COLOURFUL MYANMAR

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Third Edition 1995 September

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Printer Daw Khin Khin Win(02670) Kalhya Offset 152 Kyun Shwe Myaing Street Thuwunna Yangon. *Publisher* U Ye Myint(01049) Tetlan Sarpay 967 Padetha Street, Insein. *Manuscript Permit* 44 / 95(1) *Cover Permit* 155 / 95(4)
Circulation 5000 Copies

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khin Myo Chit (b: 1915) started her writing career in the 1930s with short stories for magazines and weekly journals, and later worked on the editorial staff of a weekly. Her pre-war years were busy, whatwith getting involved in the country's struggle for independence against the British, free-lance writing and raising a family.

When war came, it meant more involvement in partisan movements.

After the war, she picked up the broken threads of her formal education and got her B.A. degree at the Yangon University. She then began using English language as her medium in short stories and newspaper columns.

She later worked as a features editor successively of the *Guardian Daily* and the *Working People's Daily*, both English language papers. Her short story *Thirteen Carat Diamond* was included in 50 Great Oriental Stories, a Bantam Classics, published in U.S.A and Canada, March 1965. It was translated into Italian, German, Yugolsav and Gujarati languages.

She wrote *Anawrahta of Burma*, a historical novel, based on the title of King Anawarahta, the 11th century founder of first Myanmar Kingdom with its capital, Bagan.

Her infinite Variety was first published in Horizon as the prize-winning story of a contest open to South East Asian writers sponsored by the same magazine.

A Wonderland of Burmese Legends published in Bangkok by the Tamarind Press received high acclaim in the foreign press.

FOREWORD

This book is about a beautiful land of charming, hospitable people who always greet the visitor with a cheery smile. The smile instantly ripens into a hearty laugh, and in no time, host and guest are laughing together over a pot of plain tea and jaggery sweets.

But pause here awhile, lest the author be charged with singing extravagant praises of her own country and people; make way for a few observations of foreign writers who are equally, if not more, generous with their sincere appreciation of our national traits and character. Just listen to this! "He who has never known the close friendshop of (to quote his exactly and faithfully) 'a Burman' has never exercised his own maximum capacity for laughter and fun." This comes from one of the chief correspondents of a leading British newspaper John Walters who had covered many International Conferences and also witnessed tragic scenes of war and violence, floods and famine, and was one of the most widely travelled journalist in Britain.

When I first published this book in 1976, I had intended to call it "Beautiful Burma", but another foreign writer named Theophilus had already beaten me to it, and I had to be content with "Colourful Burma". He too gave a glowing account of the country and people he admired.

One of the most moving books that I have read on the subject is "The Soul of a People" by Fielding-Hall. He was unstinting in his praise of our people and I almost blush to repeat it. "The Burmese Nation," as he wrote it, "is the greatest nation in the world because it is the happiest."

Perhaps the most sincere tribute to our spiritual ideals and aspirations as taught to us by our Lord Buddha was that paid by a prominent leader of the Christian Church, Bishop Bigandet in his writings which he published for all the world to know. Referring to *Mangala Sutta* he said,"The Buddha has summed up almost all moral virtues in this Sermon -- humility, patience, gratitude, resignation, fortitude, consorting with the wise, shunning the foolish, studying the Dhamma, coversing with the religious, to remain calm and serene, fearless and unshaken amidst the ups and downs of life, to keep one's eye ever fixed on the happy state of *Neikban*." I cannot but wonder at the humility of the man that rose above one's racial and religious consciousness and appreciated the commendable qualities in another nation.

Come to think of it, the joy and happiness of our people is derived from and closely bound up with our practice of Buddhism as a way of life. The whole aim and purpose of the Buddha's teaching is to train our mind, keep it under control and gain mastery over *Lobba* or Desire, our *Dosa* or Aversion and *Moha* or Delusion, so that they become weaker and weaker until they are finally eradicated or at least powerless to threaten our peace and happiness. And the astounding thing is that all good Buddhists are following this injunction through the practice of Meditation or Mindfulness, not merely day in and day out, but from moment to moment, with each breath, keeping mindful of the reality of *Anicca* or Impermanence, *Dukkha* or Unsatisfactoriness, and *Anatta*, the reality that there is no such thing as Soul or Ego or Self i.e. a state of being yourself or myself, being nothing but a composition of Mind and Matter (Body). Mindfulness of this reality (which is in fact a triple reality) in every wakeful moment helps us to have a hold on "ourselves"(used as a conventional term), free us from the attacks of Desire and Aversion, and helps us maintain Equanimity or *Upekkha*.

This is the secret of our hapiness, our fortitude, our stay, protecting us from all our turmoils and tribulations, and this is the whole theme of the present volume "Colourful Myanmar". It provides the key to getting to know our country and people. You will find articles that describe the various seasonal festivals, which mostly have religious meaning, while some, like the New Year Festival in April, have a flavour of folk culture and tradition.

A medley of informatin on betel-chewing, cigars and cheroots take the reader into the bosom of the Myanmar family to enjoy their hospitality, share their gossip and laughter, and have a peep into their courting customs.

There is a pot-pourri of reading matter on Myanmar foods and snacks and the festive atmosphere that goes with them, fruit and vegetables with their quaint idioms, riddles and stories seasoned with broad country humour.

Various aspects of Myanmar life, thought and culture may be gleaned from pieces on language and customs, performing arts and the ancient city of Bagan.

I am grateful to Bronwen Hammet of UNESCO features whose remark should be the last word on this book: "A practical and poetic guide for the visitor who wants something better than a tourist view of Myanmar."

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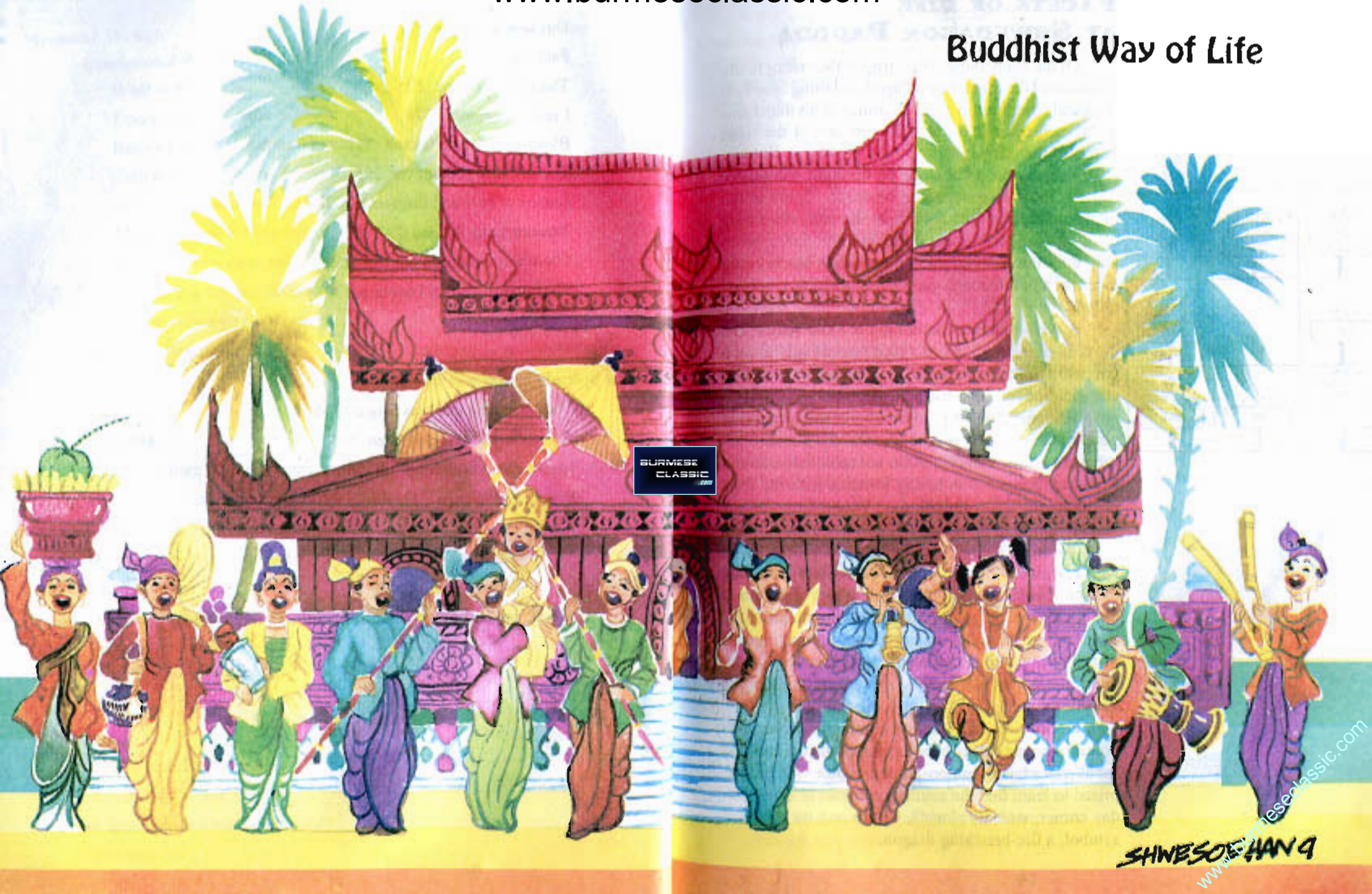
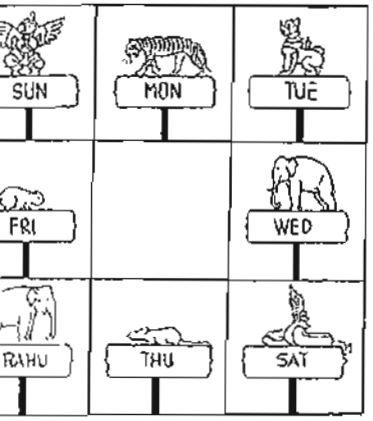


SHWESOE HAN 9

Facets of Life at Shwedagon Pagoda

Of the many things that intrigue the visitor to the precincts of the Shwedagon Pagoda, nothing is so baffling and complicated as the figurines of mythical animals, each perched on its red signboard at the eight points of the compass.



Keeping the great *stupa* on the right, the visitor starts at the northeast corner, where the figure of the mythical *garuna* bird represents the sun, the ruling celestial body on Sunday. The unwary visitor probably does not have an inkling that he or she is being taken on a tour through the planetary regions, at least not yet.

A well-meaning friend may tell the visitor that the days of the week are assigned respectively to each point of the compass, each with its ruling planet or celestial body and its mythical symbol.

"But there are only seven days in the week. One point of the compass will be vacant," the visitor ventures to comment; of course has not taken into account Myanmar ingenuity in taking liberties with the days of the week. The midweek day, Wednesday, is split into two parts so that the distribution is even.

"Well, so far so good," muses the visitor, as he walks following the sequence of days. First comes the east, or Monday, corner with its ruling sign of the moon and the tiger as its mythical symbol. Southeast is the Tuesday corner with the planet Mars and the symbol of the lion. South is the Wednesday morning corner with planet Mercury and the symbol of an elephant with tusks.

By this time, the visitor's mind is already conditioned to expect the next corner, the southwest, to stand for Wednesday afternoon. So the visitor will be surprised to learn that the southwest corner is the Saturday corner, with its planets, Saturn and its mythical symbol, a fire-breathing dragon.

From there on more inconsistencies follow. The next point, west, is the Thursday corner; its planet is Jupiter and its symbol is the mouse. The northwest corner belongs to Wednesday afternoon with its planet, Rahu (an idiosyncrasy of Myanma astrology), and its symbol, an elephant without tusks. The last point, north, is the Friday corner with its planet, Venus and its symbol, the guinea pig.

The only thing that seems to make sense is that Myanmar Buddhists go to pray at the corner assigned to the day of their birth. As Shway Yoe says in his book *The Burman: His Life and Notions:* "A Burman's birthday occurs once a week." When a Myanmar says "birthday", he means the day of the week on which he was born.

It is quite impossible for a Myanmar to survive without knowing on which day of the week he or she was born or, as the Myanmar says, "what-day-born" one is. Without this basic information, a Myanmar would not know which point of the compass on the pagoda platform to go to for prayer. Important decisions in life, like choosing a spouse, a best friend or a business partner, are made based on "birthday" information. Without this knowledge, one would not even know on which day of the week to have a haircut or to shampoo one's hair.

This last is no exaggeration. Shway Yoe says: "There are regulations as to the days proper for washing one's head..... you must remember it is unlucky to wash your head on a Monday or a Friday or a birthday. In the same way, parents sending their boy to the monastery must remember not to cut his hair on a Monday, a Friday or his birthday. A Burman's birthday, it must not be forgotten, occurs once a week."

As for choosing spouses and friends and business partners, there are sets of rhymes that are supposed to be repositories of ancient wisdom.

Here is an example:

Friday's daughter
Didn't oughter
Marry a Monday's son.

It means that Monday and Friday are hostile pairs, even if it is a Friday son and Monday daughter. There is also a saying that a Wednesday and Saturday couple will never know hunger "even if they are a couple of lunatics".

Now, to go back to the pagoda platform. the bemused visitor wonders why there are more pilgrims on the southwest than elsewhere; perhaps there is a higher percentage of Saturday-born here among the Myanmars? One can hardly blame the visitor if he or she begins to think in that way:

The explanation is simple (to the Myanmar). The planet ruling Saturday is Saturn, a powerful one, and it can bode evil to the person whose horoscope comes under its influence, which often happens when the planets go around in their orbits. What this means in practice is that when an astrologer reads a horoscope and sees Saturn in this situation, the person concerned must go and make an offering at the southwest corner. This piece of information is often couched in astrological terms, together with predictions, propitiation rites, traditional beliefs and superstitions.

The visitor by this time must be lost in this labyrinth, and this is where the present writer humbly begs to come in and help. The writer has perhaps foolishly rushed in where wise men keep their distance.

Let me begin with a somewhat trite statement. Visits to pagodas are important to Myanmar Buddhists. The guiding force is faith in the efficacy of one's own karmic deeds. For example, contemplation of the infinite compassion of Buddha, as one makes one's way to Shwedagon's great stupa, is a good karmic deed. Thus merit is gained even before one gets to the pagoda. On the pagoda platform, offerings of flowers and candles are made in honor of the stupa where the

relics of Buddha are enshrined. Donations are also given for the upkeep of the stupa. All these add up to the meritorious deeds that give one strength in facing life's problems.

Along with this Buddhist way of life and thought there exist many traditional beliefs, tribal customs and ancient rites. Buddhism is tolerant of traditional customs so long as they do not clash with basic Buddhist teachings. So it is possible for a person to be a good Buddhist without severing himself from his animistic roots.

A Myanmar Buddhist's life is rather mixed up. One goes to the pagoda not only to take refuge in Buddha and his teaching, but also to spread good-will and loving kindness to fellow beings who are on different planes of existence. There are *nats*, a term that embraces all beings of the spirit world, high and low, good and not so good, sharing the same range of qualities as people in the human world. Many of the *nats* are represented on the pagoda precincts in paintings and sculptures.

A Myanmar Buddhist goes to the pagoda and performs deeds of merit not only for himself but also to share the merit with other fellow beings, both *nats* and humans. Making offerings at certain corners is a means to enhance the good deed.

Sometimes the pilgrim is guided by a professional astrologer as to which corner he should go to for making his offerings; more often he has the basic knowledge of his horoscope, that is, the day of the week on which he was born. This is usually good enough if there are no urgent problems. If, however, there are particular problems, there are special corners at which to make offerings, and the advice of a professional astrologer may be needed. But the basic principles are easy to learn. The first thing to know is how the days of the week and the planets are assigned to the points of the compass, and, of course, the day

of the week on which one was born.

Now let's look at a chart of the week-days and planets.

Following this system of counting, one can draw charts for anyone born on any day of the week.

Northeast Sunday SUN Garuna	East Monday MOON Tiger	Southeast Tuesday MARS Lion
North Friday VENUS Guinea pig		South Wednesday morning MERCURY Tusked elephant
Northwest Wednesday afternoon RAHU Tuskless elephant	West Thursday JUPITER Mouse	Southwest Saturday SATURN Dragon

As the chart shows, the "birthday" corner is the one for honor and position. One goes there for all general purposes, as well as when one is trying to get a position or promotion in one's career. The inauspicious corner is usually a corner to avoid, and in fact this direction is useful in places other than the pagoda platform. For example, when a Sunday-born is beset with ill luck he will throw his old shoes and rags to the south of his abode.

Special corners counted from the "birthday" corner and their purpose may be listed as follows.

1. The birthday corner is for position and honor, so it is the one to go to when one needs help in getting a position or a promotion in one's career.

2. The longevity corner is used in time of illness.

3. The kingdom corner is for luck in a new job, new home, new community or when starting married life.

4. The corner of inauspiciousness is to be avoided.

5. The wealth corner is used to pray for a better bank balance or for a fortune.

6. The power and glory corner is for success in competition, a better job or a promotion.

7. The permanence corner is for success and happiness in love and marriage. It is also for the time one is building a new house or settling in a new place.

8. The grace and splendour corner is to bring success in social and professional life and happiness in family life.

The next one is a chart combining the eight-week-day system: the cardinal point, the celestial body, and the animal sign. Counting clock-wise start from the day of birth as follows:

1. Honor and position
2. Longevity
3. Kingdom
4. Inauspiciousness
5. Wealth
6. Power and glory
7. Permanence
8. Grace and splendour

Following this system of counting, one can draw charts for anyone born on any day of the week. For a Sunday-born the chart will be like the last one shown.

With the help of the basic directional chart and the special chart drawn for the subject of the horoscope, anyone can determine which directions are auspicious for what purpose. It is, of course, essential to know the day of the week on which one was born.

Northeast Sunday Honor and Position	East Monday Longevity	Southeast Tuesday Kingdom
North Friday Grace and Splendour		South Wednesday morning Inauspiciousness
Northwest Wednesday afternoon Permanence	West Thursday Power and Glory	Southwest Saturday Wealth

It is also important not to lose one's bearings, and one should always know the points of the compass wherever one is, even on a train. Myanmar peasants always know where they are, and what is more, they are often appalled by the backwardness of urbanites who speak in terms of "left and right" and not the points of the compass. Once, on a local train on a trip to my hometown in the provinces, I had the odd experience of being told "You want to go to the toilet? It's down west. Go west, then turn south."

To the Myanmar, the days of the week are important and points of direction more so. Without this basic knowledge, visits to the pagoda are no longer meaningful. And it is always a marvel how beautifully things work out when one acts according to the guiding chart. Professional aspirations can be achieved, love affairs put right, marriages saved and, above all, a sense of security and peace of mind will be maintained.

When Myanmar Buddhists go to the pagoda, they

know in their hearts that they are treading the noble path to that state where the best of human nature will have a fair chance to manifest itself in deeds of generosity, loving kindness and compassion for one's fellow beings.

The pilgrim, on his way up the steps of the pagoda, buys flowers, candles, coloured flags and streamers. They are to be offered in honour of the great stupa wherein are enshrined the relics of Buddha. this act is the act of *dhana*, or giving, an important aspect of Buddhist teaching. The donation boxes around the pagoda receive offerings large and small, given to the pagoda for general purposes. All donations are voluntary, from the smallest coin put into the box to the priceless jewels hung on the top of the pagoda. No fees are ever requested at pagoda for use of the lifts or for the minding of footwear. The pilgrim can make whatever donation he chooses and may even make none if he wishes.

For the Myanmar Buddhist, to go to the pagoda is to rejoice: to rejoice in the good deeds of others and in one's own good fortune to be able to do good deeds. I only pray that this little piece of writing will give rejoicing to others.

Pagodas and What They Mean to Buddhists

Pagodas: romance and legend

It all began, long before I was old enough to understand that stupas and pagodas symbolize the great wisdom and compassion of the Buddha to whom we owe our way of life, our philosophy, our culture and above all, our fortitude that helps us to survive all trials that life has to offer.

My earliest memories are of the green wooded hills rising out of the wide flowing river Ayeyawady. On every hill top I saw one lone pagoda or a group of threes and fours, some gilded, others whitewashed and gleaming. Since I had many opportunities to make trips up and down the river, pagodas on hill tops remain one of my happiest recollections of childhood.

Of the first things I learned about pagodas nothing had to do with the intellectual side of Buddhism but all was full of colour and romance. Once, while we were crossing the river from Mandalay to Sagaing in a small flat-bottomed boat (it was long before the beautiful Inwa bridge was built) we headed towards the long dark range of thickly wooded hills, crested with shining pagodas, and the tinkling bells from their *htis*, as the fretted wrought iron spires on top of the pagodas are called, chimed welcome to us. Colonnaded stair-ways zig-zagged through the flowering foliages. They looked so inviting that I could hardly wait to run up the steps and reach the pagodas up there.

