,854
Total value of donation for treatments and expenditure of SC-MTP spanning 27 years	900 million kyat
Number of hospitals transferred to the Ministry of Health and Sport in construction process	4
Hospitals in construction process	6



Figure 4. Sitagu Eye Hospital, Myitkyina, Kachin State, Myanmar.
Photograph by the author, 7 June 2018.



Figure 5. Sitagu Ayudana Hospital, Sagaing, Myanmar.
Photograph by the author, 30 July 2018.



Figure 6. Sitagu Eye Hospital, Thandwe Township, Rakhine State, Myanmar.
Photograph by the author, 15 February 2019.

Sitagu General Social Work Project

One of the most prominent humanitarian undertakings of Sitagu Sayadaw and the Sitagu International Missionary Association (SIMA) was the large-scale relief effort following Cyclone Nargis in 2008. In the affected areas, especially the Ayeyarwady Delta, countless lives were lost and entire landscapes were devastated by the disaster. Sitagu Sayadaw organised rescue teams and mobilised funds to provide immediate emergency assistance as well as longer-term rehabilitation. Over fourteen months, his organisation contributed more than 8.5 billion kyats in compassionate offerings—including food, shelter, medical supplies, school and monastery reconstruction, and financial assistance for affected communities. Reconstructed hospitals also received medical equipment valued at more than 23 million kyats (Wai 2014, 201-8). Beyond Cyclone Nargis, Sayadaw led relief missions for floods, landslides, and other humanitarian crises in Chin, Rakhine, Kayin, and Mon States, where he provided financial aid, ambulances, clothing, and medical support, etc. His compassionate work also extended to prisons across the country, where he offered Dhamma talks, food, essential supplies, and medical treatment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he supported vulnerable communities through the provision of food, personal protective equipment (PPE), and quarantine arrangements, and assistance for more than 400 stranded monks, nuns, and laypeople returning to Myanmar.

Table 3. Total contributions made by Sitagu Sayadaw for relief and rehabilitation after Cyclone Nargis in 2008

No	Itemized Contribution	Estimated Value (Kyat)
1	60,000 bags of rice distributed to 1,500 villages	900 million
2	500-truck loads of clothing food and purified drinking water, medications and cooking utensils	4,600 million
3	245,800 corrugated zinc sheets for roofing for 2264 monasteries	757.06 million
4	Cash contribution of 100,000 kyat to each of 2,264 monasteries	226,4 million
5	Maintenance and repair to Kadonkani drinking water factory	252.2 million
6	Medical supplies for 12 local hospitals	581.6 million
7	Reconstruction and restoration of 170 pagodas and golden umbrellas, damaged by the Cyclone around Hinegyi Island	100 million
8	Teaching supplies, including classroom computers for 6 state high schools	150 million
9	Construction of 21 new schools (1 high school, 3 middle schools and 17 primary schools)	930 million
10	Construction of one new monastery	100 million
Total Sitagu Ayeyarwaddy contribution of compassionate charity (karuṇā dāna)		8597.28 million (Approx. USD 716,440)



Figure 7. Opening ceremony for a new school building, Kan-Seik Village, Dedaye Township, Ayeyarwady Division, Myanmar.
Photograph by Sitagu Association, 20 April 2009.

The humanitarian actions of Sitagu Sayadaw represent an embodied moral expression of *karuṇā* that goes beyond scriptural teaching. From the large-scale disaster relief undertaken after Cyclone Nargis to continued social work in flood-affected regions, public hospitals, prisons, and vulnerable communities, he demonstrates a consistent commitment to alleviating human suffering across boundaries of geography, ethnicity, and religion. His leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic likewise highlights compassion-driven engagement in practice. Taken together, these activities show how Buddhist ethical values can be translated into effective, long-term welfare programmes. Sitagu Sayadaw's humanitarian work therefore stands as an important contemporary example of Buddhist social engagement grounded in compassion, moral responsibility, and service to humanity.

An Analysis on Sitagu Sayadaw's Social Engagement

Sitagu Sayadaw's humanitarian work, ranging from the water donation project to health-care programmes and disaster relief, demonstrates a strategic and doctrinally grounded application of *karuṇā* (compassion) and can be meaningfully interpreted through Max Weber's social action theory. However, these are ideal types rather than empirical categories that better fit real actions. In fact, a single humanitarian project often overlaps with several types, with certain characteristics becoming dominant at different phases of its development. The following analysis, therefore, examines not only the specific types present in Sitagu Sayadaw's humanitarian work, but also the interactions reinforcing one another and occasionally pulling against one another.

