

# 5

## U THANT

### *Buddhism in Action*

A. WALTER DORN

The election of U Thant as secretary-general on November 3, 1961, six weeks after the tragic death of Dag Hammarskjöld, was a novelty in international relations. U Thant (pronounced Oo Thawnt)<sup>1</sup> was the first non-European secretary-general in the United Nations or the League of Nations, and the first from a newly independent or developing nation. His country, Burma, had only gained its independence in 1948, three years after the founding of the United Nations, and the nation's foreign service was little more than a decade old. But, with Thant's active participation, Burma had already made a mark on the international scene as one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1955, a new experiment in the Cold War period. Because of both national and personal characteristics, Thant was acceptable to both sides of the Cold War and to the newly emerging states that were about to form a majority in the General Assembly. The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, commented at the time that Thant was "the only human being out of a hundred nations represented at the UN who was acceptable to everybody."<sup>2</sup>

For many Westerners, the greatest novelty of the new UN leader was that he was a Buddhist—and a devout one at that. Western newspapers and magazines featured this aspect of his life, as in a cover story in the *New York Times Magazine* titled "The Meditation of U Thant" and a book about his cultural and religious background.<sup>3</sup> Buddhism was an important part of Thant's upbringing, and it strongly shaped his worldview, his ethical principles, and his actions as secretary-general. But because he did not explain his official decisions using religious reasoning, the precise influence of religion in specific situations is sometimes difficult to discern. However, the overall influence is certain. He himself writes in his memoirs,

“to understand my conception of the role of the Secretary-General, the nature of my religious and cultural background must be understood.”<sup>4</sup>

There are a great many examples to illustrate the influence of religion on Thant’s ethics and behavior. This chapter examines his religious and moral values and evaluates the extent to which these influenced him, especially as he dealt with the toughest challenges facing any UN chief: the ethical dilemmas. In particular, seven dilemmas will be considered: (1) use of force, (2) intervention versus nonintervention, (3) impartiality versus neutrality, (4) independent versus dependent office, (5) private versus professional interests, (6) idealism versus realism, and (7) the sacred/secular divide. The chapter will analyze how Thant used his ethical framework to deal with the major challenges he faced in his life and while in office.

### East Meets West: A Life Story in Brief

Thant was born in the small town of Pantanaw in British-controlled Burma (then part of India) on January 22, 1909. He was the eldest of four sons of a relatively prosperous rice miller and a very devout Buddhist mother. He attended the National High School in Pantanaw and University College in Rangoon. Like many Burmese youths, he spent some time in a Buddhist monastery, though formal religiosity was not a trait in his studious and independent-minded character. He was an avid reader, and school friends nicknamed him “the Philosopher.” Unfortunately, Thant had to cut short his college education because of the death of his father. As the eldest son, he had to take responsibility for the family, a burden increased because a cousin had swindled most of the family’s inheritance. He became a schoolteacher.

At age twenty Thant won the All-Burma Translation Competition, and at twenty-two he succeeded his friend U Nu as principal of his old high school. Besides teaching and administration, he translated several English works into Burmese, including a book on the League of Nations. One of his role models was Sir Stafford Cripps, the socialist British politician with strong religious (Christian) convictions, who would later bring unsuccessful independence proposals to neighboring India.<sup>5</sup> Thant also admired the nationalist leaders Eamon de Valera of Ireland, Sun Yat-sen of China, and Mahatma Gandhi of India.<sup>6</sup>

During the Japanese occupation of Burma (1942–45), Thant served as a member of the Pantanaw Administrative Council, though he spent three

miserable months in bomb-ridden Rangoon as secretary of the Educational Reorganizing Committee. He commented privately that the Japanese system was much worse than the British one, though many Burmese at first welcomed the Japanese. He was under a Japanese “adviser” who actually “ruled,” so he was glad when he could return to Pantanaw. Once there, Thant refused to implement an edict to make Japanese compulsory in schools, and he cooperated with the growing resistance. At one point he was under imminent threat of arrest but avoided this fate after being forewarned by former students and a friendly Japanese soldier.<sup>7</sup> Though not a major participant in the Burmese resistance, after the war he accepted a request from resistance leaders to write the history of their struggle.

As Burma prepared for independence in 1948, Thant became press director for the government in waiting. He left Pantanaw to join his old friend U Nu, who became Burma’s prime minister upon independence. Thant’s farewell address as principal to the students of the National High School was remembered fondly: “In this world, try to be both good and able. If you do not become able men, at least try to be good men. The country has no use for able but bad men.”<sup>8</sup> To the students and staff, Thant was an example of what he preached: able as well as good.

One of his jobs early in the Cold War was to review and possibly censor superpower propaganda for the Burmese government, an opportunity that led him to observe that both sides were guilty of “vast oversimplification,” falsely stereotyping and dehumanizing the other.<sup>9</sup> China’s civil war also encroached upon Burma when elements of the battered Kuomintang army took sanctuary within Burma’s borders.

More menacingly, Burma was experiencing a civil war of its own. When the Karen insurgency began in 1948, Thant risked his life to go behind Karen lines in an attempt to negotiate peace. Though he was respected by Karen leaders, nothing came from that mission. In a great personal tragedy, his hometown, including his family properties, was burned to the ground in 1949. He was in Rangoon when the insurgents pushed the front to within four miles of the capital before falling back. This trying experience with secessionist forces was to have a major influence on his thinking and, quite possibly, his later actions as UN secretary-general.

In 1954 he became secretary to Prime Minister U Nu, and in 1955 accompanied him to the Bandung Conference, where the Non-Aligned Movement was formed. In Burma and abroad, Thant acquired a scrupulous reputation as someone free from corruption and selfish motives. In 1957 U Nu appointed Thant Burma’s permanent representative to the

United Nations. As a new ambassador, he stated earnestly, “It is in the UN that most of us have pinned our only hope for the future.”<sup>10</sup> In 1961, as the conflict in the Congo became a quagmire for the United Nations, Thant was named chairman of the Congo Conciliation Commission. After Hammarskjöld died suddenly in a plane crash on September 17, 1961, while trying to negotiate peace in the Congo, Thant (as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement) became involved in the lengthy selection of a new secretary-general. But when he himself was touted as a candidate, he withdrew from the negotiations.

Thant’s activities, achievements, and disappointments as UN secretary-general are described throughout this chapter, so they are not repeated here. The chapter examines his character, ethics, and religious beliefs, before analyzing some of the ethical dilemmas he faced.

## Personal and Ethical Character

Virtually all the people who knew and worked closely with Thant in the United Nations laud him as an example, if not an ideal, of an ethical and moral person. Some also speak of him as a spiritual figure, possessing saint-like qualities. For instance, Robert Muller, the executive director of the office of the secretary-general (1970–72), described him as “a master in the art of living,” a “modern monk,” and a “great ethical statesman.”<sup>11</sup> No doubt Thant possessed humility, integrity, equanimity, serenity, and many spiritual qualities in abundant measure. In account after account, his kindness, consideration and understanding for his fellow humans are much in evidence. Muller gave him the epithet “U Thant the Kind,” along with “Lie the Robust” and “Hammarskjöld the Magnificent.”<sup>12</sup> Apparently Thant never showed anger, almost never complained about people, and only very occasionally showed frustration, though the job was, no doubt, extremely frustrating at times.

### *Humility*

Thant’s humility was legendary, and he probably deserves the title of the most humble secretary-general to date. His actions show that he truly pursued neither power nor privilege, placing the common good above self-interest in his work. To begin with, he was reluctant to take the post of secretary-general. When approached, he did not advocate his candidacy

or even show interest.<sup>13</sup> Only when he emerged as the only acceptable candidate to all did he finally agree to serve. Accepting reappointment in 1962, he insisted that it be for a term starting in 1961, thus shortening his tenure by a year. Similarly, in 1966, he declared that he would not stand for re-election, frequently repeating, "there is no indispensable man."<sup>14</sup> But under sustained pressure he finally agreed to a second term, to universal acclaim.<sup>15</sup>

Days after first taking office in 1961, the Burmese government offered him the nation's second-highest title, but he declined the honor, and in September 1965, when the Norwegian ambassador visited him to tell him that he was the choice of the Norwegian Nobel Committee for the Nobel Peace Prize, he humbly remarked, "Is not the Secretary-General merely doing his job when he works for peace?"<sup>16</sup> He recorded his pleasure when UNICEF was announced a month later as the award winner, though Thant's undersecretary, Ralph Bunche, himself a Nobel laureate, murmured that it was a "gross injustice to U Thant."<sup>17</sup>

Thant was as simple as well as a humble man, uncomfortable in lavish surroundings and happy in the presence of children. He remarked that he preferred the rustic environment of the countryside to the majestic halls of heads of state, like the "chandeliered Elysée Palace with its resplendent *garde républicain*."<sup>18</sup> He usually avoided the red carpet treatment while traveling. When President Johnson offered Air Force One for an important trip to South Asia in 1965, Thant declined, saying that he "would feel awkward with a party of only five in such a big plane."<sup>19</sup>

Thant did not mind most types of criticism. If it was free from spite, he even appreciated it. He told a biographer, "At the UN we are the regular recipients of an immense flow of criticism and admonition . . . a form of stimulus which we should welcome, although, of course, it can, like all good things, be overdone."<sup>20</sup> Shortly after his retirement, he read an academic paper titled "U Thant and His Critics" that analyzed the main criticisms against him.<sup>21</sup> He asked the author, Alan James, to send him a hundred copies, presumably for sharing with friends and former colleagues.<sup>22</sup>

He usually took criticism in silence. To the frustration of colleagues, he often refused even to defend himself. For instance, when he was accused of being indifferent to the plight of Soviet Jews, he refused to divulge that, in fact, he had quietly helped hundreds of them by passing petitions to the Soviet government.<sup>23</sup> Brian Urquhart observed that he was "remarkably free of the desire to take credit, to justify himself or to blame others when things went wrong."<sup>24</sup> When Thant willingly absorbed unfair

criticism from many quarters after the 1967 war, Urquhart regretted his boss's refusal to "pass the buck" to a disunited Security Council or to the parties themselves. Thant "strongly resisted" any efforts to correct the record at the time (though in his memoirs he did so).<sup>25</sup> He allowed himself to be a scapegoat. What he said about the United Nations could also apply to himself personally: The United Nations "provides an invaluable repository and a safe target for blame and criticism which might otherwise be directed elsewhere."<sup>26</sup> He was sometimes called the "human shock absorber."<sup>27</sup>

Apparently he strove to take criticism with total personal detachment. If criticism was fair, he would admit to making a mistake, as he did after publicly (and uncharacteristically) referring to Moise Tshombe and his fellow secessionists as a "bunch of clowns."<sup>28</sup> If criticism was unfair and deliberate, he would try to absorb it. He would remain silent, but insiders knew that it sometimes smoldered within him. Urquhart and Kurt Waldheim even blamed this lack of outer reaction as a source of ill health. After his third year in office, he developed a peptic ulcer, which might have been stress-related. His chef de cabinet C. V. Narasimhan ventures, "His total serenity in his personal relations was no doubt the cause of his ulcers; although his doctors advised him to 'explode' now and again, it was inconceivable that he would, even to save his health."<sup>29</sup> Later in his term, he also began to suffer from acute fatigue.<sup>30</sup> He died on November 15, 1974, after a two-year struggle with cancer, probably related to his regular cigar smoking (he particularly liked the Burmese cheroot).