Why the pagoda was guarded: the story

It was then that my grandfather drew my attention to the twin pagodas on the high rocky cliff, on the Mandalay side, "Raise your hands in prayer," grandfather said, "and make a wish, for any wish made at these pagodas will be granted." I did as I was told, and made a wish that guavas and mangoes in my grandfathers orchard might be ripe and sweet, ready for eating.

Grandfather smiled and said: "Well done my child. You know, in the days of the ancient Myanmar kings these pagodas were heavily guarded."

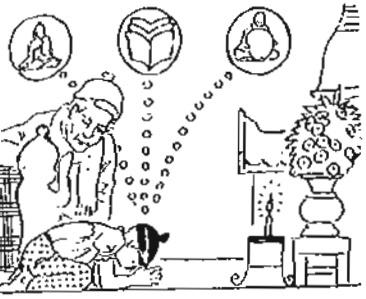
Naturally, I asked why, and as usual this led to my grandfather telling a story which runs like this:

Once a prince, feeling ill-used by his elder brother the reigning king, planned a revolt. He came to the twin pagodas and made an offering of robes to the Buddha image there. When he did so, the image suddenly moved and stretched out his hands to receive the gift. Later the prince won the coup and became king. One of the first things he did on ascending the throne was to put guards round the pagoda because he did not want anyone else to go there and make a wish to dethrone him.

Pagodas in war

If, at one time, these same pagodas were involved in war, they were at another time instrumental in bringing peace. It was on the precincts of the same pagoda that Rajadirit, the Mon king who had marched up there with his invading forces, decided to go home in peace. Rajadirit was within a few minutes march to Inwa, the Myanmar capital, and he was just waiting for zero hour to strike. From the pagoda platform, the king took a view of the beautiful land he was going to conquer; the range of hills skirted with sand bands rested on the river; high on the hills were spired pagodas gleaming in the pale moon-light: there was no sound but the tinkling of bells from pagoda spires. It was a pity that the same sweet, solemn air would be stained with blood and strewn with the slain, the noblest and the bravest of the country's people. Thus when the emissaries from the Myanmar king came, Rajadirit accepted the peace terms and went home. Before he departed, he built a

rest house on the hill, where the twin pagodas now stand as a gift to pilgrims and devotees, a Buddhist way of showing loving kindness.

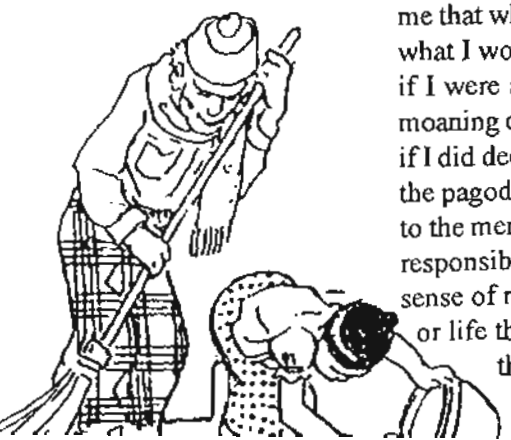


Good deeds at the pagoda

The earliest lessons I ever had on Buddhism were from the visits to pagodas. Here, in front of the Buddha image, I first learned to recite: "I take refuge in Buddha; I take refuge in His Teachings, I take refuge in the *Sangha*, His order of the Yellow Robe." And as I wandered on the precincts of pagodas, I could not help but notice the sculptures and paintings. Of course, I asked questions. All the works of art depict scenes from the Buddha's life and birth-stories, called the *Jatakas*. With no comic strips to read in those days, visits to pagodas with my grandfather telling stories were treats. I did not realize the principles of the Buddhas's teachings were instilled into my young mind then and there. They were given in almost imperceptible doses in the stories and parables depicted in paintings and sculptures round the pagodas.

Religious lessons

As I helped my grandparents sweep the pagoda grounds, I knew I was doing meritorious deed that would help me to go up the ladder of life, in the unending round of rebirth. The round of rebirth meant to me that what I did in this present life would determine what I would become and I felt hopeful. Never mind, if I were a plain girl with nondescript looks; no use moaning over it; I might be reborn a statuesque beauty, if I did deeds of merit like helping older people sweep the pagoda grounds, and offering flowers and candles to the memory of the Buddha there. I was taught to be responsible for what I would be in the future. This sense of responsibility for using the present moment or life the right way lasted all through my life, and the same has sustained me in times of stress;



after all, I, no one but I, myself, would have to answer for my own actions, good or bad. The past is past, it is my privilege and responsibility to make the best of the present and the future will be taken care of. This after all, is the basis of Buddhism.

Recreation, education and refuge

So much for childhood impressions. We do not outgrow the pagodas, even as the years creep upon us; pagodas remain very much an integral part of our life. As teenagers we wallow in songs and poems where lovers sing of the troth plighted at "the golden pagoda up the hill"; and we shed tears over the stories of broken-hearted ladies who built pagodas in memory of their loved ones. Then the pagodas opened out to us a vast wonderland of romance, colour and lyrical beauties; there seemed to be no limit to fancy and imagination.

In real life too it is at the pagodas that lovers plight their troth and it is there that a newly-married couple will make offerings of flowers and candles. In their hearts is the belief that they meet and love in this life, because of the goods deeds they had done together in their past lives. By doing good deeds together again in this life, they strengthen their bond of love, and they feel blessed and secure in the refuge of the Buddha and His teachings. Sitting on the pagoda platform side by side, each with offerings of flowers and candles in hand, a married-couple or plighted lovers often feel that their love for each other has risen from the common and the earthy to spiritual heights.

Pagoda in an adult life

As children, pagodas offer us recreation as well as education; as youths, the sylvan fields of romance and poetry; in our years of maturity, they give us relaxation and a sense of security and refuge; in our old age, solace and comfort. One of our greatest pleasures

at this time is to lead our grandchildren once again down the familiar paths in the wonderland of stories and parables, coping with their eager questions, as they point their little greasy fingers at the sculptured figures and paintings. Yes, as Buddhists, we go to pagodas, at all times of our lives, in all moods, in joy or in sorrow, or to seek peace and quiet from the stress and strain of life.

Centres of social and cultural activities

Pagodas are also centres of social, cultural and commercial activities. They are often the rendezvous for communal almsgiving to the monks, wherein people contribute their share. There are annual festivals, which are, especially in country areas, trade fairs; people kill two birds with one stone, so to say, by marketing their wares and at the same time, gaining merit by paying respects to the memory of the Buddha at shrines, and making contributions towards the repair and upkeep of the pagodas.

Why no monuments for kings and great men?

Although we have thousands of pagodas, built during more than ten centuries of history, we do not have statues of kings and great men, with the exception of the statue of King Kyansittha in Ananda temple, Bagan; and even he, it must be noted, is represented not in all his power and glory, but kneeling with his hands raised, a true disciple of the Buddha. We also do not have grand tombs and monuments in memory of our great men in history; the only ones we have are of King Alaungpaya in Shwebo and King Mindon and his queen, in Mandalay. Why no tombs of Anawrahta or Kyansittha?

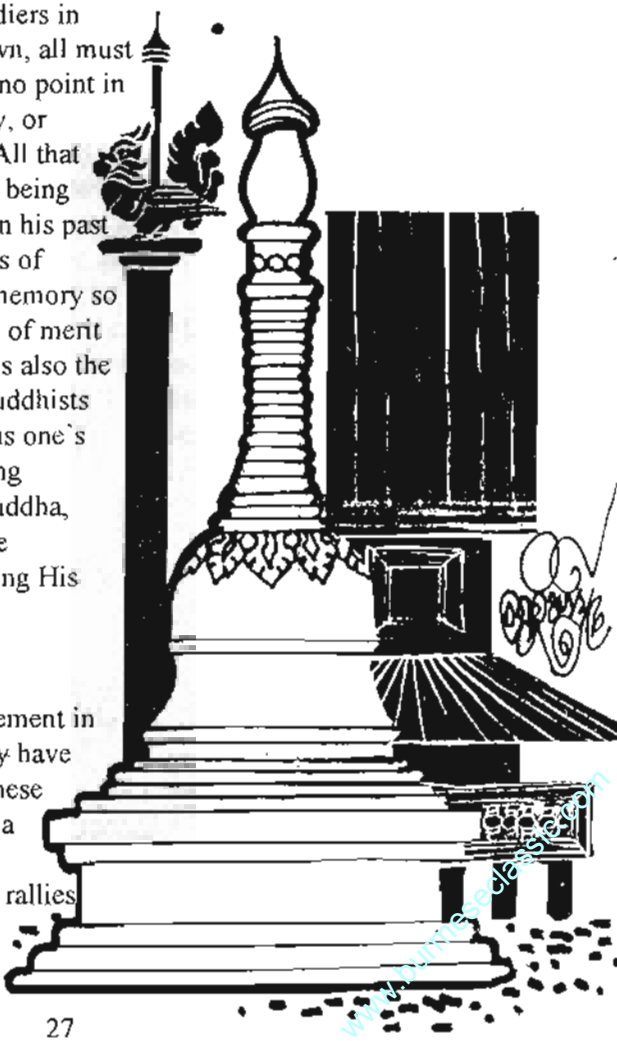
No storied urns or animated busts

Why indeed! Perhaps I may be allowed to make a guess, which might be no worse than the next

person's. Lack of objects like statues and tombs of kings and great men might be attributed to the doctrine of impermanence. It is not in our national character to glorify the dead, neither is it neglect or callousness, but that idea which may be summed up in Thomas Gray's famous lines;

Can storied urn or animated bust .
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath.
Can honour's voice provoke the silent dust
Or flattery soothe the dull cold ear of death?

Since kings in their glory, soldiers in their triumphs, artists in their renown, all must die and turn to dust, Buddhists see no point in raising monuments in their memory, or casting their likeness in sculpture. All that glory, all that wealth, all that fame, being the result of what a man had done in his past lives, it is more sensible to do deeds of merit like building pagodas in his memory so that he can have a share of the deed of merit and go up the ladder of life: There is also the underlying humility, with which Buddhists accept the fact that however glorious one's own present life may be, it is nothing compared to the greatness of the Buddha, and that if one at all were to achieve greatness, it is only through following His teachings.



Unifying element

Pagodas are also a unifying element in Myanmar Buddhist life. People may have differences over many things, but these differences disappear when there is a pagoda to be built or repaired, or a festival to be organised. Everybody rallies round, rich and poor, high and low, giving whatever they can either in

cash or in kind or in labour towards the deed of merit.

Historically no less than in the present, pagodas provide a quiet centre in the whirlwind of life's turbulence.

A Buddhist Childhood

The arcadia that is Sagaing

The motor launch skimmed over the wide expanse of foaming waters of the Ayeyawady River. The city of Mandalay faded away in the distance. I turned my gaze towards the range of wooded hills with golden and white pagodas embosomed high in tufted trees. I could see turrets of the colonnaded stair-ways among the thick growth of neem trees. I was beside myself with excitement, for there was so much to see. All around the launch small flat-bottomed boats flitted over the surging waters like birds; and "birds" they are called in Myanmar. The prow was painted to represent the beak of a bird. I nestled against my grandfather, whose patient replies could not keep pace with my eager question.

The pagoda-crested hills loomed closer. Ba Ba Gyi, for this was how I called my grandfather, made me sit down and took my palms in his, I knew exactly what I should do. I put my palms together like a lotus bud and raised them to my forehead; and directing my gaze to the pagoda on the hills, I recited:

I take refuge in the Buddha,
I take refuge in the Dhamma,
I take refuge in the Sangha.

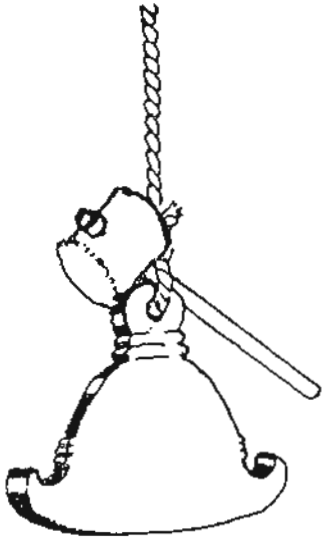
Ba Ba Gyi smiled and said "well done." This ritual of saying prayers as we came nearer our home town was a happy prologue to the glorious days I was going to spend with my grand-parents.

My maternal grandfather lived in Sagaing, a large town in central Myanmar. An old city of monarchical days, she lies on the bank of the Ayeyawady River, opposite the city of Mandalay, the last seat of the Myanmar Kings. My happiest memories are associated with Sagaing, where my parents stayed when-

ever my father managed to get a long leave from the police force in which he was serving as an officer. Whenever we came up there Ba Ba Gyi came and met the family at Mandalay, from where we took the ferry launch. It was decades before the handsome Inwa Bridge, which now joins the two towns was constructed.

Life at Ba Ba Gyi's place was quiet, peaceful and leisurely, being far from the busy streets. The house was an old-fashioned rambling affair built of teak and *pyinkadoe*, 'Myanma steel, timber,' and the roof was *wagut*, bamboo slats woven like thatch, which gave the whole house a cool air-conditioned effect. Ba Ba Gyi disdained the foreign-made corrugated iron roofing as unsuitable for the hot dry Upper Myanmar climate. The sight of the dear old home filled me with happiness and I fell into the arms of my May May Gyi (Grandmother) waiting for us at the gate.

Daily devotions



The next morning, I lay on my bed gazing at the criss-cross pattern of bamboo slats and counted the tiny squares and triangular triangles as the first light of dawn, stole into the room. I dozed off again until Ba Ba Gyi's mellow voice reciting Pali prayer texts brought me back to greet the days. I felt happy and secure, knowing that Ba Ba Gyi's recitations would drive away the evil spirits and bring in good spirits to bless the home.

As Ba Ba Gyi went on reciting, I looked at the bamboo matting wall with fair isle patterns woven in black against pale-yellow background. The rooms in Ba Ba Gyi's house were partitioned with bamboo matting and the patterns were varied and beautiful.

Ba Ba Gyi struck the brass triangular gong and called upon all sentient beings to come and share the merit of his good deed of morning devotions and I pulled myself up and made for the door. The next

moment I felt I had stepped on air and no wonder ... the floor level of my room was few inches higher than the corridor outside, and I fell on the floor with a bump.

It was always like this in Ba Ba Gyi's house... so full of unexpected turnings and levels, which kept on changing all the time; Ba Ba Gyi pottered round the house armed with carpenter's tools and the rooms, corridors, doors and windows were never in the same place. Poor May May Gyi was often exasperated especially when she had to call in professional men to finish what Ba Ba Gyi had begun.

I knew my Ba Ba Gyi would get a scolding if she knew my mishap, so I silently rubbed my hip and limped away to begin my morning ablutions. Another day had begun with the sweet tones of the brass triangular gong which was glorious climax of Ba Ba Gyi's morning prayers and recitations.

***Paritta* : Recitation of Pali texts**

The recitation of Pali texts and calling upon one and all to come and share the merit is closely connected with the basic teaching of Buddhism ... that all sentient beings go through the cycles of birth and death and rebirths. There are thirty-one planes of existences. With the abode of the humans as centre, there are twenty-six higher regions above and four lower regions down underneath. When one dies, one is born again as human, animal or celestial being according to the merit of one's own deeds.

Recitation of Pali texts is done so that the celestial beings could once again hear the words the Buddha had spoken in His lifetime, for the texts are from His teachings. It is considered a deed of merit to recite them and the good spirits or celestial beings who hear them are gladdened. Such ones bring blessings to the home. Evil spirits do not dare to come near such a home.

The invocation to come and share the merit is

supposed to be of great help to many beings, even evil spirits, who are only lower beings. If such ones rejoice on hearing the invocation and say, "Well done," they too will be blessed; they might go to better planes of existence.

May May Gyi was already waiting with our morning meal of rice porridge, hot and steaming; boiled peas soaked in sesamum oil, dried fish toasted on charcoal fire. We did justice to May May Gyi's delicacies and finished off with coffee. Ba Ba Gyi took the black earthen tea pot full of hot green tea. I snatched the small china cup and soon we were off.

Down the garden path

I trotted happily along with Ba Ba Gyi down the garden path, listening in awe to his invocations. "Those who stay on the trees and in the bushes, in the shrubs, those who stay in the garden, those who stay at the well, those who stay at the pond, may you all be blessed, may you have the best of everything, may you share the deed of merit I have done." I walked entranced through the paradise of mangoes, guavas, jack fruits, limes, lemons, then to the rows of roses and jasmine and orchids. I was thrilled by the thought that the spirits or the *devas* of the trees and shrubs would be saying "Well done," and how they in their happy joyous state would be grateful to my Ba Ba Gyi; they may even be promoted to higher regions as a result of getting their share of the merits done by Ba Ba Gyi.

When we came to the other end of the orchard where there was a well. Ba Ba Gyi put down his precious tea pot in a safe place and prepared to begin his day's work. I leant on the brick walling of the well to look into the mirror of clear water down inside. Ba Ba Gyi warned me not to lean too much into the well, although the walling was higher than my height. I moved to the brick tank which was close to the well.

There I watched what I thought to be the most wonderful feat in the world.

A few feet away from the well was a wooden pivot with a long wooden beam mounted on the fulcrum: at the end of the beam hung a long bamboo pole to which was fitted a pail. At the other end of the bamboo was a counter weight of bricks. Ba Ba Gyi stood on the brick wall and pulled the bamboo pole down into the well. Then the water-filled pail came up almost by itself because of the counter weight. The pail tilted naturally into the trough which ran over to the brick tank, I watched fascinated as cascades of water flowed down into the tank.

Ba Ba Gyi's cleverness did not end there; he had devised an irrigation system for the whole estate. There was a network of canals by which all the trees could be watered. I waited, till the tank was filled to the brim and at Ba Ba Gyi's signal I opened the water-lock and jumped to race with the gushing waters into the lime groves, shrubberies and flower beds. I ran happily teasing and cajoling the rivulets with a stick or floating a navy of dry leaves.

The household shrine

Ba Ba Gyi watched my antics while having cups of green tea as he rested under a shady tree. My explorations along the numerous tributaries were given a recess when Ba Ba Gyi reminded me that it was time I picked flowers, for May May Gyi would be waiting for me at the household shrine. Sobered by the call to sacred duty, I plucked flowers which I took triumphantly to May May Gyi. She was already at the veranda where the household shrine was. She had thrown away the old flowers and washed the vases clean.

As soon as I had put the flowers into May May Gyi's hands I sat down with my hands raised on the forehead to bow down to the golden image of the

Buddha. I then helped May May Gyi arrange flowers and listened entranced as she kept saying that a nice girl who did such deeds of merit would ever be blessed. She told me stories of maidens who were born beautiful, rich and good as a result of such deeds of merit. I loved these stories, for, even though I was born with a dark complexion, high forehead, small eyes and a snub nose, I could still hope to be a statuesque beauty in my next existence. It was in fact the reason why I never failed to help May May Gyi in her morning ritual of offering flowers at the household shrine.

It seemed that May May Gyi did not want me to wait till the next existence to become a beauty, for, right after the prayers she prinked me for the day beginning with my hair. As was the vogue of the five-year-olds, my head was shaved leaving a circular patch on the crown which was allowed to grow until the hair could be done into a knot and a thin layer of hair round the patch was trimmed into a circular fringe so that the knot would not be too severe. That circular fringe of hair is called *sa-yit*.

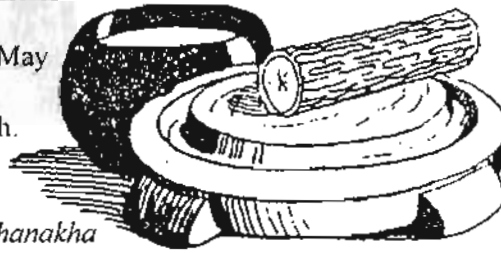
Hair styles

Before my hair was long enough to be done into a knot, it was gathered and tied with a red wool yarn at the base so that the ends of their hair stood stiff like a bunch of fowl's quills, and this style was called *kyet-taung-si* (a bunch of fowl's quills).

May May Gyi conditioned my hair with coconut oil and combed it commenting on its silken softness and picked up with the fine teeth of the wooden comb the longer tresses that had strayed into *sa-yit*, circular fringe. May May Gyi said, "Your *sa-yit* is alright, I need not trim it today." She then coiled my hair round her four fingers using the thumb to keep it in place and with an expert movement she achieve a small knot with an inch stub of hair sticking out.