From a Weberian perspective, this work may be understood primarily as value-rational action, motivated by the Buddhist ideal of alleviating the suffering of others. This is clearly evidenced in the establishment of charitable hospitals, water-supply projects, and disaster-relief

interventions across different regions of Myanmar. These actions are driven not by instrumental gain or political advantage but by a moral commitment embedded in Theravāda Buddhism. The emphasis on public welfare (*lokaḥita* and *lokaśukhāya*) resonates with Weber's definition of value-rational action as behaviour guided by ethical, religious, or ideological norms rather than calculations of self-interest. This interpretation is supported by Sitagu Sayadaw's own resolution as well: "With no thought of pride or glory, with utmost humility, we resolve to make better the world we live in, and to promote our *sāsanā* to the best of our ability" (Khin 2015, 171). This resolution demonstrates that his humanitarian work is rooted in humility and a deep commitment to both society and the preservation of the *sāsanā*. The long-term projects, especially the establishment of hospitals and education programmes, can be interpreted as value-rational action, following the Buddhist moral principles of compassion and merit-making. They involve planning, institutional coordination, and sustained implementation. Thus, these projects represent a combination of ethical purpose and rational organization. This shows how religious values orient long-term, purposive social action without reducing it to instrumental calculation.

As a manifestation of Buddhist compassion in action, the water donation project also exemplifies Weber's notion of affective social action, arising from Sayadaw's heartfelt response to community suffering and developing into a transformative, sustainable humanitarian solution for the community. Its origin combined affective and value-rational motivations; Sitagu Sayadaw was personally moved by the daily hardships of monks, nuns, and lay residents who depended on rainwater or on long journeys to the Ayeyarwady River. He framed his response in explicitly Buddhist ethical terms, and contributed his own 30,000 kyats as the founding donation. As the project developed, value-rational commitment was joined by instrumentally rational organisation, including the creation of two regional fundraising committees with dedicated financial and management teams. In its fully developed stage, the project operates through a complex institutional framework and handles sustainable, large-scale water distribution under the management of SIMA, yet it remains fundamentally framed and legitimated by *karuṇā*. Consequently, the water project does not represent any single type of Weber's social action. Instead, it reveals how affective and value-rational motivations gain institutional stability through instrumental rationalisation, while the value-rational frame continues to give the institution its moral coherence.

The extensive healthcare effort demonstrates *karuṇā* in action and aligns with affective social action by transforming an emotional response to suffering into sustained social engagement. Rather than arising from institutional obligation, Sayadaw's social projects are fundamentally driven by compassion. Furthermore, this project shows the significant and long-lasting impact of *karuṇā*-motivated action. The long-term projects, especially healthcare and education programmes, are understood as value-rational action, grounded firmly in the traditional Buddhist principles of compassion and merit-making. For durability, they include planning, institutional coordination, and sustained implementation. Thus, these projects represent a combination of ethical purpose and rational organisation.

Sitagu Sayadaw's disaster relief programmes following Cyclone Nargis in 2008 also illustrate affective social action driven by spontaneous compassion (*karuṇā*). Instead of relying on strategic calculation or institutional control, his rapid mobilisation of volunteers, rescue teams, food, shelter, and medical supplies for devastated communities represents a clear example of action arising from deep compassion for suffering others. At the same time, his long-term recovery projects including school and hospital reconstruction, medical support, and water-purification initiatives, reflect value-rational action, as they are guided by enduring ethical commitments rather than emotion alone. This transition from emergency to long-term rehabilitation also produced a productive tension. The spontaneous compassion that fueled the initial rescue phase had to be institutionalised into bureaucratic frameworks such as accounting, reporting, and partnership coordination, to sustain fourteen months of rehabilitation work. The same *karuṇā* that mobilised immediate response was forced to operate within structured systems, which restricted its spontaneity but extended its impact. The framing of these contributions as *karuṇā dāna*, or compassionate generosity, shows how Buddhist moral values function as the core motivational structure behind this form of social engagement.