Thant's main vehicle for dealing with frustrations was meditation. His daily practice included extending "good will towards all living creatures." In Buddhist fashion, he tried to let go of the narrow and tightly held concepts of "me and mine" and establish detachment. The extent to which he achieved this is evident in the remarkable statement, "I do not particularly worry about my own life. . . . I do not particularly distinguish between the lives of my own children and the lives of the children of other people. Nor do I distinguish between Burmese lives and American lives and Russian lives and Chinese lives."<sup>31</sup>

### *Integrity*

Stories of Thant's integrity, like his humility, are abundant, but only one short anecdote will be described here. When the manuscript of June Bingham's biography *U Thant: The Search for Peace* was complete, she

offered him the typescript for review. He declined, saying, "if I make a small change, then I would be implicated in writing it." The author retorted, "but no one would know." She reports his stern look as he replied, "I would." His first biography was left unreviewed and uncensored.<sup>32</sup>

Thant's strong moral sense often overrode his political sense, Urquhart wrote, causing Thant "to do what he believed was right, even if it was politically disadvantageous to him." Thant's advisers also said that when he followed advice offered to him, he "took complete responsibility for his actions, regardless of their outcome."<sup>33</sup> He would not blame others for decisions he had made. Thant's goal was simple and to a great extent selfless: "All my faith and all my efforts are unhesitatingly pledged to maintaining and developing this Organization as an indispensable centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of our common ends."<sup>34</sup>

Though keenly interested in promoting the common good, Thant did not aspire to political leadership. In Burma he deliberately chose not to become a politician, though many opportunities lay open to him. Close friends like U Nu were leaders in political parties, but he never joined one, neither before nor after independence. U Thaung, Thant's third younger brother, commented that politics "meant cliques, disruptions, power-craze. . . . U Thant detested politics, although it would not be wrong to say that there could not have been more than a handful in Burma who studied as much politics and public affairs as he."<sup>35</sup> Instead of politics, he pursued a life of public service as an educator and civil servant, remaining as far as possible from the grasp of corrupt politics. To his credit, Thant attained the highest positions of civil administration in Burma and arguably the world.

### *Simplicity and Detachment*

Thant's simplicity and detachment were cause for both appreciation and apprehension. He often responded to others with silence, not of the cold and callous type but in a kind and loving manner that the Buddhists sometimes call "noble silence." For this he was known as the "Bronze Buddha" among Secretariat officials.<sup>36</sup> Understandably, this sometimes gave rise to frustration.<sup>37</sup> Ambassador George Ignatieff of Canada admired Thant's "serenity and self-discipline" but wanted more engagement when discussing important and controversial issues like the peacekeeping force in the Sinai prior to the Six-Day War, in which Canada had a substantial number of troops. "When I tried to reason with him, he just smiled in

his gentle, enigmatic way, without any indication whether or not I was getting through to him. Being an emotional Slav, I found this attitude exasperating . . . he never showed any reaction, not even impatience, and never said yes or no. For a while it got so bad I could hardly bear to speak to him.”<sup>38</sup> That was a serious problem, coming from the ambassador of a country as supportive of the United Nations as Canada.

Despite his propensity to silence, he was an eloquent speaker, a prolific writer, and someone who enjoyed humor in life. He appreciated the “funny stories, wit and good jokes [that] his staff like to pass to him each day.”<sup>39</sup> Urquhart, however, complained of Thant’s “school-boy jokes,” in which he had “laboriously become word perfect.” Furthermore, Urquhart writes that Thant was, “by Western standards, in some ways rather simple-minded,” especially when compared to the brilliant Hammarskjöld. Certainly Thant’s approach to issues was less complicated, less nuanced. He held strong views of right and wrong. Urquhart writes, “His stewardship had none of the flair or high personal style of Hammarskjöld, but his undertakings were just as courageous.”<sup>40</sup>

### *Equanimity*

Thant’s Buddhist ideal led him to seek equanimity under all circumstances. As an example of this practice, Thant pointed to the sudden death in 1962 of his only son, thrown from a bus in Rangoon, as a tragedy he took with “minimal emotional reaction.”<sup>41</sup> His first words on hearing the news were said to have been, “My poor wife!”<sup>42</sup> A similar story arises from another great tragedy in his life. When his home village of Pantanaw was burned to the ground during the height of the Karen insurgency of 1949, his wife lamented, “Oh, my house!” Thant exclaimed, “Oh, my books!”<sup>43</sup>

A colleague in Burma, Dr. Maung Maung, joked about Thant’s dispassion by comparing him with U Nu: “When Nu fell in love, he wrote poetry aflame with emotion and dedicated them, one and all, to the dear lady. When Thant fell in love, he wrote letters to the editor, and articles and a new book.” U Nu was also a devout Buddhist who wanted to make Buddhism the state religion of Burma (to which Thant and others successfully raised strong objections), but Thant’s temperament was obviously quite different from Nu’s.<sup>44</sup>

Visitors to Thant’s office frequently remarked about his “strength of quiet dignity” and his composure. New York City mayor Abraham Beame wrote, “In stormy times, he was an island of calm in a sea of controversy.

His meditative ways helped him to maintain the neutrality so necessary to sustaining the confidence of differing nations."<sup>45</sup> Thant explains, "I was taught to control my emotions through a process of concentration and meditation. Of course, being human, and not yet having reached the state of *arahant* or *arhat* (one who attains perfect enlightenment), I cannot completely control my emotions, but I must say that I am not easily excited or excitable."<sup>46</sup>

## Religious Beliefs: Buddhism and Beyond

Thant described himself as "a spiritual person above all else."<sup>47</sup> To many who knew him, Thant not only lived but exemplified his faith. Some used spiritual words to describe him, such as Indian diplomat Lakhan Mehrotra, who felt a "spiritual glow" around the man: "One had to see him to believe what was preserved of the spiritual strength he carried within him." UN worker France Vacher observed "holiness surrounding him."<sup>48</sup> Canadian ambassador Ignatieff wrote, "My experience led me to the conclusion that I was communing with a mystic, who by constant self-discipline had attained a degree of self-control rarely encountered."<sup>49</sup> Thant cared deeply about his religion, Buddhism, but he also held to a wider set of spiritual beliefs about the human condition that were entirely compatible with his faith.

### *Buddhism*

Thant was not ostentatious or proselytizing about his faith, but on direct questioning he would share his beliefs frankly. UN official Robert Muller was a Christian whose close contact with Thant led him to a growing appreciation of Buddhism and spirituality. Thant was pleased to share his ideas with Muller, who later wrote several books describing and praising Thant's faith and philosophy of life.<sup>50</sup>

Publicly, it was difficult to get Thant to speak about Buddhism, but in one instance, at an international teach-in at the University of Toronto, he made a short and succinct statement about his faith and its application to international affairs.<sup>51</sup> Thant was surprisingly strident, almost fundamentalist, in introducing Buddhism. He conveyed none of the subtlety and searching mystical quality that were characteristic of Hammarskjöld. Buddhism, Thant stated, was "the supreme way to spiritual perfection."

It offered the world “absolute truth” (*Dhamma*) and was a “rational explanation of the mysteries of life.” These bold remarks echoed an earlier statement: “I believe that Buddhism as a religion is superior to other religions.” With humility, he continued, “but this conviction does not blind me to the fact that there are hundreds of millions of people who believe otherwise.”<sup>52</sup>

His description of Buddhist principles at the Toronto teach-in and in his memoirs is clear, unequivocal, and inspired: “Buddhism teaches, above all, a universal compassion to be extended to all living beings, irrespective of their status, race or creed.” He explained that all beings deserve compassion because they all suffer, and that wrong actions are the result of human ignorance. All beings are interdependent because *Dhamma* applies to everything. Thant so firmly believed in *karma*, the principle of reciprocal action (cause and effect), that he regarded doing harm to another as folly. “Whatsoever he does to another he does in effect to himself.” Furthermore, if “each of us were to realize” the principle of *karma*, he claimed, the world would become free of crime, war, and injustice.<sup>53</sup>

Buddhism advocates the practice of compassion (*karuna*) and good will (*metta*) to all. The practice should be done “impartially and spontaneously, expecting nothing in return, not even appreciation,” wrote Thant.<sup>54</sup> A true Buddhist is “expected to pray for the happiness of all human beings.” This he did on a daily basis.

Violence to any living creature was to be renounced in thought as well as deed.<sup>55</sup> So should the three cardinal vices in Buddhism: craving or greed, hatred or anger, and illusion or ignorance.<sup>56</sup> They are to be replaced with the four cardinal virtues: *metta* (including charity), *karuna*, *mudita* (sympathetic joy), and *upekka* (equanimity or equilibrium).<sup>57</sup> The *Dhammapada*, the most widely cited Buddhist scripture, states: “Never in the world is hate appeased by hatred; it is appeased by love—this is an eternal law.”

Another Buddhist goal, he declared, is to become selfless and unattached in one’s meditation and action. Avoiding egotism is necessary, or in time it will inevitably beget “the twin sins of pride and prestige.” Like material objects, such things are “transitory and even illusory.”

Though a devout Buddhist with a simple and straightforward approach to his faith, Thant was not a fundamentalist, despite the way he described his religion in Toronto. He saw the dangers of fundamentalism and the problems that arise from religions. At a meeting on the Middle East he said, “As an Asian, let me confess that a major weakness of Asia is religion employed as a weapon for political ends. . . . History records numerous

examples of wars waged by religious zealots, whether they be Christians or Jews, Moslems or Hindus, Buddhists or Confucianists.”<sup>58</sup> Thant was unimpressed by formal ritual and “not attuned to religiosity.” He compared his form of Buddhism to that of a Unitarian in a predominantly Protestant America.<sup>59</sup>

Although Buddhist thought does not explicitly include the concept of a God, Thant was ready to accept it. “There is one God, hidden in all things, all pervading, the inner soul of all things,” Thant quoted Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the president of India, as saying. “We tear asunder this invisible bond and break the body of humanity if we use violence against one another.”<sup>60</sup> When Ambassador Stevenson concluded his address to the newly installed secretary-general with the remark “God bless you!” Thant would have appreciated it. Narasimhan, Thant’s Hindu chef de cabinet remarked, “U Thant was a Buddhist, but not a fanatic. Indeed one could not conceive of his being fanatical on any subject, except perhaps in respect of his total commitment to the Charter of the United Nations.”<sup>61</sup>

### *Meditator as Well as Mediator*

Thant practiced meditation every morning shortly after arising, usually at 6:00 A.M. He said his goal was to empty or quiet the mind, “to separate oneself from the conflicts outside,” and to prepare himself for the day with detachment. The regularity of his practice is revealed in his description of an incident in 1967. In the opening hours of the Six-Day War, on June 5, 1967, Thant was awakened at 3:00 A.M. by a distress call from his under-secretary, Ralph Bunche. Thant writes that he “left for the UN at 3:45 A.M., without, for the first time in my memory, my morning meditation.”<sup>62</sup>

During the Cuban missile crisis, one of the most fearsome conflicts in world history, Thant went to Havana for discussions with Castro. He writes that, as he tried to meditate at 6:30 A.M., scenes of U.S. warships, Cuban anti-aircraft emplacements, and an unsmiling Castro “flitted across my mind’s eye. It was difficult to shut off my senses, even for a brief moment, and feel inner peace. In any case, I managed to practice metta (good will) and karuna (compassion) to all.”<sup>63</sup>

### *From Individual to Global*

The Buddhist solution to all problems is to raise the state of consciousness of the individual using simple moral precepts and strict spiritual practices.