As she gave finishing touches she sketched a

happy picture of me some years hence when there would be no need to shave round the coiffure and the circular fringe would be allowed to grow; the front bangs would go into the main coiffure and the two tresses would be curled behind the ears to frame the face; the fringe at the back would be trimmed just above the nape of the neck. This hair-style is called *sa-dauk* (meaning probably that main coiffure is being propped by the bangs at the back). May May Gyi then wiped away the smudges of coconut oil from my forehead and prepared to put *thanakha* paste on my face. I loved the big circular stone slab, (*kyaukypin*, used for grinding *thanakha* bark), the face of which was as smooth as satin and it had three stumpy legs about two inches high; the circular face was surrounded by a narrow channel no deeper than an inch. May May Gyi poured a few drops of water on the stone face and rubbed the *thanakha* bark in swift circular motions. In no time a fragrant creamy paste began to appear and flowed into the channel. May May Gyi went on rubbing, putting drops of water occasionally until she thought it to be enough.



***Thanakha* - the natural make-up**

May May Gyi first put three blots of *thanakha* on my face, one on the forehead, the others on each cheek and spread them all over the face. It was a sweet cooling sensation and May May Gyi told me the importance of putting *thanakha* on my face every morning if I wanted to be a beauty when I grew up. We two were so enraptured by the beauty ritual that we forgot the time until Ba Ba Gyi called. "Hey, you two, are you going to grind off the *kyaukpyin* to bits... it's nearly time for the monks to come."

Daily alms-giving

With May May Gyi, I went to the latticed front room where Ba Ba Gyi was drinking his green tea on

the wooden-framed dais with bamboo flooring. On a small table beside the dais were two black lacquer bowls, one filled with hot steaming rice and the other with boiled peas soaked in sesamum oil. In each bowl was a bronze ladle. May May Gyi had her brown shawl draped over her shoulders, as she always had when she was saying her prayers or when she had to meet the monks. Soon the yellow robed brethren of the Buddha's order came single file in procession of ten or fifteen, their jet black alms bowls cradled in their arms. With downcast eyes they stopped one after another and silently opened the lacquer lids of their bowls to receive the alms-food May May Gyi ladled out the alms-food into each bowl as they paused and passed. I watched in awe and reverence as the staid yellow-robed figures walked silently away into the long shaded alley speckled with the mild rays of the morning sun.

Monks go on their rounds for alms every morning barefooted. They stop unobtrusively outside the laymen's houses. If someone comes out with alms they would received it in silence. If no one comes to make an offering, they would go on their way. Of course, there are households like my grand-parents who daily wait with alms-food for their coming. Each householder gives what he can, quantity or quality does not matter as much as the spirit in which it is given.

The Buddha allows monks to accept food sent to them at their own place. Monks with well-to-do relatives or donors do not have to go on alms rounds. They can also accept invitation to laymen's houses to partake of alms-food. Although such monks do not need to go on alms rounds, they often do so as an act of humility and also to give the poor people a chance of seeking merit. People who cannot afford to send alms-food to the monastery or invite monks to their own houses, have a chance of gaining merit by making offerings to the monks on their daily rounds. Monks consider it an act of

compassion forpoor people to go round on alms rounds.

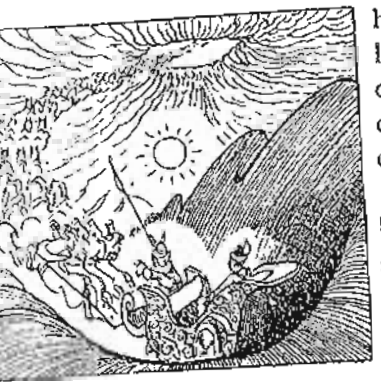
Even people who can afford to invite monks to partake of alms-food in their own houses do not want to miss the daily alms rounds; for this kind of offering alms is considered more meritorious. It is a spontaneous alms-giving without any wish for show or ostentation. There is also a spirit of impersonal and impartial goodwill; that is why my grandparents who often had monks to have alms-food by invitation, took care to do the daily offering of alms to monks on their rounds.

The day so begun with thoughts and deeds pure and holy, would be filled with sweet wholesome hours, which were reckoned with herbs and flowers. Ba Ba Gyi would potter round the garden happily tending the trees and shrubs he had planted with his own hands since his retirement from government service. He had no permanent help, but only casual hands who came and worked part time. Some of Ba Ba Gyi's staff who had also retired were glad to come and help, so there never was a dearth of helping hands. Sometimes a family of such people would be staying on the estate so that there would be a man to help Ba Ba Gyi in the garden, a woman to do the household chores and some young person to amuse and attend to the doted grandchild. In those days I felt like a princess and I was treated like one perhaps.

Tales of a grandfather

Ba Ba Gyi had an inexhaustible fund of stories, mostly from the *Jatakas* or the Buddha's birth stories. They were supposed to have been told by the Buddha Himself, revealing remarkable incidents in the long series of His previous existence as a *Bodhisatta* or One destined to be the Buddha.

The one I liked best was the story of King *Nemi*, the *Bodhisatta* who was so good and virtuous that he was invited by the king of the celestial regions to visit



his abode. As he rode on the heavenly chariot, the celestial charioteer explained to him the wondrous sights on the way. This was the favourite theme of the poets of old. Ba Ba Gyi recited the old poems and I shut my eyes as I rested my head on Ba Ba Gyi's lap.

As I listened to Ba Ba Gyi's recitation, I would be carried away on the back seat of King Nemi's chariot soaring on the seraph wings into the airy regions. As a dazzling panorama of pinnacled mansions of gold and crystal, ablaze with heavenly light unfolded, I would see beautiful goddesses in their bejeweled robes. I would hear the charioteer explain to King Nemi how these maidens won such existence with their deeds of merit. Sometimes, I would pass the flaming bounds of space and time to spy the secrets of the Abyss, the regions of hell, where the wicked were punished.

More stories

Even the non-religious stories were based on the belief in the cycle of existences. One of the interesting characters in folklore is the guardian spirit of treasure troves. Such spirits, the story goes, had been human beings; but they had died with a great craving for some hidden treasure trove they could not go to the higher regions. They might have done some deeds of merit as humans and such deeds would give them attributes of beauty and supernatural powers.

There is yet another kind of treasure-trove guardians; they are spirits, who, for some reason or other have to guard the treasures enshrined in the pagodas. It is said that the builders of ancient pagodas put kings' ransom of gold and jewels in the secret vaults of the pagodas. People who tried to steal them were supposed to bear the penalty of guarding the treasures when they died. There is not an old pagoda which does not have a treasure trove spirit story, a legend mostly unwritten but handed from father to son.

The town of Sagaing with her numerous old pagodas, the relics of the monarchical days, was rich in legends. The ranges of hills nearby with their old pagodas lent a romantic background to the stories of the treasure trove spirits. I listened to the stories of spirit maidens who, tired of their duties, wish to be born again in the abode of humans. They had to ask permission from their superiors who granted them a short lease of life. When such ones were born as humans, they were reminded of their previous existence by their spirit friends, who visited them in their dreams. The spirit friends helped such persons by giving them nuggets of gold to spend during their lease of life.

May May Gyi often told me about "true stories" of some people who had children who were treasure-trove-spirits reborn. Such children died young, May May Gyi said. After they died they often visited their parents in dreams and told them how sorry they were to leave the human abode. Such stories and characters were part of our daily life. Our daily rituals reminded us of the blessedness of human existence. We humans have the chance to do deeds of merit. If we had been born a treasure-trove-spirit, it would have been very difficult, for example, to give alms to the monks or keep sabbath.

Sabbath days

Sabbath days are assiduously observed during the lenten months. The lenten months coincide with the monsoon season. Monks are not allowed to travel during Lent, so it is the duty of the faithful laity to see to their needs; hence the custom of offering Lenten Yellow Robes and candles. Such offerings are made so that the monks should spend the lenten time in quiet meditation or study without having to worry about their needs.

The first day of Lent, which is the full moon day of Waso month, was an exciting time on my Ba Ba Gyi's estate. Monks would be invited to partake of

the alms food and I gazed fascinated at yellow robes, neatly rolled and encased in tall lacquer cups, each crowned with flowers and streamers and the tall coloured lenten candles. Such holy objects stood against the background of staid yellow-robed monks sitting with their face modestly hidden behind the huge palm-leaf fans.

The whole family including servants gathered to bow down to the monks and make the offering. Sometimes the ceremony of lenten offering is made communally, neighbours pooling their resources. It was the custom of my grandparents to contribute something to the communal offering; but this did not prevent them from inviting monks to take alms-food and offerings of the season on the sacred day, the first day of the Lent.

The lenten week-ends of sabbath days are meant for holy duties. Grown-ups observe the Eight Precepts which being three more austerities added to the daily observance of the Five Precepts, namely, to avoid taking life, stealing, unlawful sex relations, telling lies and taking intoxicants. Children, though they were not expected to observe the precepts, went along to the monastery where the older folk usually spent the day.

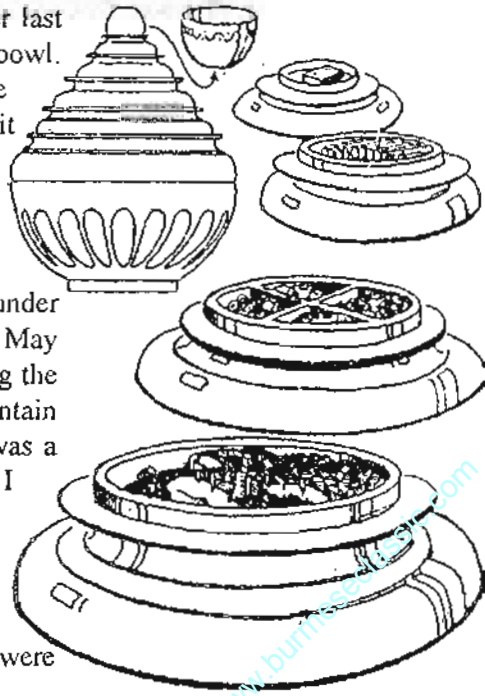
The day before sabbath day May May Gyi would be busy preparing food for tomorrow. Ba Ba Gyi would get the choicest fruits ready and I would pluck the prettiest flowers to place before the image of the Buddha at the monastery. The next morning we left home, Ba Ba Gyi carrying the basket of fruits and flowers and May May Gyi with her red lacquer bowl on her head, and I, an impish mite trotting along feeling on top of the world.

The monastery was in the midst of a woodland surrounded by ruined pagodas. It was so cool and pleasant that youngsters liked to go along with the elders to the monastery even if it was to play. The main building was a solid brick-work and it was the abode of the

head monk and the older monks. All over the compound were smaller buildings mostly wooden, where the younger monks and novices stayed. There were special rest houses for laymen and they were called *Zayats*.

A day at the monastery

The main *Zayat* which was a large open hall was teeming with people each group settling down in a chosen corner. As we went in there would be a general exchange of greetings. Ba Ba Gyi left after he had seated us in a suitable place, May May Gyi spread the mats kept in the *Zayat* for the use of the congregation and sat down. Fanning herself with her scarf she talked to friends who came to wish her. I gazed longingly at the many-tiered lacquer bowl May May Gyi had brought. I could hardly wait to see what was inside for the opening of the casket of delicacies was one of the most exciting events of the day.



At long last, May May Gyi got rid of her last acquaintance and she made ready to open her bowl. With mounting eagerness I watched her take the lid on top; it was the size of a water goblet and it was so used; underneath was a shallow tray with cheroot and matches; "will you take this cheroot and match to your Ba Ba Gyi, dear?..." "Oh, May May Gyi, Ba Ba Gyi is talking to his friends, he is busy, please let me see what is under the tray, I will go to Ba Ba Gyi afterwards". May May Gyi laughed indulgently and went on unveiling the mysteries of the bowl, while I could hardly contain myself with excitement. Underneath the tray was a bigger tray divided into compartments, wherein I saw pickled ginger and tea-leaves, toasted sesamum seeds, peanut crispies, sliced garlic fried and green lettuce leaves; in the next tray were big chunks of fish cooked in soya bean sauce, and in the last tray covering the main bowl were

curries whose spicy aroma went right into my hungry little belly. In spite of the indulgences I enjoyed, I could not expect to have a single bite until May May Gyi had put something of each in a big plate to be offered to the monks. For it was the custom of the people to offer the delicacies they had brought to the monks. Even the poorest and humblest would reserve the best portion of their meal for the monks. Sabbath in the monastery was a day of plenty.

At about nine, all would gather in the main building of the monastery and the head monk received the alms of the day and invested the congregation with the Three Gems and Eight Precepts. All make obeisance to the Three gems and vowed to keep the Precepts for the day. Children were allowed to take part in the ceremony, although they were not expected to keep the Precepts. This participation in a small way at least kept the children quiet for a short time.

The head monk gave a short sermon extolling the deeds of the day. The alms, unless offered specially to an individual monk, would be shared by all. In the sermon, the head monk often stressed the importance of the right spirit in alms giving; one should give alms to monks as ones dedicated to the service of the Order of the Buddha. Even though one gives a morsel of food to a young novice, the deed should be done in this spirit, for then the merit gained would be no less than that that may be gained by offering a sumptuous meal to a great monk. It is the spirit that matters.

Monks live solely on the offerings of the laity. They are dedicated to service of the Buddha by studying the scriptures, and propagating them, and practising meditation to gain insight. Monasteries have so long been seats of culture and even to this day the rural population has depended on the monasteries for their elementary education.

Monks, therefore, have been part of our lives as

revered teachers. They are one of the Three Gems-the Order of the Yellow Robe. They are to guide us in spiritual matters and they are often described as fertile lands where we may sow seeds of merit by offering alms. Monasteries are also places of retreat from worldly affairs. My grandparents loved going there on sabbath day; Ba Ba Gyi usually had an interesting time discussing Buddhist scriptures with other retired gentlemen, who, like him had found a useful vacation in the study of the scriptures in their retirement. Sometimes the discussions were spirited and they would often take their arguments to the head monk for decision.

May May Gyi would have a fine time meeting friends and she had an opportunity to do deeds of merit like sweeping the grounds. Children happily helped with chores, and were taught the sacred duty of keeping the monastery grounds clean instead of leaving it strewn with litter. Apart from being a happy outing, a day at the monastery is satisfying in many ways, social, cultural and spiritual. These outings are to remain in my treasure of happy memories for I as a child had fun, eating so many delicacies and playing in the woodlands. Late in the afternoon we would come home, the end of a perfect day.

Nameless Donors of jewels at The Shwedagon

Humility and generosity

One of the things that impressed Scott O'Connor, the author of *The Silken East* as that Myanmar people who were often charged with ostentation and grandiosity should place a king's ransom in jewels high up on the top of the pagoda, where no one, if ever, will see them. He compares this deed with the humility and generosity of the artists of medieval Europe who often placed their most beautiful works in the little-known niches of the cathedral domes.

This makes me think of the spirit of *dhana*, one of the basic teachings of the Buddha. To translate *dhana* as charity is hardly satisfactory. When we say of anyone as living on charity, it does not say too well of the person so spoken of; whereas the word *dhana* is associated with the blessedness, 'that blesses the one who gives as the one who recieves'.

Daily alms giving

One of my earliest impressions of the act of *dhana* was that of my grandparents offering alms-food to the monks every morning. Monks go on their rounds stopping unobstrusively outside the laymen's houses. If someone comes out with alms they receive in silence; they do not go into the laymen's houses unless invited.

Some householders, like my grandparents, wait daily with alms-food for their coming. Each householder gives what he can, usually a spoonful of cooked rice

or a morsel of curry. The quality or the quantity does not matter as much as the spirit in which it is given.

The Buddha allows monks to accept food sent to them at their own place. Monks with well-to-do relatives or donors can stay without going on their alms rounds. They can also accept invitation to laymen's homes to partake of alms-food.

Many great *sayadaws* (heads of monasteries) with all their donors to fulfil their needs often go on their alms rounds. They do so as an act of humility to remind themselves that they have no worldly goods- not even daily food. Going on alms rounds is also an act of loving kindness, because, by doing so, monks give the poorer people a chance to seek merit. Those who cannot afford to send alms-food to the monastery or invite monks into their houses can seek merit by offering a spoonful of rice or curry to the monks on their daily rounds. Monks, therefore, do not live on the charity of the lay people.

Even though we have *soon-kyway* (offering of alms-food to the monks) in our homes to commemorate any occasion, we do not forget that the offering of a morsel of food to the nameless monks, who go on their alms rounds, is much more highly commended by the Buddha. There, in such an act, are the qualities of humility, denial of self, the loving kindness and goodwill, both on the part of the donor and that of the recipient. It is a spontaneous giving without any show or ostentation.

"No alms for today, only our genuflection..."

My grandfather often impressed me with the qualities of such deeds of *dhana*, illustrating his point with stories from the scriptures. There is the story of one *thera*, who stopped at the house of a brahman, a non Buddhist, every morning for fifteen years without getting a morsel of food. One day the brahman's wife, seeing the *thera* at their door for so many years, was moved

to say. "Our genuflection is our alms for the day": for she had heard people say that when they had no alms to offer for the day.

The irate brahman

The brahman meeting the *thera* on the way asked if he had been offered anything from his house and the *thera* said yes. The brahman went home in a huff and remonstrated with his wife for giving something to the thera. When the wife told him that she had offered the thera nothing, the brahman went to the monastery and charged the thera with telling a falsehood.

The *thera* told the brahman that the wife had not giving him anything in the way of food, but she had said, "Our genuflection is our alms for the day."This, to the *thera*, was alms, for which he blessed the brahman's family. The Brahman greatly moved by the thera's words became a disciple.

Compassion of a *thera*

One of the stories that my grandfather used to tell me was that of Shin Maha Kassapha, a famous *thera* of the Buddha's time, who could, if he wished have kings waiting on him with his daily needs, but always went on his alms rounds; how one day, he saw a leper eating his meal. The *thera* in his compassion to give the poor man a chance to seek merit, stopped by his side. The leper, moved by the thera's act, put a morsel of rice into the *thera's* bowl. Right in his presence, the thera ate the food without the slightest feeling of disgust.

The spirit of *dhana*

This is the spirit of *dhana*. When we give anything, we feel gratitude towards the recipients that we are giving the chance to do the good deed. We give alms-food to the monks, not because they are medicants depending on our charity, but because they are the ones, who give us the privilege of doing the deed of *dhana*.

Now again, in our time and age, offering of jewels is being made to the Shwedagon. People throw in their jewels anonymously, as they might the pya coins. I was greatly moved; for I saw in the deed, the spirit of supreme abandonment, without any thought of recognition. This is the path laid down by the *Bodhisattas* and the ariyas (the good and the noble).

Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu. Well done, well done, well done!

Shinpyu

A fulfilment of parenthood

The time came for our son to be novitiated. I was thrilled by the prospect. We discussed the matter and Ko Latt and I decided we would not make a show of it. Nor could we afford to. Since this occasion was a purely religious one we decided to spend all we could on the monks only. No invitations to friends, no entertainment. We would feed the monks only. Of course relatives and a few close friends would be asked to come and witness the novitiation.

Both Ko Latt and I had never felt the importance of being parents so much as when we made plans for our son's novitiation ceremony. First, we had to put him under a monk to receive the necessary instructions. Daw Daw (Aunty) took us to a monastery. Once again I entered a monastery with a heart full of hope and joy for we were going to fulfil the most important duty of parenthood.

Pre-novitiation instructions

The monastery was surrounded by shady trees and its spacious grounds were well kept; the building were old and solid yet unpretentious. It was eight in the morning and we saw the monks coming back from their daily alms-round. Daw Daw told us that the monks staying there had to go on alms-receiving rounds every morning in the same old-fashioned way I had known in my childhood. The alms-round, I understood, was done more in the spirit of humility and compassion for the people than of necessity. The people were being given

thereby a chance to do deeds of merit by giving a morsel out of their daily food to the monks.

The presiding monk received us kindly and we told him we wanted our son to be given pre-novitiation instructions. Khin Maung Win was put under the care of a monk who gave him some Pali and Myanmar passages to learn. Since my youngest brother and Daw Daw's son were going to be novices, all three were to go to the monastery every morning. My younger brother and Daw Daw's son both of whom were about fifteen has already been novitiated. It was not unusual for a male child to become a novice more than once but there is yet another great occasion for a son... the *upasampada*... ordination at the age of twenty. It is considered a great privilege to have a son.