The motivation thus expanded beyond immediate emotion toward value-rational action grounded in Buddhist ethics. This transformation illustrates how affective action can develop into organised, ethically sustained programmes. Weber's categories therefore do not describe separate projects but rather phases within the same humanitarian movement. As Sayadaw's humanitarian work grew, more instrumentally rational features were inevitably adopted, such as systematic planning, resource management, and coordination with other social actors. Although ethical and emotional motivations are central, the scale of the institutions requires organisational structures associated with rationalisation. This introduces several tensions including bureaucratic rationality that occasionally conflicts with affective spontaneity. These tensions reflect Weber's theory that modern religious action often blends charismatic intention, ethical purpose, and administrative discipline.

A complementary pattern of mutual reinforcement is visible in the Sitagu eye-care programme. Here, the value-rational frame of *karuṇā* legitimates an extensive institutional infrastructure- 44 hospitals, the mobile *Cakkhudāna* treatment programme, and partnerships with medical volunteers from multiple countries-while the institutional scaffolding in turn enables compassion to operate at a scale no individual monk could achieve. The more than 100,000 sight-restoring surgeries delivered over 27 years are possible only through sustained instrumental rationalisation, yet that rationalisation derives its legitimacy and social support from the moral frame of compassionate generosity. In this case, value-rational and instrumental-rational actions do not pull against each other but compound each other's reach.

From the perspectives of Melford Spiro and Manning Nash, Sitagu Sayadaw's humanitarian work demonstrates how Buddhist leaders embody cultural models of merit-making, moral authority, and charismatic leadership in Myanmar society. His activities support the anthropological insight that monastic authority is not confined to ritual domains but extends to social

welfare, community solidarity, and the symbolic guardianship of moral order. These projects also serve as major hubs for merit-making (*kusala*). They unite lay donors, volunteers, and institutional partners into a collaborative economy of compassion that aligns with Spiro's category of Kammatic Buddhism. Moreover, Sayadaw exemplifies a socially engaged Buddhism shaped by contemporary social crises by expanding assistance across ethnic and religious lines to diverse communities and other religious institutions. Through the lens of Weber and Buddhist anthropology, his social engagement reveals a complex combination of emotional motivation, ethical values, cultural legitimacy, and charismatic authority to produce a powerful, transformative model of contemporary Buddhist social action.

Ultimately, these cases—from the water project to the Nargis response and the reinforcement of eye-care programmes, all demonstrate that Sitagu Sayadaw's humanitarian work cannot be represented as a single Weberian ideal type. In fact, his work reflects a *complex interaction* of affective motivations, ethical commitments, cultural traditions, and strategic rationalisation. To elaborate, affective motivation often stabilises into value-rational commitments, which are institutionalised through instrumental rationality; on the other hand, instrumental rationalisation extends the reach of compassionate action while retaining its moral framework. By analysing how these motivations intersect and reinforce one another, this interpretive approach demonstrates the multidimensional nature of religious humanitarian leadership within Myanmar's Buddhist society.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Buddhist social engagement in contemporary Myanmar can be fruitfully understood through a Weberian interpretive framework integrated with Buddhist anthropology. Sitagu Sayadaw's humanitarian work reveals that religious social action is rarely shaped by a single motive or a single type of authority. Rather, it emerges through a combination of value-rational commitments, traditional legitimacy, charismatic authority, and modern organisational rationality. Compassion (*karuṇā*) serves not only as a moral value but also a cultural mechanism that generates the initial motivation for social welfare activities. *Karuṇā* and the cultural practice of merit-making (*kusala*) together provide the framework that mobilises lay donors, volunteers, and institutions into sustained engagement with Sitagu Sayadaw's humanitarian projects, as well as transforming individual moral motivation into collective social action. These functions highlight Buddhist moral virtues as dynamic forces in the development of community and humanitarian relief. Integrating Weber's social theory with Buddhist anthropology, this approach clarifies the cultural mechanism through which how compassion becomes institutionalised, how monastic authority adapts, and how religious leaders negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity.

Furthermore, this study contributes to sociological theory by examining Weber's social action framework; it is especially relevant in Buddhist contexts, where spiritual authority and ethical motivation play powerful roles in shaping social practice. It also contributes to Buddhist

studies by clarifying the contemporary transformation of monastic-led welfare. It is clear that modern Buddhist social engagement is becoming increasingly structured, transnational, and development-oriented. Although this research focuses specifically on a single monastic leader in Myanmar, it suggests broader insights into the role of religious leaders in social welfare systems. Future studies may compare similar monastic social movements across Myanmar or Southeast Asia, further exploring the relationship between religion and social welfare. Ultimately, this analysis affirms that compassion-driven actions achieve a transformative impact on society when combined with organisational rationality and moral authority.

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