Do these principles apply to nations as well? Thant's answer was undoubtedly yes. For Thant, the charter embodied many of the Buddha's teachings. "Tolerance is the principal foundation on which the UN Charter rests," he said at the Toronto teach-in.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the charter dictum to "practice tolerance and live together as good neighbours is the practical application of the principle of reciprocity." The UN goal to be a "centre for harmonizing the actions of nations" is the same as that of a compassionate, nonviolent person.<sup>65</sup> In his inaugural address to the General Assembly he vowed to pursue "the ideal of universal friendship" with an "attitude of objectivity."<sup>66</sup>

No doubt, the harmony he perceived between the UN charter and his Buddhist faith was a source of tremendous strength for him in his work. Table 5.1 further illustrates the close correspondence of many principles of Buddhism and of the charter. Buddhist nonviolence can be paired with the charter's nonuse of force. The principle of unity in diversity informs both. A potential parallel between international law and cosmic law sees humans attempting to duplicate the natural order. Buddhist nonegoism is matched by the charter's call to transcend national interests and, in the words of Thant, to work for a "larger goal: the common interest of all countries."

Unlike Buddhism, however, the charter (chapter VII) includes important provisions for armed international action against threats to the peace. Thant found this to be a difficult dilemma, especially when he was called upon to use force in the Congo. At that time a verse of the *Dhammapada* clung to his conscience: "He who guides others by a procedure that is non-violent and equitable, he is said to be a guardian of the law, wise and righteous."<sup>67</sup> As we shall see later, he was only partly able to reconcile his beliefs and his actions.

### *A Broader View*

Thant also found inspiration in the works of great spiritual thinkers of other religious and cultural backgrounds. He deeply appreciated Albert Schweitzer and his ethic of "reverence for life," because, as Thant wrote, "I had trained all my life to regard human life as sacred." Thant also embraced the concepts of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, such as the unifying power of love, an orderly universe, and the world community — "a common soul in the vast body."<sup>68</sup>

Table 5.1 Comparison of the Principles of Buddhism and Those of the UN Charter

Buddhist Concept	UN Charter Provisions
<p><i>Metta</i> (good will or kindness) practiced “to all, without distinction”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours” (Preamble)</li> <li>• “to develop friendly relations among nations” (art. 1.2)</li> <li>• “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion” (art. 1.3)</li> </ul>
<p><i>Karuna</i> (compassion) the “duty to mitigate the suffering of others”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind” (Preamble)</li> <li>• “to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security” (Preamble and art. 1.1)</li> <li>• “to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples” (Preamble)</li> <li>• “to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character” (art. 1.3)</li> <li>• “the interests of the inhabitants of [non-self-governing] territories are paramount, and [administering nations] accept as a sacred trust the obligation to promote to the utmost [...] the well-being of the inhabitants of these territories” (art. 73)</li> </ul>
<p><i>Ahimsa</i> (nonviolence) respect for all</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “all Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state” (art. 2.4)</li> <li>• “to ensure . . . armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest” (Preamble)</li> <li>• “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small” (Preamble)</li> <li>• “respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples” (art. 1.2)</li> <li>• encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion (art. 1.3)</li> </ul>
<p><i>Karma</i> (law of cause and effect) “law of reciprocal action” cosmic justice “as you sow so you reap” (Christian equivalent) consequently, “hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful,” hence practice <i>metta</i>, <i>karuna</i>, <i>ahimsa</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “all Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered” (art. 2.3)</li> <li>• “to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained” (Preamble)</li> </ul>

In 1965, at a time of war, Thant visited Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the Hindu president of India, but much of their conversation was about religion and spirituality. Dr. Radhakrishnan, as an Oxford professor, had produced one of the most authoritative translations of the *Dhammapada*, an important Buddhist scripture. Thant heartily agreed with his view that the essence of all religions is the same and that “religion is not a creed or code, but an insight into reality.” This 1965 meeting, called in the wake of the Indo-Pakistan war, was more than a political meeting; it was a “spiritual experience,” wrote Thant.<sup>69</sup>

Thant took the unprecedented step of inviting Pope Paul VI to the United Nations. When cautioned that it might be advisable to obtain prior approval from the General Assembly, Thant responded: “No impartial observer would accuse a Buddhist Secretary-General of prejudice in inviting the head of the Roman Catholic Church to the United Nations.”<sup>70</sup> This first-ever visit of a pontiff to the United Nations (or to the United States for that matter) brought great satisfaction to Thant. Together the two visited the UN Meditation Room, designed by Thant’s predecessor Hammarskjöld. The words the pope spoke from the podium of the General Assembly were music to Thant’s ears: “The edifice of modern civilization must be built on spiritual principles, the only principles capable not only of supporting it but also of enlightening and animating it.”<sup>71</sup>

Thant bemoaned the fact that, apart from an occasional visit by a religious figure, the spiritual dimension was not visible in the activities of the world organization. It was for this reason that he took great delight in the creation of the UN Meditation Group in 1970.<sup>72</sup> Its leader was (and remains) Sri Chinmoy, a spiritual teacher who preaches the essential unity of religions, the spiritual significance of the United Nations, and the value of meditation for inner and outer peace. After viewing a performance of Sri Chinmoy’s play *Siddhartha Becomes the Buddha*, Thant spoke about spirituality:

Sri Chinmoy has drawn a very vivid picture of the identity between God and Truth, soul and inner Light, which I hope will create an abiding interest in these two religions—Hinduism and Buddhism—which in many ways constitute the key to all great religions. I feel very strongly, as some of my friends know, that only by the practical application of the teachings of great religious leaders, particularly the development of the moral and spiritual aspects of life, as Sri Chinmoy has stressed in the play—love, compassion, tolerance, the philosophy of live-and-let-live, modesty and even humility—that only with this approach, only with this method, will we be

able to fashion the kind of society we want: a truly moral society, a decent society, a livable society, which is the goal of all great religions.<sup>73</sup>

### *Toward a Global Ethic*

Thant wanted to write a book to be titled *Ethics for Our Time* to blend “the virtues of the Oriental wisdom with the merits of Western dynamism.”<sup>74</sup> While his illness and death prevented him from even starting this book, he did include much of this type of thinking in his memoirs. His aim in writing the memoirs, as he told Sri Chinmoy, was “to show how spirituality and philosophy can lead and guide politics.”<sup>75</sup>

In his memoirs, he applied his belief system to shine a light on the problems of the day, pointing the way to ethical and spiritual solutions. He declared with considerable foresight that the division between rich and poor nations is “more real, more lasting and ultimately more explosive” than that between communists and capitalists. Furthermore, it was “no longer morally acceptable or politically expedient for the more advanced nations to ignore the backwardness and poverty of others.” He decried the “huge resources wasted on armaments,” which he regarded as senseless spending on potential “destruction and death” instead of “construction and life.”<sup>76</sup>

To solve these problems, a “global mentality” was needed to replace narrow-minded nationalism, though he acknowledged that patriotism had its place. Thant hoped that the notion of “world citizenship” or “planetary citizenship” would become accepted alongside national citizenship. The second to the last sentence of his memoirs is: “Perhaps my own Buddhist upbringing has helped me more than anything else to realize and to express in my speeches and writings the concept of world citizenship.”<sup>77</sup>

### **Ethical Dilemmas**

The real test of an individual’s ethical framework is its application in practice. As secretary-general, Thant had to make many difficult decisions, some involving life and death, where answers were not obvious or easy. The great challenges of his office covered issues of peace (including nuclear confrontation in the Cuban missile crisis, the quagmire in the Congo, and the Vietnam War), social friction (including decolonization), and administrative tasks (such as saving the United Nations from financial

bankruptcy). For a moral person like Thant, decisions involving ethical dilemmas were the hardest, so these are analyzed in detail here.

### *The Use of Force*

Thant abhorred all forms of violence. This attitude was, he wrote, “embedded in my inner self.”<sup>78</sup> As a young man, he had admired Gandhi’s nonviolent campaign in India. He wanted his country, Burma, also to throw off the British yoke without violence. He later heaped praise on the UK for granting “genuine independence—without bloodshed, without resentment, without ill-feeling.”<sup>79</sup> His instrument in the Burmese national struggle was the pen and not the sword. Yet as secretary-general he was given a sword, and he did use it. This made him an unlikely proponent of military force, as will be seen.

Buddhist philosophy internalizes the concept of conflict (“an inner struggle”) and calls upon adherents to reject all forms of violence. Buddhism exhorts individuals to neutralize violence by changing themselves and to overcome negative and destructive forces through compassion and love. Echoing Buddhist thought, Thant wrote that “violence erodes the spirit of law, order and international morality.”<sup>80</sup> Some Buddhists believe that force may be used for self-defense, but the religion does not provide much guidance on how to use it. There is no development of a “just war” theory comparable to the one that evolved in Christian thought from St. Augustine onward.

Like all other secretaries-general, Thant frequently deplored the use of force by states. He criticized the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968), the American invasion of the Dominican Republic (1965), and U.S. bombing campaigns in the Vietnam War. He made himself unpopular with the White House and the State Department for his frequent assertions that “military methods will not bring about a peaceful solution to the Vietnamese problem.” And when an American politician suggested that nuclear weapons might need to be used in Vietnam, he was particularly blunt: “I am against the use of atomic weapons for destructive purposes anywhere, under any circumstances—and anybody who proposes the use of atomic weapons for destructive purposes is, in my view, out of his mind.” More generally, in 1968, he boldly claimed, “I have consistently—indeed, necessarily—deplored any and every resort to force as a means of settling international differences since such action is in contravention of the Charter.”<sup>81</sup>

On the other hand, he recognized that international force is needed to uphold international law, as evidenced by the League of Nations experience: “The League system, to be effective, needed the *power to compel compliance* with the law. Without this power it could not persuade; but, given the power, the use of force could have become unnecessary and persuasion would have proved practicable. Unfortunately the League had neither the will nor the means to organize such *overwhelming force*.”<sup>82</sup> Thant strongly believed in the Wilsonian concept of collective security, though it was foreign to Buddhist thought. He even suggested that a permanent UN force, while “not a practical proposition at this point in time,” would “eventually and surely emerge.”<sup>83</sup>

As soon as Thant became secretary-general in 1961, he had to transform theoretical notions on the use of force into practical ones. In the Congo during the previous year, Hammarskjöld had assembled the largest UN peacekeeping force up to that time—indeed, at almost twenty thousand troops, it was the largest such force created until the end of the Cold War. In February 1961 the Security Council had authorized Hammarskjöld to use force “in the last resort” to prevent civil war. But it was left to Thant to oversee the implementation of what would today be called “peace enforcement” measures. As it turned out, the Buddhist Thant was less averse than the Christian Hammarskjöld to using force in the Congo. In part, this was because Hammarskjöld’s own difficult experiences and untimely death in the region had fostered international support for more robust peacekeeping in the conflict-ridden country. Both the United States and the Soviet Union approved of the United Nations’ use of force to end the secession of the Katanga province, though the UK, France, and Belgium advocated a milder approach.