First novitation 2,500 years ago

In the weeks that followed we talked of nothing else. We had to make our son, now nine years old, realise the importance of being a novice. I told him the story of the young princeling Rahula, Buddha's own son. I never realised its beauty until I presented the story to my nine-year-old-son. We showed him young novices who followed older monks as they went on their morning rounds. We pointed out the young boys in the yellow robes with black bowls cradled in their arms after the fashion of the older monks. Their eyes were downcast, their faces benign. Some two thousand five hundred years ago Rahula, the seven-year-old novice had followed in the footsteps of the Buddha, his father. For seven years the young prince had waited for the Father who had left him when he was a baby in his mother's arms. He had listened to his mother Yasodhaya's story of how one sad night his father prince Siddhartha had left the palace on horse-back attended only by his faithful groom. Where had his father gone? Why had he gone? These, the little boy wanted to know. Yasodhaya told him how the faithful groom had come back with

the news that the Prince had gone into the forest after changing his princely attire for a yellow robe. Why had he done this? He had gone into retirement to seek the way out of pain, suffering and death: when he had found it he would come back and teach men the Truth he had found.

After seven years, he came back with his head shorn, robed in coarse yellow cloth, with the black bowl cradled in his arms. He walked, with downcast eyes, the street he once rode in grandeur attended by foot-soldiers, mounted guards, elephants and chariots. His father King Suddhodana was filled with shame and anger. He chided Him for disgracing the Sakkya warrior race to which he belonged. The Buddha answered that he no longer belonged to the Sakkya race but to the race of the Buddhas before Him and the Buddhas after. A strange meeting it was; a great King, proud and mighty in warrior-mail meeting his son in hermit-raiment. The son had become greater than the mightiest of kings, for he had become the greatest Teacher. One who would teach the way out of sorrow, suffering, pain and death.

Happy yet tearful was the meeting of Rahula's mother and the Buddha. The whole palace was agog with the news of the Buddha's acceptance of His father's invitation to come and partake of alms-food at the palace. When the meal was over everybody was there to make obeisance to the Buddha except the ever-adored one Yasodhaya. She was standing fast by her conviction that the once beloved would be moved to come to her not forgetting mutual obligations. Then she would make her obeisance to her heart's content. The Buddha had prescience that if He did not go to Yasodhaya she would die of grief. Handing his begging bowl to the King father and accompanied by two disciples, He repaired to Yasodhaya's chamber. There He sat Himself down on the seat of honour set ready for Him. Yasodhaya was at His feet in all haste and clasping His two

ankles in her two hands she pressed her face on His feet and smothered them in her tears. Thus she made obeisance to the Buddha, her beloved Lord. For some time the Buddha stayed at His father's city teaching His law to the people. One day Rahula's mother told him to go to his Father and claim his heritage. The young prince went to his Father, the Buddha and said, "Father, give me my heritage." The Buddha put Rahula in the care of His disciple, Sariputra. Rahula was given the Yellow Robe. This was his glorious heritage.

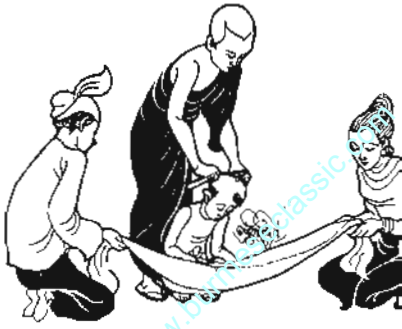
The Buddha's heritage

Now our nine-year-old son was going to receive the heritage the Buddha had given to his own son two thousand five hundred years ago. Our son was to be the Buddha's own kin; we were giving him up into the holy order of the Yellow Robe. It is then that a Buddhist marriage, which in itself has no place in religion, finds its highest fulfilment as the means of rendering onto the Order the flesh of one's flesh, the bone of one's bone.

We were up in the clouds during the days of planning and shopping. Yellow robes and all the paraphernalia of novices were got ready. On the appointed day, we left home for the monastery, Ko Latt carrying the yellow robes, Daw Daw and the girls carrying gifts for the monks. Khin Maung Win was dressed in silk longyi and long sleeved shirt. Since we were cutting down on the show, we had no princely dresses; no horseback ride and gilded umbrella for him.

Alms giving; novitiation ceremony

We gave the hundred and fifteen monks in the monastery their morning meal. It was an unforgetable sight; the yellow-robed monks partaking of the morning meal. After the morning duties were done, the boy and his two companions had their heads shaved. Ko Latt and I held a snow-white sheet to receive his hair which we



buried near a pagoda. Then the boys were led to the monk who was to be their teacher. Each with a roll of yellow robe cupped in both hands, they begged permission in Pali to be novitiated. The monk invested them with the robes. We picked up our son's wordly attire and there he stood looking pure and serene in yellow robes, yet so young and so tender. My eyes were filled with tears of joy. How could our love, Ko Latt's and mine, bring forth something so sublime? We prostrated ourselves at his feet and paid obeisance to him, who was no longer our son but the Son of the Buddha.

The boy's stay at the monastery

The boy stayed in the monastery for nine days during which he had to keep the ten precepts, one of which was to abstain from solid food after the hour of noon. Naturally we were worried about whether the boy could do without his evening meal. He was given lime juice in the evening and he took to his new way of life quite easily. In a place where no one ate in the afternoon it was easy to adapt himself. Going without the evening meal eliminates all the work and fuss and leaves more time for study and meditation. Young people keep fit and strong enough as a result of this act of self-denial.

A young novice's alms round

Every morning our son came with the older novices, each carrying his black bowl. We put rice and curry and delicacies into the bowl. Since the novitiation, our son had become another person altogether. Apart from respecting his shorn head, the yellow robe and a new pali name, we had to speak to him in honorific terms. We no longer called him by his layman's name and he addressed us "Lay-sister" or "Lay-brother". We were no longer his parents, just lay-people, for he had become a Son of the Buddha. All this brought us a strange feeling of ecstasy.

Our son's novitiation brought back the sense of

wonder I had known in my younger days. The monastery where he stay was a somewhat like the ones I had seen when I was a child. The monks were staid and quiet andspent their days in meditation and the study of the Buddhist scriptures.

Blessed is the Blameless Life

Daily rituals - household shrine

In every Buddhist household, whether it is an ultra-modern concrete and steel affair, or a bamboo and thatch hut, there is a special corner, usually higher than the flooring reserved for the shrine. Depending on the wealth of the household, the shrine will be dominated by a simple picture of the Buddha cut perhaps from a calender or one or more images, with offering are made by an average Buddhist at least once a day with the recitation of some devotional verses in Pali and in Myanmar. Thus, a Buddhist recites daily at the household shrine:

I take refuge in the Buddha

I take refuge in the Dhamma(His teachings)

I take refuge in the Sangha(His Order of monks or theras)

A Buddhist does not worship the Buddha, or his likeness in images, or the stupas, and does not pray in the accepted sense of the word, because the Buddha does not claim to be any other than a human being, pure and simple, with no inspiration from any external power. If the Buddha is to be called a saviour at all it is only in the sense that he discovered the Path to Liberation or Cessation of Suffering. But it is only through an individual's own effort and endeavour that he can tread the path. Daily offering at the household shrine and recitations are but the first steps towards the path. Offerings of flowers and candles satisfy one's aesthetic sense, and recitations in praise of the Buddha are conducive to mental serenity. All these are means to an end, which is to realize the Truth the Buddha taught.

If you ask a Buddhist why he does his devotions at the household shrine, or goes to the pagodas with offerings, his answer will be just "I do this to gain merit and finally to attain the Goal, *Nibbana*." Chances are that he may not deign to explain what is meant by "gaining merit" or attaining *Nibbana*.

***Kamma* or the force behind all deeds**

For those who have been Buddhists for 20 centuries, generation after generation, such expressions are accepted without any need to probe into their real meaning. The most an average Buddhist will say is that he does meritorious deeds so that he can go round the cycle of rebirth without, on the one side, falling into lower lives as animals, homeless ghosts or worse, as inmates of hell, and also so that he on the other side, may go even higher up with a life perhaps as a celestial or at least as a human being in comfortable circumstances endowed with intellect to know the teaching of the Buddha. Of couse the final goal is cessation of suffering.

Doing meritorious deeds is based on the acceptance to *kamma*. *Kamma* means all kinds of intentional actions, mental, verbal, physical, that is, all thoughts, words and deeds. Good *kamma* has good results and bad *kamma*, bad results. There is no element of reward and punishment by any outside power in the Law of *Kamma*. If good action produces good effect, bad actions produce bad results, it is neither justice nor reward meted out by any power sitting in judgement on anyone's action, but it is in virtue of its own nature, its own law.

The doctrine of *kamma*, therefore, places on man the responsibility of using the present moment or present life in the right way. Man has a certain amount of free will: he can modify his actions and affect his future. If a man does a good deed or thinks a good thought, the effect upon his *kamma* is to increase the tendencies toward goodness in him.

An average Buddhist accepts the Law of *Kamma*. Thus he accepts or tries to accept his lot, be it wealth or poverty, beauty or plainness. This, however, does not mean that he has a fatalistic attitude. He knows that he has in his own hands the power to do good deeds, so that he will be a better person in the next life. He knows that there is always hope even though he may have gone down in one life to be born a begger or even an animal. There are many stories of similar unfortunates who rose higher in life because of their good deeds. There is the story of a crippled begger who swept up the scraps on the pagoda pavements even as he crawled about: he was reborn a celestial in his next life. Another story tells of a dog who lived in the monastery ground, followed his master the monk on his daily alms rounds and looked after him faithfully. When the dog died he was reborn as a wealthy human being.

Buddhists are brought up with these stories as guide-posts for their conduct. The acceptance of the Law of *Kamma* comes easily to them almost like second nature. The acceptance of rebirth and future lives gives the Buddhists hope and also a sense of responsibility. It is up to him to do good deeds, instead of moaning over his loss. The past is past, but the present is in his hands to make investments for the future. He has an unending round of rebirth to perfect himself until he attains the full perfection, *Nibbana*.

Dhana, or giving, one important element of the way to perfection

With the Buddhist acceptance of the Law of *Kamma* and rebirth makes it easier to follow the path of Buddha. One of the basic practices of Buddhism is *dhana*, or alms giving. The act of *dhana* embraces all kinds of giving done with goodwill and loving kindness from feeding the household pet, providing for your family, servants and poor relations, up to the deeds like giving fabulous jewels for the vane of the Shwedagon pagoda.

The Buddhist understanding of *dhana* is closely linked to the Four Noble Truths, the basic teaching of the Buddha; the truth of Suffering; the Suffering arises from attachment and clinging; and that to end Suffering one must end its root, which is attachment and clinging, so a Buddhist starts with giving, the act of *dhana*. Every act of giving is an act of cutting away attachment and clinging. No one can give anything unless he is generous and unselfish to some degree. So, by giving whatever he can, the Buddhist practises non-clinging, non-attachment and little by little he hopes to attain perfection.

The practice of *dhana* is within the reach of everyone, however poor he might be. Even as he provides for his family, he does it with the awareness that such a deed if done with loving kindness, without any expectation of return, will help him to attain the goal of *Nibbana*. He can give a morsel of food to a monk who comes every morning on his alms rounds; he can put a few fems at the household shrine. He has every opportunity to go up the ladder of life.

Dhana and the Order of *Sangha*

Monks, members of the Order of the *Sangha*, are those who dedicate themselves to the study or practice of the Buddha's teaching; they teach the lay people the Buddha's way. For a Buddhist supporting the Order of the Sangha is supporting the Buddha's *sasana* or system of the Buddha's teaching. To a Buddhist to give *dhana* is to sow seeds of good merit and the Order of the *Sangha* is considered a fertile land on which such seeds should be sown. An act of giving is in fact even more meritorious when the recipient is good and virtuous and also does good deeds like learning and teaching the Buddha's way.

Monks go on their rounds for alms barefoot. They unobtrusively stop outside a layman's house. They cannot go in unless invited. So they stand outside; and if

someone comes out and makes an offering, they receive it sometimes with the words, 'well done' but usually in silence. If no one comes to make an offering they go on their way.

Some household daily wait alms food for their coming. Each monk is offered a morsel of rice, sometimes accompanied by a spoonful of boiled beans. In market places, wayside stall keepers make it a point to offer something out of their wares, like boiled peas, crispies or whatever can be taken with rice meal. Uncooked things are not offered on such occasion.

The Buddha allows monks to accept food sent to them by relatives or donors, and they can accept invitations to laymen's houses to partake of alms food. Some monks are not required to go out daily for alms food, but they usually do so. This is done as an act of humility and also to give the poor people a chance to do deeds of merit. People who cannot afford to invite monks to their houses for meals can gain merit by offering a morsel of food to the monks on their daily rounds. This form of *dhana* offering alms to monks on their daily rounds, is considered of even greater merit than sending an elaborate meal to the monastery or inviting monks to one's home to partake of food: It is spontaneous and lacking in show or ostentation and there is also a spirit of impersonal and impartial good will. Even those who can afford to have monks to their homes for meal do not wish to miss this kind of meritorious deed so they often make an effort to offer alms food to monks on their daily rounds. People can invite monks to the house to partake of food only occasionally, but they can offer a morsel of food daily.

Myanmar Buddhists love to do acts of *dhana*; they invite monks to partake or alms food on all family occasions. Those who do not have the meals to do such an act can also gain merit by helping. That is why most Buddhist celebrations either at home or at the monastery never lack willing helpers.

Dhana and laity

The spirit of *dhana* is strong in the Myanmar Buddhists. At a humble wayside teashop the customer who orders a cup of tea or coffee or something to eat will receive a pot of plain tea from the shopkeeper free of charge. He can linger over the tea pot as long as he likes and listen to or participate in local gossip. He only has to rattle the tea-pot, and it will be filled again. free of charge.

I never thought this action unusual, until one of my non-Myanmar friends mentioned it. Thirsty, he had gone into a teashop to take a cup of hot plain tea and he was surprised that the shopkeeper did not charge for it. He asked me whether he should buy a box of matches or a cigar. I told him that he was not obliged to do so. Such things as plain tea are given free.

When you go to pagodas and buy flowers and candles from the stall, the shopkeeper will take care of your slippers and things and no tips are expected. In small towns you may be given a pot of plain tea and a dish of pickled tea, peanuts and crispies. The shopkeeper is doing his act of *dhana*, even while he is at the mundane affair of earning a living. Myanmar hospitality, of which many foreign writers write, is deeply rooted in the Buddhist teaching of the practice of *dhana*, or loving kindness and giving.

During the Japanese occupation in Myanmar, one of the familiar sights was a procession of Allied war prisoners sweeping litter on the roads heavily guarded by Japanese soldiers.

The Myanmars, who before the war did all they could to drive out the British Imperialists, could not bear to see any humans, friends or foes, in such circumstances. Many Myanmars tried to smuggle cheroots and cigarettes to the prisoners of war. They did this at great personal risk for if caught by the guards, they would be considered lucky to get away with only a few slaps on the face.

This is an example of the practice of *dhana* under the most trying conditions, where loving kindness triumphs over hate and vengeance.

Kamma and Vengeance

In this connection it is worth mentioning that the absence of the element of vengeance in Myanmar writings through the ages is striking. Perhaps it is because of the basic teaching, the Law of *kamma*. This is well illustrated in the following four verses written in the 11th century by the king's minister just before he was put to death on charges of treason.

1.When one rises to power, another must fall; this is the Law of nature.

2.In the golden palaces and mansions, mighty and powerful, amid the goodly company of nobles and courtiers, in regal splendour sits the king, but alas, like the bubble that rises on the face of the watery main, it lasts only a short life time.

3.The king in his compassion, my life, he may spare, but just for the present; for, all men have in them the seed of impermanence and decay, so,I shall one day, inevitably, as all living beings must end - in death.

4. With deep respect, I raise my hands in genuflection, in token of homage to my king, and I crave for his permission to allow me to say this; that if in the cycle of rebirths, I were to meet Your Majesty again, in one or more of our future lives, I have no wish to take vengeance on you; I only pledge love and loyalty to you, my royal master; I do not take the least offence for what happens now; I absolve you entirely; because it is only the nature of impermanence and decay, that is right within me, that brings me to this end.

This poem written 800 years ago is still in the hearts of the people. It gives the Buddhist attitude to life, namely, that whatever happens to you in this present life is the results of what you done in your own deed or

deeds in the past. It is senseless, therefore to take vengeance on the one who wrongs you; because such an action of vengeance will only add to your bad *kamma*. Any wrong action brings only bad effects to the doer.

These are some examples of how the simple acceptance of the law of *kamma* calls forth the noblest of human feelings and emotions. This is the Buddhist ideal, and this is the way Buddhists try to live.

Animistic Rituals in Myanmar Buddhist Life

It is often bewildering to a non Myanmar and non-Buddhist to see traces of animism in Buddhist shrines, temples, pagodas and monastries or view *nat-pwes* and ritual feasts in honour of *nats*. Among tradational Buddhists, there are few if any who stop to think what the animal figures and statues of nats or spirits have to do with the Buddha's teachings- the association is well understood by Buddhists, so well that it is taken for granted that others should also understand it.

Relation between *nats* and humans

Now, exactly what and who are *nats*? When the Myanmar say *nats*, it includes all kinds of spirits high and low, good and bad. They are not immortals like the Greek gods, although their life span is believed to be many times longer than that of humans. *Nats* are a class of beings The word often implies possession of splendour and power and radiance of body. There are many levels of *nats* having goodness, beauty and power and most are believed to have some supernatural powers but it does not necessarily follow that all *nats* are good. Power and goodness do not always go together in the human world or elsewhere.

The Buddhist acceptance of *nats* is rooted in the basic teachings of the Buddha- that all beings go round the cycle of rebirth, humans, animals and *nats*: and that the state of each being is decided by his own *kamma* (his action). *Nats*, therefore, are generally regarded as sharing kinship and continuity of life with humans; the state of being a *nat* is just one of the lives. *Nats* have been human and may be born again in the human abode because even though some *nats* are allowed to enjoy a long lifespan and supernatural powers, they are in the *samsara* or the cycle of rebirth, so they need salvation as much as humans. They are subject to death and decay. Their blissful state lasts only as long as the force of their good deeds. There are *nats*, the good ones who realising this are anxious to reinforce their strength of good deeds. These take an interest in the doings of men; they rejoice and appreciate when humans do deeds of merit (which act in itself is a deed of merit). They might even exhort humans to do good deeds.

Levels of *nats*

But, there are different levels of *nats*. The higher ones above in the heavenly regions and those who are nearer to the human abode such as the guardian spirits of trees, rivers, moutains, towns, villages, forests, lakes and seas. There seems to be nothing in nature or in man-made places, big or small, that has not a *nat* guarding it. Many are anxious to gain merit so that they can go up the ladder of existence. According to the parables even powerful celestials, if they are forgetful can fall from their blissful state into the life of a lower being. Such stories also teach that the state of a *nat*, though blessed with beauty, power and pleasure, offers less opportunity to do meritorious deeds. In this respect, the human abode is more blessed because of its opportunities to do deeds of merit.

According to the Buddhist way of thought, it is easy for humans to do deeds of merit. All action of speech, mind and body, if motivated by good intention and loving kindness, are deeds of merit. If a fellow pedestrian asks which way he should take to get to a certain place, and you should tell him with loving kindness- that is to say you wish that he may be spared all

the trouble of walking the wrong way-such an action is a deed of merit. According to the Buddha's teaching, the man who provides for his family, the woman who looks after her husband and children- all these are deeds of merit if done with loving kindness.

One story tells of a celestial nymph whose span of life ended as she was dancing among her friends. She was reborn a human, grew up and married and lived the life of a good wife and mother. Later she died and was reborn in the same celestials mansion where she had been dancing only some time back. The life span of celetials being long, her friends hardly missed her, to them she was gone but for a moment and then back fortified with deeds of merit done as a human.

This story shows that in the human abode, we might be the ones who come down from the celestial regions, only for a while, to strengthen the force of our meritorious deeds. Who knows, our friends up there might be waiting for us to return?

Friends seen and unseen

Because of such belief's in after-life and the law of *Kamma*, the world of a Buddhist is not a lonely place at all. He has a host of friends seen and unseen. Even as he begins this day, putting flowers at the household shrine and reciting devotional verses to contemplate on the attributes of the Buddha, he knows that the *nats* will rejoice and appreciate his good deed and thus shall gain a share of the merit.

It is the custom of Buddhists to say *"Ah-mhya"* three times meaning "Come and share", whenever thay do a deed of merit; and it is expected of those who hear it to say *"Tha-du"* three times meaning "Well done". The word *"Tha- du"* is a derivation from the Pali "*Sadu*" and expresses joy and appreciation at some good deed done by others and when said either mentally or orally, it is in itself a deed of merit.

Buddhists believe that good *nats* wish to have the

chance to say. *"Tha-du"* to help them up the ladder of existence. Above all *nats* want humans to do deeds of merit so that we can join them in after life. The abode of nats, though a blissful state, would be a lonely place if others did not join them.

Relationship between *nats* and Buddha

If *nats*, or celestials, and humans are so related, what is the relationship between the *nats* and Buddha? Since to be a *nat* means to be reborn as a kind of being in the cycle of rebirth, the Buddha-to-be had himself been a *nat* many times before. He finally became the Buddha.

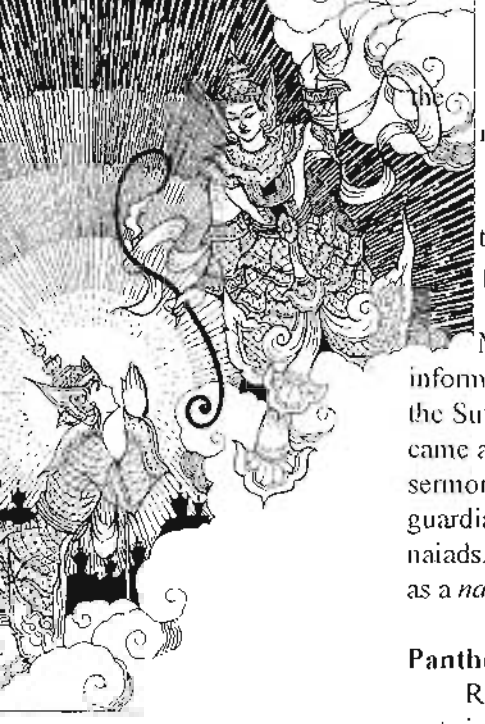
The enlightenment of a Buddha is not achieved by deeds done in one life or existence. The Buddha-to-be, as he went through the cycle of rebirths, had practised virtues, like giving, self-discipline and loving kindness so that forces of merit would accumulate and enough maturity would be achieved to be the Buddha-the final goal.

The one-to-be-the-Buddha in the scheme of things is a great being in search of the Right Way to save all beings from suffering. There are many beings, nats and humans, who realise the importance of this mission and therefore try to serve Him all along the innumerable lives so that He may achieve His goal.

One of the many examples of nats serving the Buddha is Prince Siddatha, as the Buddha-to-be, went forth into the forest renouncing his family and princely glories. The *nats*, with their supernatural powers, put the whole city to sleep so that even the guards at the city gate did not know of the Prince's departure.

This scene of the Prince's leaving the city is often depicted with some *nats* lighting the streets with torches and others with their palms right under the hoofs of the Prince's horse so as to mute the sound- an example of the artist's imagination and interpretation.

Such stories, instead of conflicting with the people's



belief in *nats* or celestials, were absorbed into teachings of the Buddha. Moreover, *nats* were mentioned in many of the Buddha's discourses and sermons. We are told that nats came to pay respects to the Buddha and attained insight into the Four Noble Truths, after hearing the Buddha preach.

One of the suttas or sermons of the Buddha, Mahasamaya Sutta, is well-known for its detailed information about the nats. When the Buddha preached the Sutta, the *nats* of the ten thousand world systems came and paid respects to Him. The first part of the sermon contains a list of *nats* of all kinds and levels, guardian spirits of natural phenomena, fairies, harpies, naiads, dryads and many others. The sutta often serves as a *nat* "civil list".

Pantheon of *nats*

Roughly speaking, the number of chief executive *nats* is often listed as 37 but there seems to be more than one pantheon. In one there are 9 chief ministers and the rest are military chiefs. During the days when Bagan was a powerful kingdom, they had a different pantheon of yet another 37, four of whom are the Big Four who guard the 4 cardinal points and the head of the remaining 33 is Sakka, *Thagyamin*, king of the celestials, who many scholars say is borrowed from the Hindu. There are quite a number of *nats* who seem to have the same source, the Myanmar Buddhists are great borrowers! A writer says that Myanmar animism is a grab-bag of all forms of spirit worship. If you have been to Mandalay and seen the Ah-tu-ma-shi Monastery, you might have noticed among the wooden carvings of nat figures, some that look like Christian angles- borrowed from Dr.Judson's missionaries.

But whatever spirits or *nats* our ancesters worshipped in the past, they have all become the Buddha's disciples, according to His sermons. Some are known

to have been given the responsibility of looking after His teachings and to see that they are practised by humans. That is why most of our spirits are given niches in the pagodas, temples and shrines.

Individual *nats*

Some *nats* are quite involved in the doings of humans. There is one nat whom no Buddhist should be without. He is the *Thagyamin*, king of the celestials or Sakka of the Hindus. There is the story of the Buddha, who on his death bed summoned *Thagyamin* and left him in charge of His teachings. *Thagyamin* was to see that humans and *nats* live according to the Buddha's teachings. To help him, he was assigned the four big *nats*, the custodians of the four cardinal points. On every sabbath day (it is not Sunday because it is calculated according to the days of the moon, the 8th day of the moon and the last days of the moon) *Thagyamin* sends his messenger, *Matali*, to the human abode so that he can get a current report on the behaviour of the humans from the big four *nats*. *Thagyamin* is responsible for the welfare of humans. He must know how things are going on down here and take action. He has a way of knowing whenever things in the human abode must be put right. It is like this- he has a couch which is so soft and downy that he sinks to the waist when sitting on it; but when there are things he should see to, the couch becomes stiff and hard as a stone. That is why when we feel ill used, we ask "Will *Thagyamin's* couch never go stiff?" "Why is it that his couch never stiffens for the likes of me?" It is a common colloquialism. In many of our poems, old and new, some written before Myanmar became a British colony, by the 19th century poet U Ponnya, in which he rails at *Thagyamin* for his neglect in looking after the welfare of humans. Scholars have not yet been able to decide what the poet meant, whether he was making a personal complaint, or grousing over the state of the country.

After *Thagyamin*, the celestial lady *Thurathati*, is popular with Myanmar Buddhists. Many believe her to be a Burmanization of *Surasati*, the Hindu goddess. Small statues of her can be bought from stalls on the steps of the Shwedagon Pagoda depicting *Thurathati* riding on a mythical *hintha* bird. Many say that she is the guardian nat lady of the Buddhist scriptures as well as a patroness of fine arts. So many who make their living by writing, painting, music or drama have her statue in the house.

This is only the background of beliefs in *nats* and how they are based on the teachings of the Buddha. Much is still to be studied and known and said on the local *nats*. *Nats* like *Thagyamin* and *Thurathati* belong to the higher level and are in many ways closely associated with Buddhism.

Guardian *nats* of the household

The Myanmars are not content with only the nats mentioned in the sermons of the Buddha. There are also family guardian *nats*, personal guardian *nats* and many others. Even though most of the additional *nats* are obviously of a lower level, they seem closer and sometimes even dearer to many people. After all, *Thagyamin* may be all-powerful, but then, "his couch never stiffens for the likes of us" and there might be some local nats who really see and care. Who should know how things are, better than the *Eindwin nat* since he is the one who is guardian of the household? In the corner of some Myanmar Buddhist homes a green coconut is hung from a cane basket decorated with a piece of red ribbon, flowers and a fan. This is an offering to the guardian of the house. A new offering is made at the beginning of the Lenten season, on New Year Day and on special family occasions like a wedding, birth of a new baby or bereavement.

This custom dates back to the fourth century during the early days of the Bagan kingdom. There was a

blacksmith of great strength who was burnt to death at the stake by order of the king, who was jealous of his popularity. The blacksmith's sister jumped into the fire to die with him. Together they became *nats* or spirits and appeared before the king requesting him to give them a place to live in. The king gave them the right to live under the roof of any household. That is why householders put a green coconut whose juice is used to relieve the pain of burns as a sympathetic offering for the ones who died in fire. Candles, or anything that burns, are never offered.

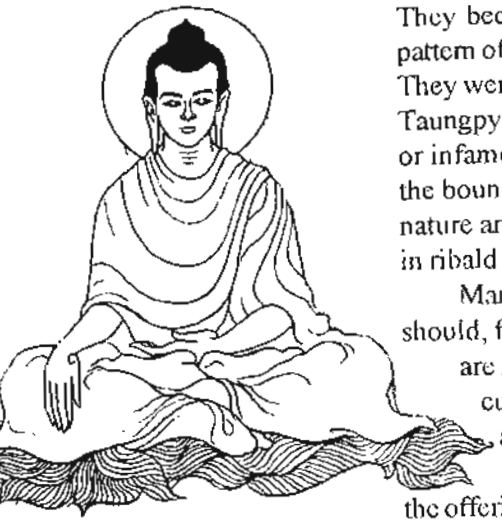
It is interesting to note that nats of this order have to get permission from the reigning king to be able to stay in a place. There are many stories of *nats* of mountains, rivers, villages, etc. This put them on a lower level than humans, especially the king.

People who die violent deaths, according to the Buddhist belief, have much less chance of being reborn in higher life because it is very important to die with thoughts of the Buddha and His Teachings in mind in order to ascend the ladder of existence. Whoever dies violently has less chance to contemplate on the Buddha and His Teachings.

Perhaps the ritual of having a guardian household nat began with the sympathetic memorial for the young blacksmith and his sister. It does not cost much, coconuts are plentiful, it looks nice hanging from a cane basket decorated with flowers and a red ribbon.

Ritual feasts

Of the *nats* who feature in ritual feasts, the most popular are two brothers named Min Gyi and Min Galay whose story dates back to the 11th century when Anawrahta was king of Bagan and started to build a kingdom with Theravada Buddhism as the state religion. The brothers were dark aliens, probably sons of an Arab seafarer. The king used them as his henchmen and later they were executed for negligence of duty.



They became spirits and the story follows the usual pattern of their asking permission to stay at some place. They were there to this day. There is a big *nat* shrine in Taungpyone for the brothers and the festival is famous or infamous for its boisterous revelry which exceeds the bounds of propriety. The basic instincts of human nature are lossened by drinks and allowed expression in ribald songs and rhymes.

Many Buddhists frown on such goings-on as they should, for the drunken songs and dances and ribaldry are not in keeping with the Buddhist faith and culture. But it has been going on for years now and perhaps some people need this wholesale letting off of steam every year, even though the offering of intoxicants is in conflict with Buddhism.

Mixed company: the good and the bad

The troubles is that the pantheon of Myanmar *nats* is a mixed company. There are dieties borrowed from the Hindu like *Thagyamin* and *Thurathati* and there are rogues and alcoholics too. The most well-known drunkard is a local *nat* from central Myanmar by the name of U Min Kyaw, or affectionately known as Ko Gyi Kyaw meaning Big Brother Kyaw. His locality is famous for the toddy palms whose sap makes toddy drink. Ko Gyi Kyaw makes the most of it. The ritual feasts in his honour are marked by drinking bouts and boisterous songs

Even in the Pantheon of lower *nats* there are really nice ones, like U Shin Gyi, the guardian of the delta waterways. Those rivercrafts plying the Ayeyawady delta area are in his charge, so offerings are made to him whenever a boat is launched. He is a nice young man, a teetotaller and vegetarian. He is also a musician and he is represented with a crooked harp on his lap, a tiger on one side and a crocodile on the other. Offerings to him include steamed glutinous rice, coconut kernel, pickled tea, jaggery and candles and flowers.

On the west Yangon river front the shrine of U Shin Gyi is often found on a small push cart with three wheels and usual offerings. The cart is pushed by a man who stops at a house or apartment where for a fee from the resident and his family, he will put the offerings in front of the picture, light the candles, arrange flowers and recite an incantation to the *nats*. If the man has a good voice and the incantation well composed, it is really a pleasure to listen to. Whether one believes in *nats* or not the man gives you your money's worth of poetry recitation and a snack of glutinous rice, jaggery and coconut kernel into the bargain.

U Shin Gyi also had been a human in his previous life. To support his mother he went along with boatmen who went out to gather lumber. As he was too young for rough work, the men left him to watch the boats and cook their rice meal. He was told explicitly by the boatmen not to play his crooked harp in that island area. But the nymphs of the forest tempted him to play the harp for them and exacted a promise that he would stay with them. When the men were ready to leave, the nymphs demanded that the young man remain. Their boat was not allowed to move until he was thrown into the water and drowned and he became a *nat*. His festival is held in many delta towns around November and December. The story of his life is enacted on the stage and it is the chance for local talents to participate. The story itself makes a lively musical drama with the young man playing his crooked harp and a host of nymphs dancing. There is dramatic conflict when he struggles with his emotions and makes a reluctant promise to stay with the nymphs leaving his mother forever. The scene where the sorrowing mother comes to the place of tragedy and the son appears as a *nat* is the most moving in the play.

Contribution to fine arts

Whatever way *nats* are supposed to help people

they have given us the gift of music, drama, dance and song. *Natchins*, as song in honour of *nats* are called, are beautiful pieces of literature, comparable to the ballads of medieval Europe. Such songs tell the story of the nat and many are rich with pathos, drama and tragedy while others are full of uninhibited humour and fun.

Ritual offerings to *nats*, as Buddhists make them, are but paying respect to those to whom, perhaps, we owe gratitude for looking after our welfare. The tradition of giving respect where it is due is often shown by the offering of *kadaw-pwe*, as the collection of offerings is called. A *kadaw-pwe* is a tray of offerings- three bunches of bananas with green coconut with a long stem placed in the middle. This offering is an eternal item in all family rituals. The same offering is made to Buddha at the shrines, to monks, to parents and senior relatives, to teachers. On occasions like wedding or the introduction of a new baby to the family and friends, a Buddhist offers the *kadaw-pwe*.

Any musical entertainment or play begins with ritual music and the female dancer circles round the *kadaw-pwe*. Movie people do not omit the *kadaw-pwe* when launching a new picture and on the day the contract between the producers, directors and film stars is signed, the personal gather around the table of offerings to pay respect to the Buddha, His Teachings, His Order of the *Sangha* and to parents and teachers. There may be offerings of alms and food to the monks on the same day.

There are yet several aspects of animistic practices in Myanmar Buddhist life. Recently foreign writers on Myanmar have given more attention to the subject, as in. "A Thousand Lives Away" by Winston I. King; "Burmese Supernaturalism" by Melford E. Spiro; "Living with Nats" by June C. Nash and "An Analysis of Animism in Burma Village Social Relations" in the Cultural Report Series 13 of the South-East Asia Studies Group of Yale University.

Sir R.C. Temple's "37 Nats", published by W. Griggs, London 1906 is a magnificent book bound with red silk with colour reproductions from an old Parabike (a flat thin parchment folded backward and forward).

This is just a short account of what nats and rituals mean to someone who is born and bred a Buddhist and also very much emotionally involved in them.

Life and Customs

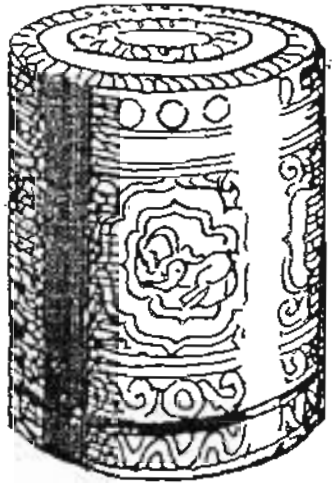
The Art of Betel Chewing

Leisurely habit

For most betel addicts, the little shops at Yangon street corners, where they sell ready-made betel quids, leave them cold. A fastidious connoisseur must compose his quid to suit his own individual taste and chew it in his own sweet time, as he let the world go by. But, one can hardly do so in these days of rush and hurry. One has to be content to stop at a stall, buy a quid and shove it into his mouth and rush.

If something is not done and done quickly, this gentle art of chewing betel will be irretrievably lost. Betel chewing is meant to be done in a leisurely and relaxed manner. It is definitely not for the restless and the hurried. Take, for instance, a lady of my grandmother's day; she would sit with her legs decorously tucked in on a finely woven mat, edged with an inch-wide red velvet. She had before her all the paraphernalia of betel chewing.

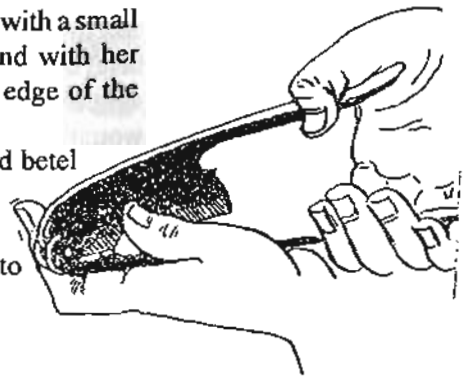
The lady with a betel box



The circular betel-box, at first glance, looked solid, until the lid was removed and the bowl inside uncovered. The top of the bowl was fitted with two shallow trays, one on top of the other; on the upper tray were four little cups and a brass phial. In the cups were the ingredients for making betel quid, namely betel nuts, cloves, cutch, anise seeds, shredded wild liquorice ice or sweet creeper (*nwe-cho*). In the brass phial was lime, soft and pure.

In the tray right under the first one was a layer of dried tobacco leaves: only when the tray was taken out, the main bowl with green fresh betel leaves was revealed.

The lady first shredded the betel nuts with a small nut-cracker; she then took a betel leaf and with her dainty fingers, remove the stem and the edge of the tail-end and smeared it thinly with lime.



She then put a little each of shredded betel nuts, anise, cutch and tobacco leaf and folded the edges to make a neat compact quid and secured it by sticking a clove into it.

Not for the one with two left hands

It took practice and training, and above all, art to make the betel quid and much more skill to chew it daintily, so that the lips were reddened like rubies. There are many love songs praising the "lips reddened by betel juice and the sweetness of breath".

In my younger days, in the small town where I grew up; no one, if any, had heard of things like lipsticks. For "dressing up" occasions we girls were given a betel quid each to chew and redden our lips with. Many did it charmingly. But I was not among that "many", I only succeeded in making an awful mess. With my best white muslin jacket stained with betel juice, and streaks of red juice running on my chin, I did not come anywhere near being the belle of the party.

Lips reddened with betel juice

Anyway, it was fortunate for me and also for all concerned that I was not born in the age when ladies were expected to sit on a finely woven mat with red velvet endings, making betel quids. With my two left hands, I would never manage to make a quid. The task of putting those leaf and packing neatly was not for me. To be sure, all these shredded betel and anise seed things would fall out even as I tried to stick a clove to secure the edges.

The chances are that I would upset the betel box

and there are few things in the world as chaotic as a betel box upset. By that time, the quid I was chewing would be dripping with red juice and the whole thing would be a masterpiece of slovenliness.

Supposing courting swains were present, what chance would I have? Perhaps, I might worm my way into someone's heart by this show of helplessness. A forlorn hope this. This manner of helplessness would hardly conduce to the blossoming of romance. No swain would ever queue up for the favour of getting a betel quid from the likes of me. So why should I bemoan, after all, the decadence of the gentle art of betel chewing.

Betel Leaves and Betel Boxes

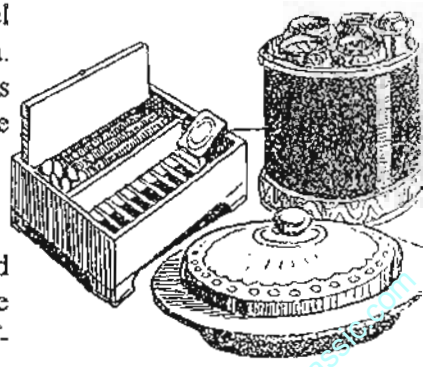
Hospitality and welcome

Betel chewing is still as much a habit as smoking cheroots here in Myanmar. Even right in the city of Yangon, at every street corner you see little stalls that sell, among other things like cheroot, matches and sweets, betel-quids ready for chewing.

In many households, especially in small towns betel boxes are part of the furnishings in the parlour. The boxes may be lacquer, silver or bronze, ornate or plain, depending on the means and status of the family. In cities like Yangon one sees betel boxes as decoration.

When there is a family celebration, betel boxes complete with green betel leaves and necessary ingredients are one of the items put on the table along with cheroots and a dish of pickled tea. "Betel, tobacco and pickled tea"- this expression in Myanmar language bespeaks of hospitality and welcome a visitor receives in a home.

Whenever a friend or stranger crosses the threshold of a Myanmar home he is welcomed with a betel box; a small tray of cheroots and a dish of pickled tea. The host may not have all three, but there will always be the betel box. Even the poorest home in a village has a battered lacquer betel box to offer to a visitor.