#### THE CONGO CASE: FROM SELF-DEFENSE TO OFFENSE

Thant received a baptism by fire in the Congo: Eight days after his appointment as secretary-general on November 11, 1961, thirteen Italian airmen working in the *Opération des Nations Unies au Congo* (ONUC) were murdered by mutinous Congolese troops.<sup>84</sup> UN peacekeepers were also targeted by mercenaries working for the secession of the mineral-rich Katanga province. The Security Council, on November 24, instructed ONUC to remove all foreign military and paramilitary personnel (i.e., mercenaries), using the “requisite measure of force, if necessary.” The secretary-general was also authorized to “take all necessary measures to

prevent entry or return of such elements.”<sup>85</sup> The rambunctious Katangan leader Tshombe responded with an inflammatory speech in the Elizabethville stadium, declaring that “U Thant will launch a war on our territory. . . . You cannot all have automatic weapons or rifles. But we still have our poisoned arrows, our spears, our axes . . . not one United Nations mercenary must feel safe in any place whatever.”<sup>86</sup>

Tshombe’s speech had the anticipated repercussions: Some UN officials in Katanga, including Urquhart, were kidnapped and assaulted a few days later. Thant responded forcefully, declaring that indiscriminate arrest or molestation of UN civilians must be “resisted by all possible means including use of force, offensive and defensive, as necessary.”<sup>87</sup>

The United Nations also had under its protection some thirty-five thousand anti-Tshombe Baluba in a refugee camp that was under frequent attack by Katangan paramilitary forces—similar in situation to the UN-protected areas in Bosnia thirty years later (though without the tragic results). Thant negotiated continuously with Tshombe, but he soon realized that the Katangan leader was acting in bad faith. When a secret Katangan plan for a full-scale attack on ONUC was seized in early December 1961, Thant authorized a UN action “to assure freedom of movement.”<sup>88</sup> Fighting from December 2 to 19 ended when Tshombe agreed in the Kitona Declaration to renounce the secession of the province. But in the months that followed, Tshombe predictably reneged and UN troops were repeatedly attacked. The United Nations refrained from launching an offensive. Then, beginning on December 24, 1962, the United Nations suffered a sustained four-day attack on its positions in the Katangan capital. This allowed Thant to authorize the final and most forceful round of engagement with Katangan forces, dubbed “Operation Grand Slam” by officials in the field, who were well prepared for it. The declared objective was to “gain complete freedom of movement for ONUC all over Katanga.”<sup>89</sup>

Operation Grand Slam proceeded well from the start. At one point, however, Thant ordered the UN advance to stop at the Lufira River. The UK government was calling for an immediate ceasefire in the face of threats from Katangan fighters that any attempt to take the strategic minefields beyond the river would result in these resources being blown up. But the troops in the field, seeing no resistance, proceeded to the minefields, finding that all the mercenaries had fled. It was a pleasant surprise for Thant. When Bunche came back from the Congo with letters of apology from troop leaders for the “initial breakdown in communications,” Thant was

contrite: "I felt that it was I, not they, who should have apologized for my miscalculation and apprehension based on scare reports from London and Brussels."<sup>90</sup> The Katangan secession was now over. Tshombe's military potential and foreign support disintegrated and he was obliged to accept a peaceful settlement.<sup>91</sup>

The casualties suffered by ONUC during its three rounds of action in 1961–62 were forty-two killed and two hundred wounded. Several hundred Katangan forces and perhaps fifty civilians were also killed.<sup>92</sup> Overall, ONUC (1960–64) suffered the most fatalities of any UN mission, even more than the post–Cold War missions in Bosnia and Somalia.<sup>93</sup>

#### ANALYSIS AND JUSTIFICATION

Ironically, in the Congo Thant proved to be a determined fighter, and he supported the troops in the field. Later Thant would write, somewhat proudly, that ONUC proved to be the "first experience, under combat conditions in the field, of an armed force composed strictly of international units and strictly under UN command."<sup>94</sup> The UN force was robust, even by today's standards. It acquired artillery, tanks, and fighter jets. It dropped bombs (including inadvertently on a hospital, something not often mentioned). It developed a sophisticated intelligence-gathering system and it did take offensive action, despite claims that it was acting in self-defense only.<sup>95</sup>

What could justify Thant's resort to such force? The answer is provided not in Buddhist scripture but in the just war theory that arose out of the Christian tradition. Though he himself did not refer to it, a look at Thant's explanations at the time and in his memoirs shows that all the elements for a just war existed in his thinking: just cause, right intention, right authority, last resort, proportionality, and minimum use of force.

The *justice of the cause* generated controversy in Thant's day. In fact, Katanga supporters argued that the province's secession was a legitimate exercise in self-determination. Thant takes pains to refute this argument in his memoirs.<sup>96</sup> The Congo had been admitted to the United Nations as a "unified state," with the written agreement of Tshombe in 1960. Furthermore, "no sovereign state in the world ever recognized the independence of Katanga," and Tshombe's government was "never able to exercise effective control" over the whole province.

Thant may have had deeper reasons for his aversion to Katangan secession and civil war. For one, his native Burma (and Thant himself) had

suffered enormously from secessionist attempts (the Karen insurgency) shortly after independence. He had also seen at close hand the devastating effects of the 1947 partition of India. As secretary-general during a period of widespread decolonization, Thant was also keenly aware of the precarious state of many Afro-Asian territories. Should secession be recognized or encouraged in one country, it could easily spread to others. Thant, the United Nations, and almost all members of the international community strongly supported the territorial integrity of former colonies and emerging states. Thant expressed antiseccessionist sentiments strongly in February 1970: The United Nations “has never accepted and does not accept, and I do not believe it will ever accept, the principle of secession of a part of its Member State.”<sup>97</sup> The United Nations’ acceptance of some twenty secessions in the former Communist bloc in the 1990s was to prove his prediction wrong, though the principle of territorial integrity remains strong in the international community.

The other criteria for a just war were also applicable. Thant, the United Nations, and ONUC could not reasonably be accused of selfish or undeclared motives; therefore the *right intent* criterion was implicitly satisfied, at least in Thant’s mind. The *right authority* provision was also easily met because the UN charter permitted the Security Council to authorize force, which it did in two resolutions on the Congo. This was a key to Thant’s belief that the use of force was legitimate.

The *last resort* criterion was also very much on Thant’s mind. Indeed, the first Security Council resolution, adopted during Hammarskjöld’s tenure, urged the United Nations to prevent civil war, using force “if necessary, in the last resort.”<sup>98</sup> Thant learned from many experiences that Tshombe could not be trusted; he “always went back on his promises, assurances and declarations.”<sup>99</sup> Therefore Thant would rightfully claim that “it was only after all other efforts failed” that the order for armed action was given. The final UN operation in late 1962 was provoked by a sustained Katangan attack, which some soldiers in the field considered a blessing because it gave the United Nations reason to respond forcefully.

*Proportionality* was also present. That is, the extent of force was proportional to the threat. The Katangan military included fighter jets, extensive weapons holdings, an organized *gendarmerie*, and a cadre of toughened mercenaries who disregarded the rules of warfare (for instance, using vehicles with red cross markings to transport weapons).<sup>100</sup> The UN actions could not, as a whole, be considered excessive.

The “minimum of casualties” from Operation Grand Slam brought great relief for Thant and his advisers at UN headquarters. He sent a congratulatory message to ONUC forces, declaring that the fighting had been “forced upon us” and that “it was only after all other efforts failed that the order was given to undertake defensive action of removing the hostile gendarmerie roadblocks which has now been completed so successfully and fortunately with a minimum of casualties.”<sup>101</sup>

Though Thant claimed that UN troops used their arms only “in self-defence under attack,” not all actions were in self-defense. For instance, one of Thant’s orders had wider objectives and permitted offensive actions: ONUC was to take “all counteractions—ground and aerial—deemed necessary to restore complete freedom of movement in the area.”<sup>102</sup> Although the Security Council authorization allowed for more than self-defense, Thant justified his actions using the universally accepted principle of self-defense. The concept was stretched significantly but not unreasonably. Given the current practice of UN intervention in civil conflicts, Thant’s politically correct declaration that ONUC was not an intervention into internal affairs rings hollow today, but it must be considered in the restrictive environment of the day.

Although Thant justified his actions to others and to himself, he felt his conscience “pricking” him for using force. As a Buddhist, he was saddened by violence toward any human being, be it a UN soldier, a Congolese rebel, or a foreign mercenary. “Every morning I prayed for the sparing of lives. In the course of my meditation, I practiced *metta* (good will) and *karuna* (compassion) to all in the Congo, without distinction as to race, religion or colour. I realized, however, that the moral principles of my religion had to be adjusted to the practical responsibilities of my office.” Thant viewed the United Nations’ actions in the Congo “as a battle for peace, not as a war; to me war—all war—is folly and insanity.”<sup>103</sup> He recognized the practical necessity of international force under international authority. Though not a Buddhist concept, it was an ethical one as long as it satisfied the commonsense criteria described in just war theory.

In Thant’s mind, international force could be justified, and at times force was a practical necessity. Later Thant would deplore “the failure of the Security Council to enforce some of its decisions” in the Middle East and would ask the council to consider applying chapter VII to order India and Pakistan to cease fighting in 1965.<sup>104</sup> Fortunately for Thant and his conscience, the Congo was the only operation in which he had to give

orders to UN soldiers to apply force against a determined opponent. Throughout the rest of his tenure, he would call for utmost restraint over the use of force and plead for the sparing of innocent lives. Apart from the Congo, his interventions, including peacekeeping, did not go beyond self-defense.

*To Intervene or Not to Intervene?*

The dilemma of intervention challenged Thant throughout his entire term, as it does all secretaries-general. On the one hand, many dire situations morally demanded UN mediation or even stronger intervention to prevent conflict and save lives. On the other hand, there are many restrictions on the secretary-general, including ones laid out in the UN charter. The limitations in the founding document had been included expressly because history had shown that outside interference in internal matters was the cause of countless wars. Most nations harbored some fear that an outside power, perhaps even the United Nations, would intrude uninvited into their domains. Hence the UN charter emphasized respect for national sovereignty, and article 2 (7) specifically prohibits UN intervention in matters “essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state,” though enforcement actions under chapter VII are exempted from this rule.<sup>105</sup>

Given the sensitivities of the day, Thant was very careful not to intervene uninvited. For example, in the absence of an invitation from the government of Nigeria, he refused requests to mediate the Biafra conflict. Though mass killing and starvation were shown frequently on television in 1968–70, there was little he could do apart from limited humanitarian work. When Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau pressed him for UN action, Thant responded that the appropriate forum for dealing with the dispute was the Organization for African Unity (OAU), whose involvement the Nigerian government endorsed (and controlled). The secretary-general further pointed out that if the United Nations became involved in this civil war, it could be seen as encouragement for secession, a threat faced by many newly independent African states.<sup>106</sup> So the conflict ran its awful course, with more than a million dead by the time the Nigerian government won its final military victory in 1970. This conflict was no doubt a source of sadness and frustration for Thant.

His good offices were also declined in the civil conflict in Northern Ireland. Ireland sought Thant’s help, but Britain adamantly refused any “outside intervention.”<sup>107</sup> Similarly, the principle of consent meant that

when President Nasser asked Thant to pull UN peacekeepers out of Egypt, Thant felt obliged to comply, though he made a valiant attempt to change Nasser's mind. During the Vietnam War Thant received mixed signals from both sides, and his statements on the prerequisites for peace at times offended the parties, who sought military victory on the battlefield. Still, he felt obliged to speak out, and he dauntlessly investigated ways to bring the parties together, with limited success.