Betel boxes at the royal court

Betel boxes, bowls and trays of all sizes and shapes were important items of the regalia of the Myanmar kings. They were the status symbols of officials, courtiers and queens; one could know how somebody stood in the king's favour by the betel box he was allowed to use. The betel box offered to a visitor was a criterion of how he stood with his host.

Princes and officials would offer their own betel box to a favoured guest and less ornate ones to ordinary visitors.

In courtship

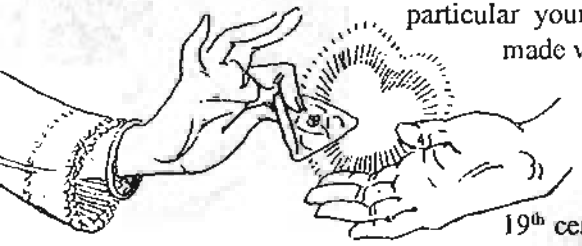
Betel boxes also played an important part in courtship some fifty or sixty years ago. In those days houses had a kind of loggia for marriagable girls of the family to entertain their suitors. By sun down the girl sat there at work at her spindle; she had the betel box fully equipped with fresh betel leaves, lime, cutch, pieces of dry tobacco and betel nuts.

The young men came, in groups of five or six, and they would sit and chat with the girl. There was light-hearted banter, a battle of wits and often a game of riddles. It was the unwritten code of the time that young men must leave when the next group came along. In fact there were other girls to visit on their rounds, and such were called "bachelor rounds".

The girl had the freedom to choose whom she liked. The parents though never present at the loggia were inside the house and they might give a discreet cough now and then just to show that the girl was not unchaperoned.

Betel quid, symbol of favour

The girl had all the time and young men at her disposal to decide on. She showed her preference for a particular young man by giving him a betel quid made with her own hands. Her action would be a signal for other young men to seek elsewhere.



Betel quids were tokens of favour in those days. Once in early 19th century, a queen consort of a Myanmar king gave audience to an English merchant who presented her with gifts. The queen, as a token of thanks, gave the merchant a betel quid from her own bejewelled

bowl. The Englishman, not knowing what to do, thanked her and put it in his trouser pocket.

A special royal favour - but not for the squeamish!

This caused a titter among the court ladies, but the queen went on chewing betel unperturbed. But the Englishman's ordeal was not yet over. There was yet another custom, not at all for the hygiene-conscious people, giving away the betel, already chewed to a pulp, to the best loved and most favoured ones.

The queen gave the chewed betel pulp to a princess sitting nearby and the Englishman was greatly alarmed not knowing what he should do, if the queen offered him the same favour. But the queen gave the stuff only to the princess; she did not deign to give it even to other court ladies, least of all, to an alien commoner. He had been unduly presumptious to think himself worthy of such an honour.

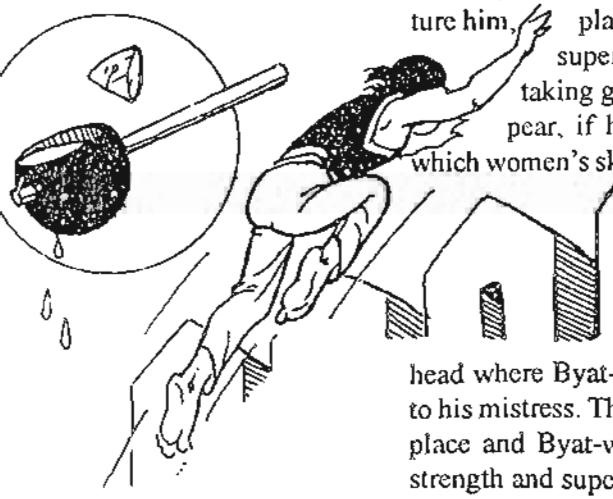
A Quid of Betel and a Cup of Water

Quaint idioms

Myanmar language is full of idioms which a poor bemused non-Myanmar cannot make head or tail of from the context. Many expressions have stories or anecdotes in the background. If someone says: "Give me a quid of betel and a cup of water," it means that he has given up so completely that there is nothing left for him to live for.

To understand this expression, one must go back to the days when King Manuha ruled the Mon Kingdom of Thaton. At that time, there was a man of great strength, "the strength of five elephants", named Byat-wi. He was an alien, a man "who came over the seas". The king feared that he might be a threat to the peace of the kingdom, so he ordered that Byat-wi be captured.

For some time Byat-wi could not be captured, because he also had supernormal powers. So the commander, who was in charge of the men trying to capture him, planned a ruse. He knew that Byat-wi's supernormal powers, like for instance, taking great leaps into the air, would disappear, if he walked under a clothes' line on which women's skirts used in child-bed, had been hung.



Fall of a strong man

Byat-wi had a mistress whom he visited occasionally; so the commander had all these things overhead where Byat-wi would pass. That night he came to his mistress. The commander's men surrounded the place and Byat-wi found to his dismay that all his strength and supernormal powers were gone.

Even though he fell into the hands of the commander's men, they could not kill him; "spears wilt, swords break, he dies not, even though elephants trample on him!" so goes the song. He would not die, unless he willingly gave himself up to death.

The commander had to plan a ruse. He taunted Byat-wi saying how foolish he was to wish to go on living when the woman he loved had betrayed him; but Byat-wi still believed that she was innocent. Then the commander made a bet; he would get the woman show a gesture that she wished him to die. If she would not, he would let Byat-wi go free; if she would, he must give himself up to death. Byat-wi took the bet.

The trick that worked

The commander said that the woman would come to Byat-wi with a quid of betel and a cup of water, which according to the "custom" was a gift to a dying man. Byat-wi, being a foreigner who came over the seas, did not know that the "custom" was invented by the commander on the spot to suit his purpose.

He then told Byat-wi's mistress a different story; that Byat-wi had been pardoned and that he was waiting for her. Full of joy, the woman was about to run to him when the commander, as if in an after thought, suggested that she should take to him a quid of betel and a cup of water, which she did.

The woman was never to find out that she had been a harbinger of her lover's death.

Since then, to ask for "a quid of betel and a cup of water" means there is no hope, nothing to live for.

No Myanmar would walk under a clothes line

The story of Byat-wi also explains the unwillingness the Myanmars often show to walk under a clothes line, especially those on which women's skirts are hung. Not only men; women also are unwilling to walk under the clothes line. Ask them why, they will

say vaguely: "It will lower or debase the human mystique."

"Human mystique" is the nearest I could find for the Myanmar expression "*phone*", which is often translated as glory. "The Myanmars believe that all humans, male or female, each has *phone*, which is something endowed upon human beings, as the noblest and highest of all beings.

Cigars and Cheroots

Inside of a cheroot

Everyone knows the Myanmar-cigar, as the trusty dictionary says, is a tight roll of tobacco with pointed ends for smoking. But what do we call the other kind, the *Say-baw-leik*, or mild tobacco cigar, as the word implies? We call it cheroot, but it does not tally with the description given in the dictionary; "cigar with both ends open". It was only one end for lighting and the other end has a filter, a small roll of dry corn-husks.

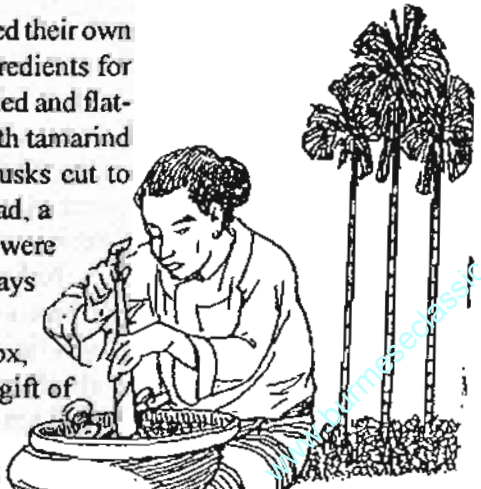
For lack of a better word - if there is, it has not yet come to my notice - let me call it cheroot anyway. It is not a tight roll of tobacco leaves. It is a roll all right; the outside is dried leaf of *carbia myxa* (*tha-nat-phet*). The insides are a mysterious mixture of bits of dried wood and crushed tobacco.

Cheroots come in all sizes, the smallest ones are only slightly bigger than cigarettes: the big ones are about six to eight inches long with a half-inch girth. The strength varies depending on the portion of tobacco put inside.

Cheroot-rolling ladies

Ladies of my grandmother's days rolled their own cheroots to suit their individual taste. Ingredients for cheroot rolling, namely, *tha-nat* leaves, dried and flattened, bits of dried soft wood seasoned with tamarind pulp, crushed tobacco leaves, dry corn-husks cut to make filters, a skein of silk or cotton thread, a left-over from the family loom - all these were put in the red lacquer basket fitted with trays and compartments.

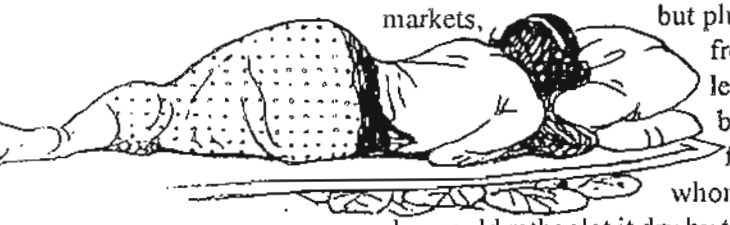
This tobacco basket, like the betel box, played an important part in the family. A gift of



cheroot rolled by the lady's fair hands meant to the courting swain that he had a good chance to win her.

Cheroots in love songs

There is a love song, well known even to this day, that tells of the gift of the cheroot from a maid to her lover, who had gone to the golden city of Inwa. The girl said she did not buy the *tha-nat* leaf from the markets, but plucked it green and fresh from the tree: she put the leaf under her bed, partly because she could not face others asking "for whom" and partly because she would rather let it dry by the warmth of her young body than by the heat of the sun or fire; since she could not afford a piece of silk thread she tied the end with a white cotton thread. A humble gift but rich in love and tenderness.



Cheroots are as varied in size as in quality. The poor of the villages use dry corn-husks, the same material as the filter, in place of *tha-nat* leaves. The mixture put inside is basically the same.

Decorated cheroots

Kun-thi-phet-say-leiks, those big, long stately white cheroots, rolled with paper-thin sheet from the frond of betel nut palm, are the aristocrat of the species. They are used as take-away gifts for guests at weddings and novitiation ceremonies. They are decorated with bands of red foils at the filter end and put in ornate silver bowls. A bevy of girls welcome the guests, offering each a cheroot.

Perhaps, one does not see white cheroots too often here in Yangon even on gala occasions, but in places like Mandalay and towns in upcountry they are parts of the trimmings of a celebration.

Recently I have developed an interest in cheroots, because I have taken up smoking, something I missed in my mis-spent youth. It is never too late. I am also inspired by the example set by a lady, a distinguished Gallic beauty, who is partial to Myanmar cheroots, which she smokes fitted to her long ivory holder - a picture of chic or glamour. So far, any chic or glamour I may have achieved seeps out of the little holes I make on my jackets and *longyis*(skirts).

Turbans and Headgear

Back in the colonial days, many Myanmars had pictures that reminded us of the days when Myanmar was a free sovereign state, like portraits of King Mindon, King Thibaw, and his queen, the last to rule Myanmar, and also pictures of General Bandoola who lost his life defending the country against the British. We, as growing children, learned our history even before we learned to read, from those silent memories.

Among the memorabilia, there was also a picture of three strange looking gentlemen in European dress suits, wearing silk Myanmar *gaungbaungs* or turbans. They were Prince Myingun and his sons; the prince, a son of King Mindon, had to flee the country and seek asylum with the French, after an unsuccessful attempt to seize the throne.

It is remarkable that the Myanmar prince retained his headgear even though he had to don the European style dress. *Gaungbaung*, as the silk headgear is called, is still worn on formal occasions, but bad to say, it is only a parody of what it used to be.

Gaungbaungs today are mass produced, which is what should never be; because this headgear is individualistic in style, each man choosing his own, not only in size or shape or model, but also in colour and pattern. Today, they are produced in a variety of colours, but only plain, not patterned. The shape or model is stereotyped.

People say that it is so convenient, not involving all the trouble of making it yourself; one just puts it on

like a hat. Well, that is the whole trouble, one puts it on like a hat. A Myanmar *gaungbaung* is never meant to be put on like a hat; it must be modelled by one's hand to suit one's own taste.

A Myanmar man of yesterday would not go out without his *gaungbaung*, which was part of his personality. In any gathering, one saw Myanmar men from twenties up wearing *gaungbaungs* of various colours, patterns and shapes, In those days there were still men who wore their long hair done into topknots.

Some men left the topknot, sleek and shining, uncovered; to make the *gaungbaung* they folded the silk piece diagonal wise into a band of three or four inches wide. then they wound the band round the head, covering half of the forehead and tucked the end on one side leaving a triangular edge to hang over the shoulder. The length of the triangular end varied from a little "rabbit's ear" to something that nearly reached the shoulder.

Some men covered up the topknot and swathed the silk piece round the head to achieve something haphazard and yet so full of dignity, with the inevitable triangular edge on one side either short or long. In those days no two *gaungbaungs* were made alike, each was a work of art, created by the wearer to suit his own personality.

Not only plain coloured pieces were used for making *gaungbaung*, but also flowered patterns, polka dots and scrollwork motifs, and each *gaungbaung* is done in a distinctive style. Many well-known personalities were known by the style of their *gaungbaungs*, Dr. Ba Maw a veteran politician, wore his, lopsided, covering half of his forehead and this feature was the delight of the caricaturists of the day.

There must be something in the Myanmar character that does not like uniformity - in dress particularly. Take a gathering of men dressed in western style; they are often compared to a flock of penguins in their

shirts and tails. Myanmar men even today, with or without *gaungbaung*, still express themselves in their choice of *longyis*(sarongs). I wish they revived the old art of self-made *gaungbaungs*.

In the days of the Myanmar kings, silk pieces from abroad (probably India) found their way through Pathein, a seaport town of Myanmar. So the pieces were called Pathein scarves. Pathein scarves often feature in love songs. The princess sat by the window waiting for her lover to come with his "Pathein silk turban" aloft.

The Myanmar *ganugbaung* is not merely for utility, it is for ornament, prestige and most important of all, for the upholding of men's dignity and mystique.

Men's Hair Styles

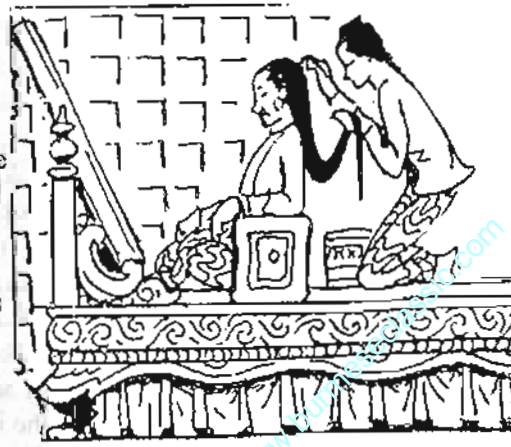
The handsome top-knot

These days we see young men with long wavy hair, the trendy style of the day. Most of the older people do not like it at all. It is unfortunate that this hair style is associated with road devilry, heroin and such unsavoury activities. Otherwise long hair should not be objectionable.

There is no hard and fast rule that men should wear their hair short; there never had been. Myanmar men of yesterday had long hair and they sported a handsome top-knot. Men of the occident too wore their hair long; look at the Laughing Cavalier, the Merry Monarch, Bonnie Prince Charlie, to name only a few. They were the heart-throbs of their time.

The Myanmars put a great importance on the hair. It is disrespectful to touch someone's hair; and one does so only after saying *kadaw*, which means "with due respect to you". With the royalty the rules were strict. The king's hair might not be touched except by his chief queen.

It was one of the most prestigious tasks of a queen to oil, comb and twist the king's hair into a top knot. When King Mindon's chief queen died, the king wrapped his topknot in a silk scarf and never suffered it to be touched by any of the lesser queens.



But, one moment please, we need not be dewy-eyed about the king's love for his dead queen. It was that if he let any of his ladies do his hair, it could mean that she had been promoted to the chief queen's place. Nor was his all: it could also mean that the son of the lady would be his heir apparent. The chief queen had died childless.

The king did not wish to commit himself as to who should succeed him, as it would cause strife and intrigue. So his action had nothing to do with sentiment; it was only a political strategy.

By the way, have you, who read European languages, read any love songs that refer to the image of the lover by his hair style? From what little I have read I have not found any. There are many love songs in Myanmar in which the love lorn girl refers to her lover as "this maiden's beloved who wears his top-knot lop-sided."

A village maiden who lives on the other side of the stream, that cannot be forded in rainy season tells her love: "Oh, my loved one with hair twisted into a knot, please do not come. I am afraid you might be drowned."

"The one with lop-sided top-knot" or "the one with hair twisted into a top-knot", such expressions are also epithets for the beloved man; among the Myanmars of those days, it was considered cold and unaffectionate to call the loved one by name. In a love poem written in the 15th century there is a line:

"Out into the open came forth from my lips the childhood name of my beloved, as I fervently made a wish-". It meant that it was the only time he referred to the girl by her name.

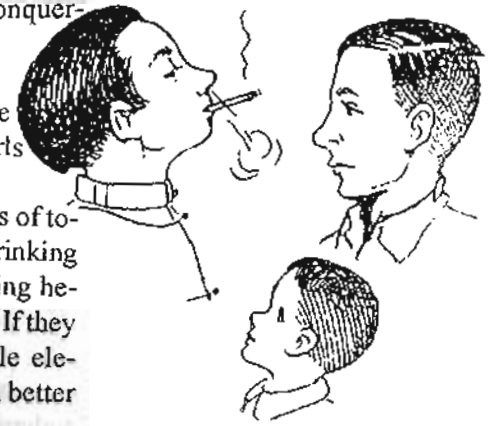
A warring prince wrote to his wife from the battle-field that he had his top knot wrapped up in a silk scarf, because he could not suffer his loved one's handwork to be touched by any other hand. It reminds me of Shakespeare's Coriolanus, who says on seeing his wife after long years's exile:

"Now, by the jealous queen of heaven, that kiss
I carried from thee, dear and my true lip
Hath virgin'd it e'er since."

To catch hold of a man by his knot was the worst insult and the law courts would award compensation for the injured party. Among royalty, even those who

were to be executed were spared of this indignity. Setting of the top knot was one of the rituals given in honour of the princes and princesses.

It was after the British occupation that Myanmar men wore their hair short-cropped like their conquerors; it is called *boh-kay*. Love songs of those days refer to the beaux and swains as *ko boh kay*, the man with the English crop. I still have to find out from today's pop song what the girls of today call their boys.



Well, coming back to the long-haired ones of today it should be all right. With proper care and prinking the boys should remind us of the swash-buckling heroes of Alexander Dumas and Raphael Sabatini. If they should dissociate themselves from undesirable elements and prove that they are as good, nay even better than any short-cropped guy.

Nonsense Songs of the Season

Utter nonsense!

During the water festival, you hear lots of songs sungs to the drums, cymbals and bamboo clappers: and out of the bloom and crash, the little flute chirps out silvery notes mimicking the words.

You might wonder "what pipes and timbrels, what wild ecstasy" or in other words, what unholy din they are making. You may wish what all the songs mean: perhaps you might aspire to know what literary beauties are hidden therein.

Most of the songs are sheer genius, in the sense that it is utter nonsense. Here is a specimen:

"That little budding teenage maid,
The Chameleon.
She is being courted by Lizard with a
European style hair crop.
But she is celebrating the nuptials.
With the *Taukte* (Gecko)
Oh, the lace net bed curtains got a tear- Ah- ha-ha
The cockroach is wooing the spider-
Oh, dear, dear, there the crab scorpion
In child-bed having her young ones!"

Well, what do you make of it? Send it to the psychiatrist to be analysed?

A young husband's plight

The Myanmar love of music and fun can be seen in many of these songs. In rural areas the Myanmar men usually marry young, before they have quite shaken

off their free bachelor ways. They still like to join the music troupes, out with the boys, neglecting their duties as a householder. Often their wives find it hard to put up with their ways. Here is a song that tells a story.

"The moment I have my drum flunk over my shoulder
My wife just utters one word, DIVORCE!
She is leaving me! My young son crying by my side:
Don't you cry, my boy, your mum will be home soon:
When she comes, just catch hold of her long creeper-like
Breasts, soft and plaint,
And suck them to your heart's content!"

Love's whisper of a drum

Drums are young people's favourite instrument, because they can be played according to the player's mood. The young man can play his drum with as much gusto as he likes and drown himself and others in the din.

But he can also play it in such a way that it give a whispering note that just steal into the heart of his beloved.

"Oh, mother dear, I hear Ko Yin Maung's drum whisper.
I wish to go to the festival. oh, mother dear!"

So sings the girl; but her mother tells her not to, because there are bad men who have no respect for a girl's modesty.

Drums, youth's precious possession

The young man often sings of his precious drums; here is a song in their praise.

The shorty drums, where did you buy them?
So you ask, so you ask.
You know the Banyan tree market place

To the south-east of the city?
From there I bought these drums *nyi-naung*,
For a viss of silver!

The expression *nyi-naung* cannot be translated; literally it means; 'younger and elder brother'. In Myanmar language a brother has to be either older or younger *Nyi-naung* is an affectionate term that bespeaks of love, tenderness and togetherness. The drumer express his love for his instruments, a pair of drums, by these words. He says, he paid a viss of silver for them, which is only an exaggeration, but may be taken to be a measure of the value he sets on them.

Come, live with me

The drum is the young man's friend, especially when the course of his love does not run smooth; the girl of his heart has been chastised by her mother for some unseemly behaviour, like stealing out into the lover's lane. Like Marlowe's Passionate Sheperd, he calls out to his love to "Come, live with me".

My dear little maid, beaten by her mother,
Come now, my love come with me to my village.
What has my village to offer?
Plenty, my love, rolls of smooth hand-woven cloth,
And sarongs and muslin jackets embroidered with starry sequins,
Oh, all the joys and pleasures of my villages shall be yours!

Shwe Yoe, a favourite character

Not only songs and music, there are dances too. Clowns and mountebanks in gaudy costumes dance inviting others to join in. One character in the troupes is the one made up as an old man, dressed in bold checked *paso* (nether garment) and silk turban. He represents a favourite character of the films of the 1920s His name is U Shwe Yoe (Mr. Simple), a jolly old man with a roving eye.

His creator was U Ba Galay, a clever versatile artiste, actor, film star, director and cartoonist. His cartoons of those days were reprinted in foreign journals like the Word Review. U Ba Galay is no more, but U Shwe Yoe lives on amidst the songs and music and dances. During festival time he is resurrected to the delight of young and old.

Nonsense Songs Again

Something to mumble

I have not quite shaken off the effects of the Thingyan water festival, so, I keep humming the nonsense songs. It is a good thing to have something to mumble, what with this heat and tempers getting out of hand. It is better to mutter the nonsense songs rather than those colourful epithets that often rise to my lips, prompted by the unbearable climate of these days. Here is one of my favourite songs:

Say it not, oh, say not so,
It is not nice and proper!
The *tauk-te* gecko dons a turban!
It's alright, quite alright to say.
For even the turtle and the iguana
They go trailing in zig-zag *pasoes*.
The flying chameleon of the scented woods
She wears alloy ear tubes.
Wearing a handful of curls, hind her ears
The cockroach sews her dressed fair.
The curvacious *nga-bye-ma* fish
She's been given a smashing kiss
By the ugly *nga-khu- -*
That dashing torpedo fish!

I like that songs, because it is a kind of Walt Disney picture with familiar creatures, the *tauk-te* gecko with a silk turban and the turtle and iguana in zig-zag pattern *pasoes*. I like to think that it must have come from the lips of an imaginative child.

Children close to nature

Children in rural areas are close to nature; they often see *tauk-te* geckos stick themselves on the walls of their homes; they look like sculptured figures. A *tauk-te* is a large lizard often a foot long, with spots all over the body. The child think that the *tauk-te* will look grand if he has on his head a silk turban with a triangular edge sprouting on one side-the kind Myanmar men wear.

Suddenly the child remembers that she must not say inappropriate things, for, the spirits will be angry; but she cannot help her mind; so she hastily says: "Say it not, oh, say not so"by way of appeasing the wrath of the powers that be.

Once she has begun to say, however, there is no holding back. She has seen venerable gentlemen trailing in zig-zag pattern *pasoes*, men's nether garments worn on formal occasions. Zig-zag is a fashionable pattern to this present day for both men's and women's sarongs. A short stumpy man in *pasoe* reminds her of a turtle and slim quick-moving person on an iguana. Such a pair must have excited her imagination.

The chameleon with the nodding head is a favourite with children. It has beautiful colours and it is easy for the child to imagine the chameleon wearing alloy ear-tubes.

The cockroach with long wishers reminds the girl of her grown-up sister who wears curls behind her ears; perhaps, the child is still at the stage of having just a circular patch of hair on the crown. She is waiting impatiently for the day when her hair would be long enough to done into a knot with a circular fringe cut all round.

Waiting to have a grown-up hair-do

It will be another long wait for her to come to the age of her sister, when the fringe round the knot would be allowed to grow long enough to have a pair of tresses curled rounds the ears.

The child thinks that her sister is beautiful with her fair face framed with curls behind each ear; it must be fun to be grown up and to be sewing pretty dresses. Talking of dresses and hair styles, here is a love song:

With a handful of curls behind her ears,
And rows of beads gracing her fair neck,
My little girl with gold anklets,
How elegant and glamorous she looks!

The song gives a pictures of a girl's charm and beauty. The curls behind the ears feature in many love songs. It must have done a lot of to the fair face, "uncertain, coy and hard to please": the rows of beads draw the swain's attention to her fair graceful neck: and as she shifts her feet with a soft tinkle of gold anklets, the swain is swept off his feet..

I feel I could go on with the story, but a little voice said: "Never mind your grandmother and her swain. What about the last four lines of your nonsense song; about the curvacious fish – how do you think the girl wove up that picture?"

I said: "Shut up! It must be some dirty minded adult who added up those lines."

Legend of the Rains

Love that lasted more than one life

It will not do to have lived through all these wet, wet days of torrential rains and not to have heard of the legend of the rains – especially because it is a love story, the story of a love that lasted more than one life.

Once upon a time, there was a man named Magha, born of a rich and noble family. He did good deeds, like repairing roads, building rest houses and digging wells. His wife Suja, was a happy-go-lucky type, not at all interested in good works. She was content to enjoy a life of ease and pleasure. Magha doted on her and he just let her have her own way.

When his life span ended, Magha was reborn in the abode of the celestials as their king: he was known as Sakka. Many of his friends who had done the good deeds along with him joined him there,but Suja was not among them.

A benevolent rich man

Sakka missed her and with his omniscient power, he looked for her in the other planes of existence, only to discover her reborn as a crane in the forest. Such was the fate of the pleasure-loving Suja, whom Sakka had loved and cherished.

Sakka visited her and took her to the celestials city and showed her the delights. With all his love for her and the powers at his command, Sakka could not give her a place there, Suja would have to work for it herself.

Sakka told her to keep the Five Precepts, one of them being to abstain from taking life, which was an act of self-denial, because as a crane, she lived on fish and insects. But she promised to keep the precepts.

One day, she saw a fish lying by the waterside. She picked it up by the head thinking it to be dead, but she let it go the instant the fish wagged its tail. She would rather go hungry than break the precept. Later, she died and was reborn in the human abode, a daughter of a potter.

Sakka again looked for her and discovered her whereabouts. He came and reminded her to observe the precepts and do good deeds. It would not be long before she could join him in the celestial abode.

Searching for his love

While waiting for Suja to join him, Sakka was busy with the task of consolidating his position in the celestial abode, where beings called the Asuras were already living, before Sakka came. The Asuras, though god-like in appearance and blessed with powers, revelled in all kinds of debauchery.

Sakka did not like to share his kingdom with such satyrs, so he made them drunk with the liquor of the celestials. As they lay in drunken stupor, Sakka and his friends kicked them down to the lower regions.

The Asuras did not realize their fallen state until the season of coral flowers.

Asuras wage war on Sakka

Up in the celestial abode there was a celestial tree which blossomed exotic red flowers. But now they did not see the flaming flowers, nor could they inhale their sweet fragrance. All around were ugly bushes with common scentless flowers.

The Asuras rallied their forces and went up to wage war against Sakka. The beating of the war drums sounded to humans like thunder and the flashing of steel

looked like lightning. All the heavenly regions were disturbed and clouds melted in rain drops.

Lady Suja in Asura country

It was a twist of fate that Suja, after living her life as the potter's daughter, was reborn as the daughter of the king of the Asuras: she was famed throughout the celestial abode for her beauty and goodness. Many celestials desired her. So a day was appointed for choosing her bridegroom.

The winning of Lady Suja

On that day, Sakka joined the goodly company of celestials and won her love. He carried her off and made her his chief queen. Because his search for Suja far and wide had been crowned with success at last, Sakka was very happy. He celebrated his sucess by taking the title of Sujapati, Lord and Husband of Suja. And it was his best loved and proudest title.

The Asuras continued to wage war on Sakka every time the common scentless flowers bloomed on the bushes and reminded them of their degradation. And also we have rains in this season every year as the thunderous battle drums and lightning-like flashes of steel disturbed the heavenly regions and melted the clouds into drops of water.

Note: Sakka is believed to be the first King of the Celestials – Thagyarmin

In Thunder, Lightning and Rain

Mythical creatures of grace and beauty

This week I am trying to write of the last days of summer when sweet smells the sun-scorched earth as the gentle showers fall and how the poets and lovers turn their thoughts to *kinnayas* the mythical beings, half bird, half human, creatures of grace and beauty, whose habitat was the scented forest lands, where they spent their long life-span of one thousand years, singing and dancing happily amidst the flowers.

It is not easy to dwell on idylls and romances and fairies when a storm is raging outside, a perfect setting for King Lear or Macbeth. "Forget them," I told myself sternly; "they belong to your misspent youth in lecture halls and examinations. Think of the stories of *kinnayas*, the fairy lovers who wept for seven hundred years, (their life-span was one thousand years) because they had been separated for one night because of rain storms".

With great effort I wiped away the vision of King Lear raving in the storm and the wierd sisters on the health, in fog and filthy air; instead I think of the scented sylvan glades where two loving *kinnayas* danced and sang along the sandy banks of the mountain stream.

Storm over the sylvan glades

The water, barely reaching their ankles was crystal clear and the *kinnayas* playfully chased the multi-coloured fish and strewed flower petals on the waves.

Suddenly, the skies darkened and a deluge of torrential rain fell and the *kinnayas* found themselves on either side of the stream.

The next moment the soft rippling stream turned into a cataract of foaming waves sweeping down the branches and logs along the way. The two *kinnayas*, shocked and dazed, stood on either bank unable to reach each other. As the rain fell in thick showers, they could hardly see each other. Only when the lightning flashed did each catch a glimpse of the other's face.

The whole night's ordeal

The whole night they stayed amidst the rain and storm, crying helplessly, wringing and waving their hands. In the murky darkness they waited for the flashes of lightning so that each could see if the other was still there.

So the night wore on; and at long last the rough night gave way to morning and the storm abated; the mountain stream had run its course and the loving *kinnayas* were once again united.

The memory of the dreadful night was forever with them; every day, they stood on the bank of the stream and wept again remembering their ordeal. This story is the never-never-out-of -vogue theme for songs, plays and dances. Figures of *kinnayas*, always in pairs, are found as decorative motifs carved on the entrance of shrines, and doors of monasteries.

It is also interesting that the story is one of the Jataka tales, the Buddha's Birth stories. The Buddha recounted the story to King Kosala, who was estranged from his queen Malika.

Why the story is told

Eons of time ago, (The Buddha said), the Buddha-to-be was a king named Bhanlatiya, who was fond of hunting in the forest. During his wanderings, one day, he saw a pair of *kinnayas* weeping near a stream;

he asked them what was the matter. The *kinnayas* told the story of their one night's separation and how they had been weeping every day for years remembering the mishap.

The king was brought to his senses and he realized that he should not be wandering in the forest away from his realm and family, so he returned home and looked after the affairs of his country.

The Buddha ended his discourse with these words to King Kosala:

"Take a lesson from the fays:
Quarrel not, but mend your ways."

At that time, King Kosala was the fairy *kinnaya*, Lady Malika was his mate and I myself was King Bhantatiya."

Marriage counselling

Come to think of it, we talk about the weather and go on into romance and myths, and from then on to songs, dances, plays and fine arts; then the whole thing ends up with an episode in the Buddha's life – an episode that shows that the Buddha was so concerned with the well being of his disciples that he did not hesitate to give a discourse that would bring peace to the family. Call it marriage counselling if you like; in Buddhism even marriage counselling is based on the basic teaching of the Buddha, namely the acceptance of *samsara*, the round of rebirths.

Le Penseur, Myanmar Style

What wild ecstasy?

Whenever I see the reproduction of Le Penseur, I can hardly keep down the waves of laughter rising within me, and I have to tell myself sternly not to be stupid at my age. It is not that I lack respect and admiration due to the great sculptor; it just happens that the association of ideas does not run on the serious and contemplative level, as perhaps it should.

On second thoughts, however, Rodin would have liked to know the story of another thinker in Myanmar folklore. Perhaps a ghost of a smile might light upon his heavenly face and I even hope that he might join in my girlish giggles.

This is the story of another Le Penseur, whose contemplation pose won him the hand of a fair lady.

The man who stroked his chin

Once upon a time, there was a young man who was in the habit of sitting on a log, stroking his chin, his face deep in thought. As his fingers twirled his scanty beard, his face became more and more serious and his eyes became dreamy with some great thoughts.

He was a strange young man, he shunned the company of youths of his own age. Every morning he sat on the log in the cool shade of a huge tamarind tree,

near the market place. He gazed at the busy crowd with unseeing eyes, and stroked his chin oblivious of the noise and hubbub around.

He stroked his chin and crumpled the hair of his beard between his thumb and forefinger: as he felt the silken softness of the hair between the fingers, his face lighted with radiance. Then suddenly, his face wilted like a lotus flower under harsh sunlight. He shook his head slowly and sadly. He pulled his beard with an impatient jerk and wrung his hands in exasperation.

The next moment his hands went up to his chin again and he went on pulling and twirling his beard in deep contemplation. This he did, day in and day out, sitting there by the busy market place.

A rich man impressed

People were too busy to take notice of him, but there was one rich merchant who did. This merchant came to the market place every day and he looked at the young man with great interest. He went into the market to do business, which took some time, but when he came out the young man was still there stroking his chin.

One day, after watching the young man at his usual place for several minutes, the rich merchant said to himself: "Well, why not? Why not this young man? Maybe he is an answer to my prayer"

It so happened that the merchant had a beautiful daughter, who he decided, must marry a wise man. He had been looking for one for a long time, but could not find one good enough for his only daughter.

Chin-stroker in the family

So the merchant made friends with the chin-stroker and it was not long before he brought him home and married him to his daughter. Now they had a wise man in the family, the merchant thought; they should be very proud of him.

Now, the chin-storker, the loved and cherished son of the family went on with his chin-stroking. One day, the merchant took him aside and asked; "Now my son, I would like to share your great thoughts. You have the look of a wise man, a thinker. Do not hesitate to speak what is on your mind; I shall be only too happy to hear. So, speak, my son."

The young man stroked his chin and twirled his beard and gazed into space and said gravely: "I have been thinking of this for quite a long time, father. The problem that has vexed me ever since I learned to think is this; from whence does this beard spring? Does it come from the hairs of the scalp or from the moustache of the upper lip? This, I cannot find the answer so far"

That's the end of the story. It dose not tell us whehter or not the merchant had a stroke after hearing the answer. I was almost tempted to send this story to the UNESCO committee for the publication of folk tales of Asia, but, better counsel prevailed.

P.S. If Rodin ever turned in his grave, it would be with laughter.

Language and Pitfalls

Let's Call Them Names

Myanmar language is rich in names

The Myanmar language is rich in names, the good and printable ones as well as the other kind. We have various ways of addressing our fellow-beings, or calling names, to use a literal translation of the Myanmar expression.

It is not quite considerate to a non-Myanmar to introduce a man as, for example, U Tin and then have him addressed by different people as Ko Tin or Maung Tin or Ko Gyi Tin or U Lay Tin. Chances are that the poor bemused foreigner is at a loss as to who is referring to whom, and he may not be able to decide what he should call the said gentleman. May be he has some colourful names to call him by but not aloud.

There is no such thing as surnames and first names among the Myanmars. The prefix, "U" for adult males and "Daw" for adult females are considered correct. "Ko" or "Maung" for younger males and "Ma" for younger females seem to be the rule, but then, one could never say how young or how old. It depends on who is addressing whom.

"Ko" or "Maung" and "Ma" are usually among one's own peers and "U" and "Daw" are used by the younger to their seniors. "Ko" "Maung" and "Ma" are informal. Insome localities, Ko Maung is used with the monosyllable of a man's name, for example, Ko Maung Tin.

What name to call by?

The Myanmars attach importance to how a person is addressed. The forms of address tell us both how well bred and correct the addressee is, and how well the addresser is held in esteem and regard.

"Ko" "Maung" and "Ko Maung" are used among one's own peers but a senior gentleman in high official status might use them to his juniors, for example, Ko Hla Aung or Ko Maung Nyi. It is a fine gesture on his part, polite as well as affectionate.

Juniors often address their seniors, as Ah-ko-gyi, or Ko-gyi prefixed to the monosyllable of the man's name, for example, Ko Gyi Aung; this prefix means big brother. Sometimes a senior officer is addressed as "saya"; this means "teacher". In the army a training sergeant is "saya".

When one is called "saya"

When a senior officer is addressed as "saya", the epithet bespeaks of love and respect; because, teachers are included in the Five Blessed Ones, whom we must never forget to hold in respect. We grew up with the parables of how teachers were revered, as illustrated in an incident that happened not long after the Buddha's demise.

It was when all the kings of India had gathered to claim their share of the Buddha's relics. It was a goodly company of crowned heads, each attended by the Four Elements of War, namely infantry, cavalry, chariots and war elephants. Swords, spears and shields gleamed in the sunlight as the caparisoned elephants and horses impatiently dug their heels in the ground, as they waited for action.

A "saya" in command

Then came the dispute over who should receive how much of the relics. Tempers rose and angry voices cut through the air and it seemed inevitable that a blood bath and destruction would follow.

At this moment, from a nearby hill an authoritative voice rang out above the din - SILENCE, ALL OF YOU. The princes turned their heads towards the hiss and there stood Dona, the Brahmin, who had

taught them the princely arts, in their students days

There was silence as the kings bowed down in respect to the one who had been their teacher. Without so much as a word of dissent the kings accepted the Brahmin's decision and went away with whatever share of the relics was handed out to them from the hands of their saya.

How to address the seniors

The Myanmars seldom, if at all, address a senior person by name. The epithets "A-Ko-Gyi, Ah-Ko, Ko-Gyi, Ko-Ko(big brother), U or U-lay, U-Gyi, Ba Gyi, Ba-Gyi(Uncle) for men and Ma Ma, A-Ma-Gyi (big sister), Daw Daw(aunt) for women, are used depending on the age of the people involved.

In our younger days, lady teachers of the missionary schools were addressed as Ma Ma Davis (Miss Davis), Ma Ma Butt (Miss Butt). Even today, there are people who remain so Myanmar that they do not feel at ease to call their non-Myanmar friends, who are senior in age, by their first name because it means that we have to do without the prefixes like, Mrs., or Miss. It somehow does not sound polite.

Not without Ko or Ma, please!

We had, in our younger days, friends whom we called Ko Tommy or Ko Frankie, Ko Ko Richard. This habit dies hard. Sometimes we refer to some of our dear friends as, for example, Ko Eddie or Ma Emma, even though we do not call them so in their face, because it meant a long drawn explanation of our ways.

How a husband is addressed

In my parents and grand-parents' days, ladies do not usually call their husbands by their name (I believe they called them a lot of other names in private), they seemed shy to do so. Husbands were often referred to as either *ein-ga-lu* or *ein-thar* (man of the house). Perhaps these terms are synonymous with "good man" found in the English classics.

I surmise that even lovers in olden days rarely addressed each other by name, except in moments of tenderness and deep emotion. In a love poem written in the 15th century, there is a line.

"Out into the open came forth from my lips the childhood name of my loved one as I fervently made a wish".

We called our loved ones by any name we fancy, but then, what's in a name anyway?

The Trouble with You and Me

Person to person relationship

Of course, the trouble is mainly with you...s and me...s in Myanmar language. My sympathy is with the poor bemused foreigner who has to learn the language. I see many fight a losing battle, especially with personal pronouns. There are many variations, which, as Shway Yoe said, "might be philologically interesting, but spoil the temper."