He was outspoken on the internal situations in Northern Rhodesia and South Africa because these involved racism and because the Security Council had not only discussed them but had invoked chapter VII to recommend that states apply sanctions. On Rhodesia, his statements were in line with his rather militant stand against colonialism.<sup>108</sup> Thant was a strong spokesman for decolonization, an important international issue of the day, noting that "the United Nations stands for the self-government and independence of all peoples, and the abolition of racial discrimination without reservations. It can never afford to compromise on these basic principles," and "self-determination remains the most sacred right of all people who still find themselves subjugated."<sup>109</sup>

Thant did sometimes intervene without prior invitation, but he did so cautiously. On such occasions his preferred technique was to send identical appeals to both parties to a conflict. This would ensure that he was treating them impartially. He did this in the Cuban missile crisis to good effect. After some forty-five countries requested his intervention to prevent global catastrophe, he sent President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev identical letters requesting that they freeze the situation so talks could take place, possibly with his help. Both Kennedy and Khrushchev sent high-level negotiators to the United Nations to supplement the efforts of their UN ambassadors. Thant's efforts there were rewarded with success. President Kennedy would later say, "U Thant has put the whole world in his debt."<sup>110</sup>

In the final analysis, Thant's concept of intervention was consistent with Buddhist principles as well as with the UN charter. He tried to show compassion and concern for all. "The Secretary-General has the duty to do whatever he can, in whatever way seems most appropriate, so long as his action does not violate the Charter."<sup>111</sup> Many times he offered his "good offices" to help resolve a conflict situation. But when his offers were declined, he remained respectful and tolerant of those he was dealing with, realizing that the secretary-general cannot intervene without the consent of the parties. It was a philosophy of live and let live.

*Impartiality Versus Neutrality*

Thant strove for “impartiality” but rejected “neutrality.” He felt that on moral issues it was impossible and immoral to be neutral because neutrality implied a lack of concern. When Ambassador Stevenson interviewed him on television five days before his election as secretary-general, Thant explained that, like a judge, the UN secretary-general must be impartial toward all people but not neutral about a crime that has been committed.<sup>112</sup>

As a Buddhist, he believed that the welfare of all people was his concern. The same Buddhist attitude also meant that he should not discriminate among people: He should instead respect all individuals, though still take action to prevent wrongdoing. His meditation practice of viewing the world selflessly helped him gain an impartial perspective. Thus the legal and the religious views of impartiality coincided in Thant’s case.

In practice, too, Thant was impartial. He was never accused of being partial toward Asians, Buddhists, or newly emerging states, though he had deep affinities with all three groups. He also managed to overcome potential personal prejudices in his life: against the British for colonialism, the Japanese for occupation, the Karens for civil war, and the cold warriors for trying to divide the world carelessly. He lived by the motto “to make the world safe for diversity.” Diversity, for him, meant upholding respect for all human beings, and for the rule of law.

The tendency to take sides in national or international disputes was foreign to him, though he was constantly pressured to do so. He preferred to judge actions, not people or countries. He said in a U.S. media interview, “Within a civilized and orderly society, a criminal act is judged for its criminal character and not for its political significance. In your country, a Democrat does not applaud a robber because he has robbed a Republican and vice versa. But internationally, this is exactly what all too frequently happens.”<sup>113</sup> His impartial attitude gained him sustained respect in the Cold War. This saved him from the ill fate suffered by his two predecessors. He left the office in 1972 on good terms with both superpowers.

When it came to identifying aggression, however, Thant was bold and outspoken. He brazenly criticized the superpowers for their respective military actions in the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and Czechoslovakia. Though such criticism could have repercussions for his re-election chances, Thant clearly was not concerned. Thant did express sympathy with Western-style democracy but felt that patience was needed with new

nations to allow them to grow naturally. In the matter of capitalist versus socialist economic principles, he advocated a balance of the two.

One international act that he found “despicable” was airplane hijackings, which rose in frequency in his last years in office. When Algeria asked him to secure the release of captured Arab guerrillas in Israel in return for release of Israeli passengers on a hijacked plane in Algiers, he “categorically refused.” He viewed hijacking as an international crime that should in no instance be rewarded.<sup>114</sup> Still, he gained the respect of both sides for his mediation in that crisis.

As a mediator between opponents, Thant had to preserve his impartiality, while suggesting solutions that both sides could accept. “Reaching a compromise is an art, not a formula,” he said. “You have to take the rights and wrongs of both sides into consideration and feel your way to a solution that is fair to them and all the other people affected by the decision. There are rarely only two sides to any problem.”<sup>115</sup>

Hans Morgenthau, the *realpolitik* theorist who favored direct confrontation with the Soviet bloc, criticized Thant for overstating the value of compromise and accused him of elevating it to “a universal principle of foreign policy” rather than keeping it as one of many possibilities.<sup>116</sup> For Morgenthau, it was unethical not to align with the United States in the Cold War struggle, but Thant considered nonalignment, the “attitude of objectivity,” and “the ideal of universal friendship” to be essential for his work as secretary-general.<sup>117</sup>

### *Independent Versus Dependent Office*

The secretary-general is primarily a servant of the UN membership, but the officeholders have also developed an independent voice and role. Thant felt that he was “at the service not only of all Member governments but of the peoples of the United Nations.”<sup>118</sup> A natural tension exists for any secretary-general with respect to how independently he can speak and act in that larger cause.

Thant accepted certain constraints. First, of course, he sought to always abide by the UN charter and devoted himself to its implementation. The secretary-general “must tread his way through this jungle of conflicting national policies with the Charter as his only compass.” Second, Thant felt that “any Secretary-General, irrespective of his personal views on any issue, is obliged to stand by every resolution or decision of the main deliberative organs of the Organization.”<sup>119</sup> This team-spirit attitude

sometimes meant defending and accepting views that were contrary to his own. As a former ambassador, Thant was accustomed to confining his public statements “within the four corners of my government’s set policy and statements.”<sup>120</sup>

As secretary-general, Thant sometimes dealt with this dilemma of conflicting personal and professional views by using the concept of “two U Thants.” In 1964, for example, Thant was asked whether Communist China should be admitted to the United Nations. The vote for admission had not carried in the General Assembly, though the resolution was gaining ground each year. Thant replied at a press conference, “Please try to remember that there are two U Thants—the U Thant who represented Burma before 1961 and the U Thant of post-1961 as the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The 1964 U Thant is not supposed to have views in that capacity on such matters.”<sup>121</sup> Around 1970, however, Thant started speaking openly and strongly in favor of China’s admittance. The vote finally swung in China’s favor in October 1971. The next month Thant was delighted to personally welcome the newly arrived representatives from the People’s Republic of China.

When the press asked Thant for his opinion about the 1962 coup in Burma by General Ne Win, Thant also gave a “two U Thants” reply but added, “One of them is temporary.”<sup>122</sup> It was generally known that Thant opposed the military overthrow of his long-standing friend and former boss Prime Minister U Nu.

Thant was not a passive secretary-general in voice or action. In the spirit of his predecessor, Dag Hammarskjöld, he sought to push the limits of the office. Before being elected in 1961, for instance, Thant asserted that he alone would appoint his senior officials, despite initial Soviet insistence on Security Council review for appointments. Perhaps as a sop or compromise, Thant let it be known that he would include a Soviet national among his top advisers.

Unlike any secretary-general before or after, Thant created two new peacekeeping missions on his own authority, without prior Security Council authorization. The establishment of the United Nations Yemen Observer Mission (UNYOM) and the United Nations Security Force in West Irian (UNSF) was, he felt, well within his purview because the parties had approached him, not the council, and after negotiations they had arrived at a mission mandate and agreed to pay the full costs of the mission. This circumvention of the council, however, brought strong criticism from the Soviets. Though other countries came to Thant’s defense,

resolutions were passed in the UN organs that authorized the missions *ex post facto*.

In 1967 Thant decided on his own authority to withdraw the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) after Egypt had so requested. Some member states claimed that the decision properly belonged to the General Assembly, which had created the force, or the Security Council, which had primary responsibility for international peace and security. Nonetheless, Thant only notified the troop-contributing nations of his decision without seeking their approval or that of any UN body. The complaining nations, including Canada, did not exercise their right to challenge Thant's decision in one of the main organs.

After the Six-Day War, Thant was savagely criticized for his decision, as he himself describes in his memoirs. The *Spectator* of London titled an editorial page "U Thant's War," and an opinion piece in the *New York Times* creatively, though unfairly, accused Thant of using "his international prestige with the objectivity of a spurned love and the dynamism of a noodle."<sup>123</sup> The Israeli government (which had refused a request to station UN peacekeepers on its territory) compared Thant to a firefighter who vanishes at the site of fire. To top it all, Nasser claimed he had not requested the full withdrawal of UNEF.<sup>124</sup> At the time, Thant simply absorbed the blame.

Thant resisted bringing matters to the attention of the Security Council when he knew the council would not be able to deal with them. Though this might have lessened his burden, his team-player approach would not allow him to pass the buck easily (as he could have done in 1967). Unlike his predecessor, Thant never formally invoked article 99 of the charter, which gives the secretary-general the right to add a new issue to the council's agenda. If member states did not raise the issue, Thant figured there must be reason.

In the East Pakistan crisis of 1971, however, he became so frustrated with the lack of action in the Security Council in the face of an impending war that he took the unusual step of publicly releasing a memo he had sent to the council to prod it to consider this emerging "threat to international peace and security." Had he invoked article 99, he could have forced the council to meet to consider the situation, but he avoided this action. Thant strongly relied on the implied powers of article 99. For him, it meant that he had to keep a "watching brief" on situations that could threaten the peace.<sup>125</sup> In East Pakistan, he devoted himself primarily to humanitarian assistance.

Although criticism of the superpowers could come at a heavy price (as his two predecessors had discovered), Thant did not hesitate to blame the United States and the Soviet Union when he saw blatant violations of the charter. He labeled the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia a “serious blow to the concepts of international order and morality which form the basis of the Charter.”<sup>126</sup> When the Soviet Union accused the United Nations of being a “tool of imperialists” in the Congo, Thant could not help but respond.<sup>127</sup> In 1962, when given the opportunity to address the Soviet people on radio, he boldly declared, “The Russian people do not fully understand the true character of the Congo problem,” prefacing his words with the remark that he did not believe in “honeyed words.”<sup>128</sup> Similarly, on the Vietnam War, he said at a press conference, “I am sure that the great American people, if only they knew the true facts and background to the developments in South Vietnam, will agree with me that further bloodshed is unnecessary.”<sup>129</sup> Quite undiplomatically, he repeated the famous maxim that “in times of war the first casualty is truth.”

Thant also criticized the actions of several other nations: Belgium for supporting mercenaries in the Congo (a former colony), South Africa for its racist apartheid policies, Rhodesia for its unilateral declaration of independence, and France and Russia for nuclear testing, which he called “a manifestation of a very dangerous psychosis.”<sup>130</sup> Surprisingly, Thant did not receive a strong rebuff from nations for his criticisms. Part of his success lies in the difference between his substance and his style. His sense of morality gave power to his words, but they were spoken with great humility, respect, and sensitivity—“his words often being much stronger than his tone.” Though his statements were not “sugar-coated,” he never lost his temper.

### *Private Versus Professional Interests*

The work of a secretary-general is intense and demanding. Sometimes it is exhilarating, but more often than not it is frustrating. Though Thant did not agree with the words of Trygve Lie that it was “the most impossible job in the world,” he said he thoroughly understood why his predecessor felt that way. Not only does the role present political challenges, it also takes a heavy personal toll.

In Thant’s case, the toll included his health and family life. He had to be hospitalized for a brief period near the end of his third year for peptic

gastritis, and later in his tenure he suffered from ulcers, acute fatigue, and hemorrhoids. He was diagnosed with cancer shortly after leaving office.<sup>131</sup> As secretary-general, he was committed to ten-hour workdays six days a week, less on Saturdays. He could be interrupted at any time of day or night with news of a serious conflict breaking out somewhere in the world. Furthermore, his wife had not acclimatized to North America: she did not learn to speak English and did not socialize with Thant's colleagues or the diplomatic corps. She wanted to return to Burma. These were some of the personal reasons behind his reluctance to serve a second term in 1966, despite universal demands that he do so. Thant chose to place UN service above personal interest.

In 1972 a much weaker and at times hospitalized Thant determined that, for the sake of the United Nations as well as for himself, he would not run for a third term. In his farewell speech in December 1971, he spoke of his retirement bringing him a "tremendous sense of relief bordering on liberation."<sup>132</sup>

A secretary-general's privacy is also jeopardized. His thoughts, feelings, and actions are constantly questioned on issues ranging from international crises to personal beliefs. Thant tried to keep his religion private, despite strong interest from the media and the public. The teach-in in 1967 was one of the few forums where he addressed the issue directly. He started out by saying, "normally I would be unwilling to discuss in public my religious convictions," but he agreed under "the special circumstances of the Toronto teach-in." He left these circumstances unspecified, but they probably related to the burgeoning interest in Buddhism in that era, and perhaps also to the fact that the organizer was the son of his friend George Ignatieff, the Canadian ambassador to the United Nations.

Thant gave UN duties priority over personal concerns and even over his religious identity. In a meeting with Buddhists, he told them that in his office in Manhattan, "I must forget that I am a Burmese and Buddhist. . . . Most of my visitors have something specific to say to me, I must open myself to them, I must empty myself of myself."<sup>133</sup> Sometimes his visitors brought weighty problems. In some cases, they brought criticism of Thant himself.

The secretary-general was subjected not only to criticism but also to outright slander. U.S. secretary of state Dean Rusk made the outrageous statement that Thant was working to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In response to Thant's criticism of U.S. policies in Vietnam, right-wing

groups accused him of “insolent candor” and of being an “apologist and propagandist for Communist aggression in SE Asia.”<sup>134</sup> One group even claimed that “by 1963, the UN was headed by avowed Marxists.”<sup>135</sup>

Thant seldom lowered himself to the level of his critics and often accepted unfair criticism in silence. He also kept the same humble attitude when he was successful. “The perfect good offices operation is one which is not heard of until it is successfully concluded, or even never heard of at all.”<sup>136</sup> Much of Thant’s political work was “quiet diplomacy,” done away from the glare of media attention and outside the chambers of the United Nations.

Because of Thant’s affinity for reporters, however, his staff sometimes had to excuse him from spontaneous “lobby press conferences.” Thant was the first to establish daily press conferences with the spokesman of the secretary-general and he is credited by Secretary-General Kofi Annan with “opening up the United Nations to the media.”<sup>137</sup> But his affinity for the press rarely interfered with his “good offices” functions, which he carried out with modesty and considerable discretion.

Thant’s answer to the personal-professional dilemma can best be summed up in the Buddhist-sounding dictum “service over self.”

### *Idealist Versus Realist*

Thant struggled between his idealistic vision of a world at peace, operating in accordance with the UN charter, and a realistic view from close quarters of national behavior during the Cold War. He had to deal daily with the narrow politics of nationalism, the conflict of ideologies, the selfish motives of many politicians, and, all too often, resentment against UN interference. He once commented on politics, “Behind their smooth façade of words, there goes on all the time bitter haggling, accentuated by bland international blackmail and power threats, euphemistically called diplomacy.”<sup>138</sup>

In listing qualities necessary for an officeholder, Thant included both idealism and pragmatism: “a sense of obligation to the human community in its broadest sense . . . and an urgent sense of political realism.”<sup>139</sup> His general evaluations of the world situation, included in his annual reports, were often critical but realistic: “The unbridled rivalry of nations is the dominant factor in international life”; “the greatest obstacle to the realization of the principles of the Charter is the inescapable fact that power politics still operates.” He called for patriotism to “take new and more

creative forms than the old concepts of political domination or material power.”<sup>140</sup>

Like every secretary-general, Thant also had to reconcile unlimited idealistic objectives with limited means. Knowing the bounds of international progress, he proposed realistic goals that he knew could conceivably be implemented and avoided those that were premature or overly idealistic, however appealing they may have been. It is a testament to his political judgment that most of his proposals eventually saw the light of day. In a remarkable speech to the World Federalists Association in Ottawa in 1970, he advocated seven goals for UN reform, which were, to a large degree, ultimately achieved:

1. “Decisions of the United Nations, particularly the Security Council, must be made enforceable.” During Thant’s tenure, the Security Council did not apply mandatory sanctions, except in the cases of South Africa and Rhodesia, and did not take military enforcement action under chapter VII of the charter, with the Congo being an arguable exception. After the Cold War, by contrast, sanctions were applied to more than a dozen nations or groups of individuals, and military enforcement was applied in several important cases (e.g., Iraq–Kuwait 1991, Angola, Sierra Leone, Congo 2003). Now, more than ever before—though perhaps still not sufficiently and not with enough impartiality—UN decisions are being enforced.

2. “The unused provisions of the Charter, which can add greatly to international peace and security, should be activated.” Specifically, Thant suggested that council meetings be held at the ministerial or head-of-state level (now happening frequently, though only three times at the latter level, the first in 1992),<sup>141</sup> greater use of the International Court of Justice (whose case load increased dramatically after the Cold War),<sup>142</sup> and the establishment of UN fact-finding bodies (which also are much more frequent in modern times).

3. “The International Court of Justice must be empowered to interpret the UN Charter.” While there were two examples in Thant’s time of ICJ cases involving interpretation of the charter, the practice has increased since then.<sup>143</sup> However, the court has yet to challenge the legality of a Security Council decision.

4. “Universality” should be the goal of the United Nations. This has been achieved.<sup>144</sup> A major step was the inclusion of China in 1971, a year after Thant’s Ottawa speech.

5. “Global authorities” should be established “to deal with serious global problems,” particularly the environment. A United Nations Environment

Program (UNEP) was created in 1972, as Thant had urged, with headquarters in Nairobi. Many others followed.

6. An “international regime to administer the resources of the seabed” should be established. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, opened for signature in 1982, created the International Seabed Authority.

7. “The United Nations urgently needs a stand-by force.” The current UN Standby Arrangements System (UNSAS), created in 1994, allows the United Nations to better choose from potential troop-contributing nations. Furthermore, a Standby High Readiness Brigade for UN Peace Operations (SHIRBRIG) became operational on January 1, 2000, with headquarters near Copenhagen. It has sixteen experienced members who have earmarked troops for UN service. Thant rejected the idea of a standing (as opposed to standby) UN force as premature, preferring to support more realistic measures.

These examples show that Thant was at once a visionary and a practical man, fully cognizant of the realities and limitations of the international community. Between what he called the “two poles” of the United Nations—the charter and “unconcealed selfish nature of national sovereignty”—he sought modest but progressive means to bring the charter dream to reality.<sup>145</sup> Throughout his term of office, he pushed the United Nations to greater goals that were within reach. To summarize Thant’s approach, he was an idealist in vision and a realist in action.

### *The Sacred/Secular Divide*

Though religious, there is no reason to believe that Thant was superstitious. But, like many Burmese Buddhists, he did have horoscopes cast on occasion. One was prepared, for instance, for his neighbor and biographer June Bingham when her husband was running for election to the U.S. Congress. It is also quite likely that one of his secretaries, an American woman whom he brought with him to the United Nations from the Burmese mission, was engaged in astrology. Out of respect for Thant, the American press never investigated this practice. When Thant’s press officer, Ramses Nassif, asked him if he believed in astrology, he answered adroitly, “I do not believe in it, nor do I reject it—but let me tell you, there are many great people in Asia who would not make a major decision without consulting their horoscope.”<sup>146</sup> In fact, Thant was one of those Asians, but he kept this practice private.

His Buddhist upbringing and strong beliefs were no secret, but he did not promote these in his official duties or speeches (with a few exceptions, as noted above). He did make a special “pilgrimage” to sacred Buddhist sites while visiting heads of state in south Asia in 1967, but these visits were for his own benefit, not official functions.<sup>147</sup> He respected the non-religious character of the world organization, though he regretted the exclusion of the spiritual dimension.

The United Nations was founded as a secular institution, despite the religious convictions of many of its founders (including Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson before him) and the close parallels between religious principles and the UN charter. Like the founders, Thant valued religion as a source of inspiration but realized the dangers of “religion employed as a weapon for political ends.”<sup>148</sup> He had opposed the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion of Burma, and he would no doubt have opposed any religious favoritism in the United Nations. Still, he felt that by ignoring the religious and spiritual side of life, the United Nations was missing an important part of human existence. These facets were, in his view, essential to lifting the human condition. He took up this issue squarely in his farewell address in 1971:

I have certain priorities in regard to virtues and human values. An ideal man, or an ideal woman, is one who is endowed with four attributes, four qualities—physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual qualities. . . . I would attach greater importance to intellectual qualities over physical qualities. . . . It is far from my intention to denigrate intellectualism, but I would attach greater importance to moral qualities . . . like love, compassion, understanding, tolerance, the philosophy of “live and let live,” the ability to understand the other person’s point of view, which are the key to all great religions. And above all I would attach the greatest importance to spiritual values, spiritual qualities. I deliberately avoid using the term “religion.” I have in mind the spiritual virtues: faith in oneself, the purity of one’s inner self which to me is the greatest virtue of all. With this approach, with this philosophy, with this concept alone, will we be able to fashion the kind of society we want, the society which was envisaged by the founding fathers of the United Nations.<sup>149</sup>

Soon after Muller arrived as director of the secretary-general’s office in 1970, he asked Thant if he had any unfulfilled dreams.<sup>150</sup> There were three: the entry of China into the United Nations (realized in 1971), new forms of international education (partly fulfilled with the creation of the United

Nations University in 1973 and the University for Peace in 1980, largely through Muller's efforts), and spirituality at the United Nations. Explaining the last dream, Thant said, "I always listen to political and economic speeches. I never hear a spiritual voice in the United Nations, even though I am a spiritual person above everything else." Fortunately, this dream was realized soon after Thant uttered those words.

As mentioned earlier, in 1970 a UN Meditation Group was formed under the leadership of Sri Chinmoy, an Indian spiritual teacher, who took an approach that Thant fully supported. The group, still in existence today, honors all religions, is open to all, offers silent meditations for delegates, staff, and NGO representatives, and organizes a vigorous program of UN lectures, concerts, and commemorations (including UN charter day walks and annual peace runs). The group later established the U Thant Peace Award, which is offered to individuals who exemplify the aspirations of the former secretary-general. The awardees have included Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev, Javier Perez de Cuellar, and Desmond Tutu, among many others. The November 1974 issue of *Meditation at the United Nations*, the monthly bulletin of the group, was dedicated to Thant shortly after he passed away. The bulletin was full of touching tributes, including those given by ambassadors in a special service of commemoration that the group organized the day after Thant's passing. At the commemorative service, Sri Chinmoy's remarks revealed the depth of spiritual appreciation for the late secretary-general: "Beloved Brother, man of silence, man of peace, may the Supreme grant your soul Eternity's Silence, Infinity's Peace."

By embracing spirituality, Thant overcame the problems of narrow sectarianism and religious disharmony. He chose to focus on the commonality of all religions, the spiritual essentials that easily relate to the UN charter and that unite peoples and nations: "How are we to practice tolerance? What states of mind are necessary for all of us to live together in peace with one another as good neighbors? How are we to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security? The answers to these questions lie, it seems to me, in our ability to bring out the best in us and to return to the basic moral and ethical principles of all great religions."<sup>151</sup>

## Conclusion

Thant served the United Nations during a tumultuous decade of world history, a period that put to the test his faith in both Buddhism and the UN

charter. Fortunately, these two aspects of Thant's thinking were not only compatible but mutually supportive. His reservoir of good will and tolerance, gained through meditation and Buddhist practice, helped him to be an effective UN mediator between the East and West in the Cold War, between the North and South in the age of decolonization, and between emerging nations in the global South. In the world-threatening Cuban missile crisis, he was able to serve as a humble bridge between nuclear-armed superpowers as well as to placate a furious Castro in Havana. Because of his self-effacing style, even his strong criticisms of superpower actions, for example in Vietnam and Czechoslovakia, were tolerated by them. After the Six-Day War he allowed himself to become a convenient scapegoat for international inaction, accepting this unenviable role with as much Buddhist detachment as could be summoned.

His Buddhist-internationalist ethical framework was possible because he took a broad view of his religion and embraced a spiritual view of humanity. He placed the human being at the center of his considerations long before the modern terms "human security" or "sovereignty of the individual" became popular. For him, the differences between North and South, East and West were much less important than the everyday human struggle for dignity and the inherent oneness of humanity. His belief in cosmic law and order (*Dhamma* in Pali, or *Dharma* in Sanskrit) led him naturally to seek the rule of international law and order based on the organized will of the international community as expressed through the United Nations. His Buddhist belief in nonviolence and human equality helped him speak from the depths of conviction about the necessity of peaceful dispute settlement, the nonuse of force, and fundamental human rights.

Ethical dilemmas did arise in his term of office. He ordered UN peacekeepers to use force to prevent the secession of Katanga from the Congo. Though his conscience was troubled by this necessity, he justified this use of force as a last resort, authorized by a legitimate body (the Security Council) and applied at the minimum level necessary to accomplish the aim, as well as other just war criteria. In addition, he stood strongly against secessionism in the Congo as in any other country.

He faced another dilemma when countries ruthlessly suppressed rebel movements but rejected his overtures to play a pacifying or mediating role. In the Biafra-Nigeria conflict, he accepted a minor role in humanitarian relief at a time when many nations were calling for a greater role. Similarly, when Egypt requested the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from its

territory, he dutifully complied after Nasser rebuffed his peace initiative. He accepted the centrality of state sovereignty and respected the right of states to determine the extent of his intervention in their affairs. Again, he humbly placed himself in the background.

When Thant did intervene, he adopted an impartial attitude, using the charter as his compass. He felt that the secretary-general could not pick sides or favorites and should judge only actions, not people. Furthermore, his Buddhist practice was to show good will and compassion to all, without discrimination. He rejected neutrality, as that would mean turning a blind eye to suffering and the wanton destruction of war, and sought to give all a sense of peace, even seeming adversaries like Tshombe.

When his personal convictions conflicted with UN resolutions, he felt obliged to support the UN organs, though sometimes admitting to two views (the “two U Thants”). Here his Buddhist sense of self-effacement came in handy: He could sacrifice his personal views for the larger whole. Though he had a strong conscience, he kept himself humble and as detached as possible.

When conditions allowed, he did push the limits of his independence. He created new peacekeeping operations on his own authority and spoke out on many sensitive matters, all the while keeping within the bounds of UN policy. He did not hesitate to criticize even the great powers if they transgressed the UN charter or the resolutions of the main UN organs. He was outspoken against “colonialism, war, the arms race and unequal distribution of world resources.”<sup>152</sup>

He had to find a Buddhist balance (“the middle path”) between noble ideals and human realities. He accepted the limitations of office, proposing small but feasible steps while keeping his vision on the larger goal of world peace and social justice. He envisioned and fostered, using his considerable administrative skills, the creation of many new bodies, including the UN Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations University.

Finally, his dream of a more spiritual United Nations was substantially realized with the creation of the UN Meditation Group in 1970. He wrote the group’s leader, Sri Chinmoy, in 1972, “You have instilled in the minds of hundreds of people here the moral and spiritual values which both of us treasure very dearly.”<sup>153</sup> Thant felt deeply that “the edifice of modern civilization must be built on spiritual principles,”<sup>154</sup> and that “the ideal of human synthesis has been developed by almost all great religions.”<sup>155</sup> He held a holistic view of his religion among other religions and within the greater sphere of human activity and experience.

Thant's life and actions showed that Buddhism is not only a personal voyage with the goal of nirvana, the perfect state of inner meditation, but also a life of service to the world—one committed to the peace between as well as within human beings. He was a novel and rare example of a Buddhist on the international stage, an important political figure who sought to apply good will and compassion in global politics. Thant was a prime example of Buddhism in action.

## Notes

1. U Thant is pronounced "Oo Thawnt," though Burmese frequently make the final "t" a silent one. The prefix *U* shows respect and is roughly equivalent to the English word "mister" (literally "uncle"). Like many Burmese, Thant had only one name. In Burma (Myanmar), he is called "Pantanaw Thant" to identify him more clearly.

2. Quoted in June Bingham, *U Thant: The Search for Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 281.

3. Gertrude Samuels, "The Meditation of U Thant," *New York Times Magazine*, December 13, 1964, 32; Bingham, *U Thant*. Bingham and Thant became acquainted when he was still an ambassador. After he became secretary-general she gained his reluctant permission to write his biography. She lived near him in the Riverdale neighborhood of New York City, which gave her the opportunity to meet him occasionally and ask questions. She also made a trip to Burma to interview Thant's relatives and to research the conditions and history of Burma, something that helped gain Thant's approval for the book.

4. U Thant, *View from the UN* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 20.

5. Unfortunately, Cripps's 1942 proposals were rejected by the Indian National Congress, and India began down the painful road of partition.

6. Bingham, *U Thant*, 97, 125.

7. *Ibid.*, 171.

8. *Ibid.*, 190.

9. *Ibid.*, 194.

10. *Ibid.*, 220.

11. Robert Muller, *The Example of a Great Ethical Statesman: U Thant*, special supplement to the United Nations Meditation Group Bulletin, January 1977 (Jamaica, NY: Agni Press, 1977); and Robert Muller, *New Genesis: Shaping a Global Spirituality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 132.

12. Muller, *Example of a Great Ethical Statesman*, 9.

13. Thant, *View from the UN*, 7.

14. Bingham, *U Thant*, 280. On September 19, 1966, Thant issued an unequivocal statement: "It is my belief, as I have said more than once in the past, that a Secretary-General of the United Nations should not normally serve for more than one term. I have similarly made it known that I do not believe in the concept of indispensability of any particular person for any particular job. In the circumstances the conclusion I have reached will, I hope, be understood by all my friends and colleagues: I have decided not to offer myself for a second term as Secretary-General, and to leave the Security Council unfettered in its recommendation to the General Assembly with regard to the next Secretary-General." UN Press release SG/SM/567, September 19, 1966, quoted in Raymond B. Fosdick, *The League and the United Nations After Fifty Years: The Six Secretaries-General* (Newton, CT: Raymond B. Fosdick, 1972), 159.

15. "With genuine esteem for the Secretary-General himself delegate after delegate took the rostrum and pleaded [with] the Secretary-General to reconsider" his decision not to accept a second term. *Newsweek*, October 1996, quoted in the *Jakarta Post*, "Myanmar's U Thant Steered United Nations During Crisis," January 24, 2000, available at [www.globalpolicy.org/secgen/pastsg/uthant00.htm](http://www.globalpolicy.org/secgen/pastsg/uthant00.htm).

16. Bingham, *U Thant*, 259. Thant did accept two dozen honorary degrees from universities around the world. They are listed in Sri Chinmoy, *U Thant: Divinity's Smile, Humanity's Cry* (Jamaica, NY: Agni Press, 1977), 10. He also accepted the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 1967 from the government of India (Chinmoy, *U Thant: Divinity's Smile*, 14); Thant, *View from the UN*, 23; and C. V. Narasimhan, *United Nations at 50: Recollections* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996), 129.

17. Quoted in Brian Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 396.

18. Thant, *View from the UN*, 61.

19. Quoted in Brian Urquhart, *A Life in Peace and War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 203.

20. Quoted in Bingham, *U Thant*.

21. Alan James, "U Thant and His Critics," in *The Year Book of World Affairs, 1972*, ed. G. W. Keeton and G. Schwartzberger (London: Stevens, 1972), 43–64.

22. U Thant to Alan James, 1972, in UN Archives, New York, Series 0893, box 6, file 41. Professor James and the journal editor wrote back that it was not possible to supply the copies.

23. Thant, *View from the UN*, 352.

24. Urquhart, *Life in Peace and War*, 190.

25. Thant, *View from the UN*, chapter 8. See especially 268–71.

26. U Thant, *Portfolio for Peace: Excerpts from the Writings and Speeches of U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations, on Major World Issues, 1961–1968* (New York: United Nations, 1968), 29.

27. Bingham, *U Thant*, 5.

28. Ibid., 7. Many thought Thant's comment was a drastic if not amusing understatement. Tshombe had ordered the harassment and killing of UN peacekeepers in Katanga, and probably had the Congolese prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, killed as well. Thant's full statement was: "Mr. Tshombe is a very unstable man, he is a very unpredictable man. The same can be said of his two colleagues. . . . I have tried to get Mr. Tshombe and the Central [Congolese] government to negotiate, but without any result. I don't know what I can do with such a bunch of clowns." Quoted in Fosdick, *League and the United Nations*, 148.

29. Narasimhan, *United Nations at 50*, 182. In late 1964 Thant was admitted to a New York hospital for treatment of an ulcer. He received a transfusion, prompting colleagues to remark that Thant was now "part American . . . let us hope his neutralism has not been diluted!" Quoted in Bingham, *U Thant*, 15.

30. Urquhart, *Life in Peace and War*, 226.

31. Quoted in Muller, *New Genesis*, 50.

32. Bingham, *U Thant*, 4.

33. Urquhart, *Life in Peace and War*, 190.

34. Thant, *Portfolio for Peace*, 3.

35. Bingham, *U Thant*, 110.

36. Ibid., 5.

37. Muller, *Example of a Great Ethical Statesman*, 2.

38. George Ignatieff, *The Making of a Peacemonger* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 226.

39. "A Visit with U Thant," *New Republic*, January 8, 1966, 11.

40. Urquhart, *Life in Peace and War*, 190.

41. Thant, *View from the UN*, 23.

42. Bingham, *U Thant*, 11; and Narasimhan, *United Nations at 50*, 84. Ramses Nassif, who, along with C. V. Narasimhan, brought the news of the death of his son, recalls that his first words were: "I wonder how my wife will take it." Ramses Nassif, *U Thant in New York, 1961-1971: A Portrait of the Third UN Secretary-General* (London: C. Hurst, 1988), 21. Apparently Thant carried on with his duties at the United Nations that day, but later, when a reporter expressed sympathy, his eyes filled with tears. Samuels, "Meditation of U Thant," 116.

43. Bingham, *U Thant*, 198.

44. Ibid., 121, 232.

45. Quoted in Chinmoy, *U Thant: Divinity's Smile*, 64.

46. Thant, *View from the UN*, 20. Close colleagues like Ralph Bunche were able to detect subtle signs of irritation and nervousness on occasion, such as thumping pencils, bumping knees, and chain-smoking of cigars. Urquhart, *Bunche*, 396.

47. Quoted in Douglas Gillies, *Prophet: The Hatmaker's Son* (Santa Barbara, CA: East Beach Press, 2003), 23.

48. Both men quoted in Chinmoy, *U Thant: Divinity's Smile*, 63, 34.

49. George Ignatieff, "U Thant as Secretary-General: Private Qualities in Public Life," *International Perspectives* (January–February 1975): 35.

50. Robert Muller, *Most of All, They Taught Me Happiness* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978). See also Muller's *New Genesis* and *Example of a Great Ethical Statesman*.

51. UN Press Release SG/SM/822, October 20, 1967, reprinted as "Statement on the Role of Religious Convictions at the Third International Teach-In, 22 October 1967," in Andrew W. Cordier and Max Harrelson, eds., *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations*, vol. 7, *U Thant, 1965–1967* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 599–602.

52. Thant, *Portfolio for Peace*, 14.

53. Cordier and Harrelson, *Public Papers*, 7:600.

54. Thant, *View from the UN*, 21.

55. The main Buddhist scripture, the *Dhammapada*, does not give exceptions to the rule of nonviolence, but there are references to permitted violence in other Buddhist texts.

56. Bingham, *U Thant*, 74.

57. Thant, *View from the UN*, 21.

58. U Thant, "On Tension in the Middle East," in Thant, *Towards World Peace: Addresses and Public Statements* (New York: Yoseloff), 29.

59. Bingham, *U Thant*, 61.

60. Thant, *Towards World Peace*, 398.

61. C. V. Narasimhan, "U Thant as I Knew Him," *Secretariat News*, December 16, 1964, quoted in Narasimhan, *United Nations at 50*, 184.

62. Thant, *View from the UN*, 254.

63. *Ibid.*, 186.

64. *Ibid.*, 26.

65. UN charter, article 1.4.

66. Fosdick, *League and the United Nations*, 145.

67. Thant, *View from the UN*, 145.

68. *Ibid.*, 24; and Bingham, *U Thant*, 273.

69. Thant, *View from the UN*, 406.

70. Nassif, *U Thant in New York*, 56

71. Quoted in Muller, *New Genesis*, 113. Also available at [www.christusrex.org/www1/pope/UN-1965.html](http://www.christusrex.org/www1/pope/UN-1965.html).

72. The group at present is called Sri Chinmoy: The Peace Meditation at the United Nations. It meets twice weekly at UN headquarters for silent nondenominational meditation.

73. Chinmoy, *U Thant: Divinity's Smile*, 47. Sri Chinmoy's play is available at [www.srichinmoylibrary.com/siddhartha-becomes-buddha](http://www.srichinmoylibrary.com/siddhartha-becomes-buddha).

74. Muller, *Example of a Great Ethical Statesman*, 7.

75. Chinmoy, *U Thant: Divinity's Smile*, 6.
76. Thant, *View from the UN*, 441, 444, 452.
77. *Ibid.*, 454
78. *Ibid.*, 144.
79. Quoted in Bingham, *U Thant*, 185.
80. Thant, *Portfolio for Peace*, 6.
81. *Ibid.*, 49, 42, 72.
82. Thant, *Towards World Peace*, 400 (emphasis added).
83. *Ibid.*, 282.
84. Andrew W. Cordier and Max Harrelson, *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations*, vol. 6, *U Thant, 1961–1964* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 135.
85. Security Council Resolution 169, November 24, 1961, available at [www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1961/scres61.htm](http://www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1961/scres61.htm).
86. Fosdick, *League and the United Nations*, 146–47.
87. Quoted in Trevor Findlay, *The Blue Helmets' First War? Use of Force by the UN in the Congo, 1960–64* (Clementsport, Nova Scotia: Canadian Peacekeeping Press, 1999), 115.
88. Thant, *View from the UN*, 137; and A. Walter Dorn and David Bell, "Intelligence and Peacekeeping: The UN Operation in the Congo, 1960–64," *International Peacekeeping* 2 (1995): 11–33.
89. Thant, *View from the UN*, 143.
90. *Ibid.*, 144.
91. Ironically, after a short exile abroad, Tshombe returned to the Congo and became its prime minister in July 1964 in a coalition government, serving at the helm of the very country he had earlier tried to break up. After corrupt elections, however, he was forced to flee to Spain. On June 30, 1967, his plane was hijacked to Algeria, where he was confined to jail, and he died from heart failure in 1969.
92. Findlay, *Blue Helmets' First War*, 135.
93. Statistics on fatalities in UN peacekeeping operations are provided at [www.un.org/Depts/dpko/fatalities/fatal1.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/fatalities/fatal1.htm). The ongoing UN Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), established in 1978, has the same number of fatalities as ONUC had in its four years of operation (1960–64): 250. The UN forces in the former Yugoslavia (UNPROFOR, UNPF, and UNPREDEP, 1992–95) suffered 228 fatalities over a four-year period.
94. Thant, *View from the UN*, 145.
95. Dorn and Bell, "Intelligence and Peacekeeping."
96. Thant, *View from the UN*, 107.
97. *United Nations Monthly Chronicle*, No. 36 (February 1970): 1.
98. Security Council Resolution 161, February 21, 1961, available at [www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1961/scres61.htm](http://www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1961/scres61.htm).

99. Thant, *View from the UN*, 108.
100. *Ibid.*, 138.
101. Quoted in Findlay, *Blue Helmets' First War*, 131.
102. *Ibid.*, 118. These are words from Thant's authorization for use of force on December 5, 1961.
103. Thant, *View from the UN*, 144–45.
104. *Ibid.*, 328.
105. This provision can be traced back to the insistence of former president Howard Taft in his communications to Woodrow Wilson in Paris to appease conservatives in the U.S. Senate.
106. Ignatieff, *Making of a Peacemonger*, 237–39; and Thant, *View from the UN*, 54.
107. Thant, *View from the UN*, 53.
108. Cordier and Harrelson, *Public Papers*, 6:132.
109. "Statement by Secretary-General U Thant at the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity," UN Press Release SG/112, July 17, 1964, available at [www.rfksa.org/documents/5.php#37](http://www.rfksa.org/documents/5.php#37); Thant, *Portfolio for Peace*, 98.
110. Samuels, "Meditation of U Thant," 115; and quoted by Ambassador Zenon Rossides in Chinmoy, *U Thant: Divinity's Smile*, 17.
111. Thant, *View from the UN*, 44.
112. Bingham, *U Thant*, 253.
113. Thant, *View from the UN*, 343.
114. *Ibid.*, 302–6. Thant was surprised to learn after the hijacking that Italy had secretly worked out a deal for the release of Arab insurgents in Israeli jails.
115. Bingham, *U Thant*, 196.
116. *Ibid.*, 272.
117. Fosdick, *League and the United Nations*, 145.
118. Cordier and Harrelson, *Public Papers*, 6:254.
119. Thant, *View from the UN*, 44, 33.
120. Bingham, *U Thant*, 238.
121. *Ibid.*, 259.
122. Samuels, "Meditation of U Thant," 115.
123. Quoted in Thant, *View from the UN*, 230.
124. *Ibid.*, 268.
125. *Ibid.*, 50.
126. *Ibid.*, 382.
127. Cordier and Harrelson, *Public Papers*, 6:71.
128. *Ibid.*, 222. Bingham believes that the Soviets censored these critical words from his address to the Soviet people.
129. Thant, *View from the UN*, 67; Bingham, *U Thant*, 267.
130. Cordier and Harrelson, *Public Papers*, 6:168.
131. Urquhart, *Life in Peace and War*, 226; and Nassif, *U Thant in New York*, 24.

132. Farewell address to the UN General Assembly, quoted in the *Jakarta Post*, January 24, 2000.

133. Quoted in Muller, *Example of a Great Ethical Statesman*, 6.

134. Bingham, *U Thant*, 277.

135. John A. Stormer, *None Dare Call It Treason* (Florissant, MO: Liberty Bell Press, 1964), quoted in Bingham, *U Thant*, 278.

136. Thant quoted in Urquhart, *Bunche*, 429.

137. Kofi Annan, "Secretary-General's message for the launch of the U Thant Institute," December 5, 2003, available at [www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=680](http://www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=680). The homepage of the institute is [www.uthantinstitute.org](http://www.uthantinstitute.org).

138. Quoted in Bingham, *U Thant*, 238.

139. Nassif, *U Thant in New York*, 16.

140. Thant, *Portfolio for Peace*, 3–5.

141. Security Council meetings at the head of state level occurred on January 31, 1992, September 8, 2000, at the time of the Millennium Summit, and September 14, 2005. However, heads of state gather each year for the opening of a new General Assembly.

142. In the 1960s the International Court of Justice issued only four judgments and one advisory opinion. In the 1990s the ICJ issued thirty-five judgments and three advisory opinions.

143. For example, in the *Certain Expenses Case* of 1962, the ICJ determined that, in accordance with the UN charter, the cost of UN peacekeeping was a regular expense of the organization and hence an obligation of all member states.

144. With the admission of Switzerland in 2002, no major state remains outside the United Nations, unless Taiwan is considered a separate state. Most countries consider Taiwan part of the People's Republic of China.

145. Thant, *View from the UN*, 43.

146. Nassif, *U Thant in New York*, 24.

147. Thant devotes a chapter of his memoirs to his pilgrimages to major Buddhist sites in south Asia in 1967. In Kandi, Sri Lanka, he visited the temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic. In India, newly installed prime minister Indira Gandhi arranged for his visit to Sanchi, the location of *stupas* and other monuments built by the Buddhist emperor Ashoka around 250 B.C. In Pakistan, Foreign Minister Ali Bhutto escorted him on a visit to Taxila, an ancient Buddhist seat of learning under excavation. Thant wrote that he was "speechless with awe and veneration" (*View from the UN*, 405). In Nepal, the king provided his personal helicopter to allow Thant to visit Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. It was "one of the most important days of my life" (*ibid.*, 417). Thant was disappointed, however, by the physical state of the site. He eagerly initiated a joint UNESCO-Nepali project to develop the sacred location that later was declared a "World Heritage Site."

148. Cordier and Harrelson, *Public Papers*, 6:9.

149. Quoted in Muller, *New Genesis*, 8.

150. Gillies, *Prophet*, 23.

151. "Secretary-General's New Year Message," UN Headquarters, December 23, 1966, quoted in "The United Nations and World Peace: A Tribute to U Thant, A Symposium and Commemoration of the Eighty-Fifth Birth Anniversary of the Late Secretary-General," Harvard University, January 21, 1994 (unpublished photo exhibition).

152. Bernard J. Firestone, *The United Nations Under U Thant, 1961–1971* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 108.

153. Chinmoy, *U Thant: Divinity's Smile*, 52.

154. Nassif, *U Thant in New York*, 61.

155. Thant, *View from the UN*, 24.