I suggest that any non-Myanmar student learning the language should ask his teacher for several rounds of ammunition in colourful words, so that he could shoot away, when he loses his temper. To say the least, it might be often.

Trouble with pronouns

Take for instance, personal pronouns, starting with the First Person Singular. In English the "I"in capital letter can express any amount of egoism one is capable of carrying within his fathom-length body. In Myanmar language there are many variations, depending on the gender and mood. They run like this:

Kyun-daw	-	used by a male
Kyun-ma	-	used by a female
ngar	-	common gender
kyun-nok	-	common gender
da-pyi-daw	-	common gender. used by lay people to monks

The first two are all right. They mean "your servant", a polite expression that can be used safely anywhere. *Kyun-nok* is rarely used in conversation, but almost always used in writing. The tricky one is *ngar*. In all our Buddhist stories and parables, *ngar* is used in all forms of conversation; seniors to their peers; seniors to their juniors; juniors to their peers; and it is common gender.

First Person variations

In written languages, *ngar* expresses strength and power.

"Ngar" does not change in the syntax, except for the possessive case, which is just *Nga* or *Ngar-ei*. The slight variation of accent in *nga* might exasperate a non-Myanmar.

Personal Pronouns pair off like this:

First Person--to--Second Person

kyun-daw(masculine)--*khin-bya*(common)

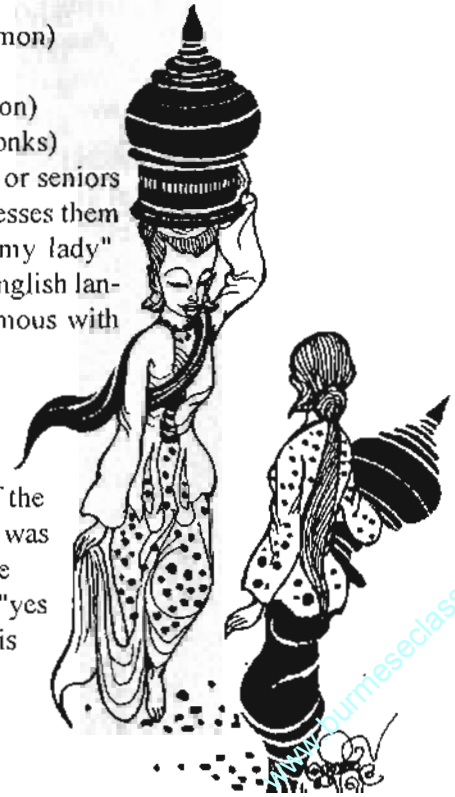
kyun-ma(feminine)--*shin*(common)

ngar(common)--*nin, thin, min*(common)

dapyidaw(common)--*ashin-phaya*(monks)

When a man is speaking to his peers or seniors he refers to himself as *kyun-daw*, and addresses them as *khin-byar*, which means, "my lord" "my lady" Some Myanmar boys struggling with the English language often take *khin-byar* to be synonymous with "Sir".

This often caused embarassment and misunderstanding. Once a nice respectful boy, fresh from the country, answered the roll call- "Present sir" to the indignation of the lady in charge of the class. She thought he was mocking at her. So, ladies, please do not be flabbergasted, if some Myanmar boy says "yes Sir" or "no Sir" to you, only know that he is being polite.



First person feminine

A woman refers to herself as *kyun-ma*, and she addresses them(both genders) as *shin*. It is polite and formal; she places herself as "Your humble servant" and the addressee in either "my lord"or "my lady".

When someone is calling her name a well-bred woman answers with a "*shin*"; a well-bred man, on such an occasion with a "*khin-byar*".

Suffixes to show gender

When speaking or writing, a woman will end her sentences with the word *shin* with a deeper accent; a man will do the same with the word *khin-bya*. So, a letter written by the Myanmar creates no problem of guessing who the writer might be.

Letters begin like this:

With great respect and regard
this letter is written-*shint*;
With great respect and regard
this letter is written-*khin byar*.

In this way everyone knows whether the correspondent is male or female. This should save the trouble of getting replies addressed; "Mr. Khin Myo Chit, or even "U Khin Myo Chit" - the last one must be from someone who thinks he knows all about Myanmar names.

Tricky pronouns

Now again, tricky pronouns are *ngar* and *min*. *Ngar* has its place in classics, but in every day speech it has its pitfalls. *Ngar*, even when used by a senior to his underling, is not considered kind or polite. It all depends on how people look at it. the epithet *ngar* is often associated with anger, disrespect and lack of consideration. But there are exceptions, where the same usage means love, closeness and tenderness. There are no hard and fast rules except that these words are never to be used by juniors to their seniors.

Familiarity, love or disrespects?

Ngar is paired with *nin*, as Second Person. To address a person as *nin*, is the same as using the First Person *ngar*, the implication is the same. Amongst old and dear friends, the exchange of *nin* and *ngar* is something endearing and intimate.

When no one uses "*ngar*" and "*nin*" with you...

When one of the old boys with whom I went to school once said: "Hey *nin-nin-nin* is the same bull headed, bad-tempered, sharp-tongued shrew, *ngar* used to know, why *ngar* never thought anyone would have the nerve to marry *nin*", well, I was as pleased as if some suave, debonair gentleman from the diplomatic corps had paid a beautiful compliment. It certainly put several years off my back!

"There are but a few, if any, who use *ngar* and *min* with me, these days,"-- is often the complaint of people who suddenly find themselves old and lonely, or on top of the world, which is also a lonely place.

Minn and *thin* are in the same category as *nin*, but considered a little more polite. *Thin* is mostly used in written language especially in classical dramas.

When *ngar* and *minn* form is used in man to man conversation, it expresses a dear, loving close relationship. *Minn* or *nin*, therefore, may be synonymous with the English "thou" and French "tu". The usage is left to the discretion and feeling of the people involved.

Honorific terms

So far, I have said only of the forms of address among lay people. There is still a thesaurus of honorific terms in relationship between laymen and monks. A monk does not eat, but he *phone-pays*; he does not sleep, but he *kyeins*; he does not come or go, but he *kywas*; he does not stay in some place, but he *tha-din-thones*; he does not die but he *pyan-daw-mus*. A layman does not speak to a monk, but he has to *shauk*;

one does not hand things to a monk, but has to *kat*; one does not invite monks, but has to *pink*.

Things in relation to monks are also called in different terms. Rice meal is *soon*, and houses for monks, *kyaungs*. A woman is referred to as *da-yi-kar-ma*, and the man as *da-yi-kar*. Older peresons are called *da-gar-ma-gyi*(female) and *da-gar-gyi*(male). A monk's father and mother are called the same.

Bitter-sweet moments in the family

It is often one of the bitter sweet moments in Buddhist family life, when the son of the family is novitiated, a traditional custom of giving one's own flesh and blood into the Buddha's Order. When the dear boy, shorn of his hair and boisterous ways, looking solemn and dignified in his yellow robes, tries his first faltering conversation with his parents, they, in turn, grope their way in the new relationship. "Would *ah-shin-phayar* like to have *soon* early next morning? This afternoon your father...er... I mean *ah-shin-phayar's da-gar-gyi* will bring some cold drinks to the *kyaung*" – so on and so forth.

Little pint size sublimity

It was one of the moments, I remember, that I felt like running away to some quiet place and howl, just howl. But then it would not do for the *da-gar-ma-gyi* of the novice the little *ah-shin-phayar*, a pint-sized sublimity. It was not that my little son was going to spend some days at the monastery, the first time away from home,but that the severance from home and family was so obvious even if it was to be for a short time. The sundering of the ties seemed, at that time, so complete and final.

Inspire deep emotions

It was then that we parents realized the strength of our faith in the Buddha's teaching, so great it moved

us to "give the son, we had reared and nurtured in our very hearts into the Order of the Buddha".

Come to think of it, the expressions in our language may be at times exasperating to the non-Myanmars, but they can also inspire deep emotions of friendship, love, and tenderness, and even religious fervour. With this statement, *kyun-ma* may be allowed to end this article-*shint*.

The Trouble with In-Laws

Good printable names for in-laws

No, I am not running a lonely-hearts column or going to do marriage counselling. It is just that I am going to give a list of names we use in Myanmar when we refer to our in-laws and relatives. Of course, we call them a lot of names, many of them perhaps not quite fit for print. So, I will stick to the conventional and proper appellations that tell the relationship between people.

I assure you, the names, though not so picturesque as you might imagine, are interesting in their variations. I suspect many epithets also describe the underlying implication of what the related persons feel for each other.

Variations of brother-in-law and sister-in-law

For instance, the name *yauk-kha-ma*, though common gender, is often pronounced as if to mean the female of the species of parents-in-law; this word has a jarring note and it could be uttered or muttered with any kind of intonation to describe your feelings for the one that goes by that name. How I wish we had an expression like *la belle-mere*, as in French: then we could all become *le beau* or *belle*, all beautiful. It seems that in French all in-laws are just beautiful; isn't that nice?

Our language is quite rich in names by which we call in-laws, the good and printable ones, I mean. Once I introduced my son's mother-in-law to a non-Burmese friend as "my *kha-mel*" explaining that it describes our relationship. My friend said she wished there were a similar word in English. "When I introduced my son's parents-in-law as Mr. and Mrs. So and So, it does nothing to explain our relationship", she said.

In many ways, I think, the English language is rather poor in expression, for when we say "brother-in-law" it does not quite tell us whether it is a man-to-man relation, or woman to man relation. In Myanmar, a man's wife's brother or his sister's husband is *yauk-pha*. I believe Karens used this word to mean "friend".

Brother and Sister Terms

Among the Myanmar, if a man called you (a man) *yauk-pha*, it works both ways; either he is leering at your beautiful sister, or trying to throw his sister into your arms. So it depends on the circumstances whether this form of address is to anyone's advantage.

The word changes when it describes the woman to man relationship; a woman's husband's younger brother or her younger sister's husband is called *mutt*- a husband's older brother or her older sister's husband is *khe-oh*: when two men are married to two sisters, each one to the other, I mean, they are called *ma-yor-nyi-ah-ko*, that is to say, "brother-by virtue of-their wives."

A woman's brother's wife or her husband's sister is *youk-ma*; a man's younger brother's wife or his wife's younger sister is a *khe-ma*; a man's elder brother's wife or his wife's elder sister is a *ma-yee*, when two women are married to two brothers, they are *lin-nyi-ah-ma*; these are the variations of the word "sister-in-law" in English.

A Brother, Elder or Younger?

"Brother", and "sister" create quite a lot of problems in Myanmar language: a man's younger sister is *hna-ma*, elder sister *ah-ma*; a woman's younger sister is *nyi-ma*, elder sister *ah-ma*, the same as a man's elder sister. A man's younger brother is *nyi* and elder brother *ah-ko*; a woman's younger brother is *maung* and elder brother *ah-ko*, the same as a man's elder brother.

Some thirty years or so ago, a woman's elder brother was called *maung-gyi* not *ahko*, which is for man-to-man relationship. It was then considered incorrect to refer to a man's younger sister as *nyi-ma* which is for woman-to-woman relationship; but today, the same word is used for the younger sister of either man or woman or even of no known person.

The "older" or the "younger" problem created quite a stir in the B.B.C. headquarters some years ago, when the news of some celebrity's brother was about to be put on the air; the one in charge of the Myanmar section insisted on knowing whether the man was the older or younger brother. His chief could not quite understand why he should make an issue of it, until the Vietnames section demanded the same information.

Cousin — no Myanmar Equivalent

Another tricky word is cousin, for which the Myanmar have no equivalent. We have a suffix in Myanmar *wun-kwe* to describe the relationship among those who are scions of the same grand-parents; the world *nyi* or *nyi-ma* is added.

That is why, even among the fairly educated, Myanmar people often say, "this is my cousin-sister or cousin-brother".

Again there are uncles and aunts: a parent's elder brother is *ba-gyi* or *u-gyi*, younger brother *u-lay*, or *ba-dway*; the older sister of a parent is *gyee-daw* or *kyee-kyee*, a younger sister is *daw-lay* or *daw-daw*: *ah-yee* is mostly used by Upper Myanmars and it is common gender, aunt or uncle; *gyi* or *lay* is added to show whether he or she is older than your parent.

There are localities where *ah-yee* is considered feminine gender; and people often get a shock at some different place to see a venerable gentleman with a handle bar moustache when a frail little old lady is expected.

How to have grand-children while single and respectable

Our grandchildren are *myee*, common gender; so are our grand nephews and nieces. Bachelors and spinsters could have *myees*, even while living a blameless life of single blessedness. I have had a good share of maiden aunts and great aunts and I can say that I was descended from a "long line of maiden aunts" without slurring anyone's good name.

Trees, Fruits and Vegetables

Leave My Jackfruit Tree Out of It

Trees: idioms and stories

All the nice things that could be said of trees have been said by poets. The only thing I, a poor wretch, could do is to quote or misquote them.

The temptation to say things like, "Never saw a poem lovely as a tree," or "Poems are made by fools like me but God alone can make a tree," — is very strong. But then, no amount of repetition can tarnish the beauty of those words.

Perhaps it is old sayings and stories that keep our love of trees alive. For instance, whenever I behold a jackfruit tree, my heart does not exactly leap but 'my intestines become ticklish'. This is a Myanmar expression which describes, not what one gets after eating too many jackfruits but the ripples of laughter that rise from one's insides.

A Rabelaisian tale

Seeing a jackfruit tree always reminds me of a story, one of adultery, murder and deceit, a story worthy of Chaucer of Rabelais. It runs something like this:

Once upon a time, a man coming home from a journey found his wife with a lover. He killed the rival and the couple was faced with the problem of disposing of the body.

It so happened that there was a monastery nearby; it was right in the midst of a thick jackfruit grove. The layman who acted as a watchman guarded the trees by shooting clay pellets from his catapult when the night prowlers came to steal the fruits.

So the man and his wife carried the dead body and left it propped up against a jackfruit tree. The watchman saw them prowling, so he let forth a barrage of clay missiles from his trusty weapon. The guilty couple got away leaving the dead body under the tree.

When the watchman came out to look, he was shocked to find a man dead. He thought that his shots had killed him. He reported the matter to the monks. After some discussion, they decided to pretend that it was a visiting monk who had died overnight.

The unusual behaviour of a mourner

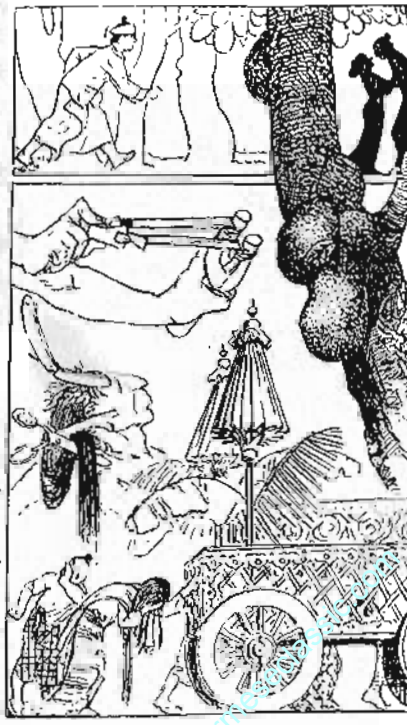
This meant shaving away the dead man's hair; it was quite a job, for, in those days, men wore their long hair done into big topknots. They dressed the body in monk's yellow robes and went on with funeral arrangements.

Villagers came round to help and the woman could not resist going to have a last look at her unfortunate lover.

It was the custom in those days to have mourners at monk's wakes; they were usually women who could sing or recite some old songs or poems. The woman, playing the part of a mourner, sang a few verses and after some time, she slipped in something of her own:

"Last night so handsome with a sleek and shining topknot.
Now shaven clean and bare.
Just because you'd been left leaning against a jackfruit tree"

Of course, no one knew what she meant, but the watchman did. He came near the woman and scolded her in her ear, "Hush, woman, hush. Cry, if you must, for your paramour, *but leave my jackfruit tree out of it!*"



This expression, *Leave my jackfruit tree out of it*, has become an idiom to express an unwillingness to get oneself involved in any affair.

Dear beautiful jackfruit tree that gives such luscious fruits and still more luscious chuckles, what more can anybody ask?

Jackfruits Again

A saga of getting the jackfruits down

Jackfruit is one of the early monsoon fruits very much liked. The tree grows to a height of twenty to thirty feet. The fruits are huge, two feet, or more in length, almost spherical. They weigh seven to eight pounds.

The fruits are covered with warty rind, green when immature but turning brown on ripening. It is quite a job to get the enormous fruits down from the tree and the presence of ants' nests does not make things any easier.

The day we take down the jackfruits is a day of great excitement. The family, from grand-parents down to the littlest tots are out in the garden as the tree climber makes his ascent. He has a long knife and a coil of strong rope. He has his body annointed with kerosene to discourage the ants.

Shouting orders: nobody listening

Once the man gains the required height he puts the rope on the croft between the branches and tries pulling it to and fro. If the old man Archimedes' principle of lever and the pulley still holds good the big fruits should come down safe and sound.

By this time, everyone is shouting orders and no one really listening. "Is the branch strong enough? Hey that fruit is not ripe enough, better take the one on your right . . . on your left I mean . . . stupid; Hey, careful, you'll drop your knife. . . hey twins ... come away, don't go too near the tree."

Menace of the crows

We all make an unholy din and scarcely notice the formation of the crows, nor hear their raucus caw — caws. Not until the man on the tree let out a yell

HELP! There on the man's bald pate are the crows pecking angrily while others perch on his bare shoulders.

Again we shout orders. 'Quick, quick get a catapult... shoot... Be careful, you'll hit the poor man's head . . . just shoot anywhere to frighten away the birds. Hey you dirty birds . . . we're not doing anything to your dratted nests."

The twins danced with delight as if the whole thing were staged for their benefit.

Ordeal of the climber

At long last, the fruits are down, one by one, with minimum scratches, let us hope on the climber's body. He went away taking his share. He muttered something about never doing it again. Never mind, we all know he will be back the next season, by which time his skin will be smooth and fine again.

Having got the fruits down, however, does not bring us anywhere near to enjoying the fruits. There is still one more hurdle, a tough one too.

To rescue the golden juicy sheaths

First an incision is made on the warty rind with a sharp knife and the fruit is halved. The inside is made up of fleshy sheaths in which are embedded large seeds the size of a thumb.

Now the sticky part is to rescue the golden juicy sheaths from their trap. The man in charge soaks his fingers in the bowl of cooking oil and takes out the sheaths, one by one, and places them on a plate kept ready.

An aftermath: white fibres and warty rinds

The trouble is that he cannot keep up with the swiftness and the dexterity of the people around whose sole interest is to snatch up the seeds and chew up the yellow sheaths. There are ohs and ahs of appreciation.

They are impatient when the extractor of the seeds ventures to put one or two into his own mouth.

The plate kept ready to receive the seeds is never allowed to be full; most of the time it is empty except for the discarded white seeds. In no time there is nothing left but the white fibres and warty rinds all littered around. It takes a lot of nagging and scolding to get someone clean up the garbage.

P.S I am glad the jack-fruit season is over.

You've Never Tasted Them Until

Once a year, I appear . . .
I who would be king . . .
With the royal white umbrella overhead . . .
Who am I?

How to enjoy the true flavour

The fruits do not yield their true flavour to the purchaser of them, nor to him who raises them for the market. There is only one way to obtain it, yet few take that way. So said Thoreau in Walden.

To me no truer words are ever spoken. It is vulgar to suppose that you have tasted things like mushrooms, bamboo shoots, if you have not plucked them yourself. The best bamboo shoots and mushrooms, I ever tasted were those we youngsters plucked in the midst of woodlands decades ago.

Mushroom gatherers' joy

The day was cool and cloudy with occasional sprays of sunshine that flitted over the greenery around like a golden spot-light. "Come on, let's go mushroom gathering . . ." it was the war-cry that brought of doors the young and not-so-young armed to the teeth with baskets and trowels.

We followed the sandy path which was a stream bed. On rainy days it welled with surging water that flowed right into the river. We take off our slippers just to enjoy the cool soft touch of the golden sands which looked good enough to eat.

Bamboo shoots!

The sandy path was fringed on both sides with clumps of bamboo. Suddenly someone cried: "Look, bamboo shoots." There they were at the foot of the

bamboo stalks, white pointed things that looked like miniature white pagodas.

The shoots were at most a foot or so high and even as we got hold of the base which is nine to ten inches in circumference, they practically melted into our hands, so soft and tender they were. Poets often liken their ladies to 'buxom, yet soft and under bamboo shoots.'

Searching and digging

If we were lucky we might find mushrooms. They were usually found in old ant hills and mounds. The kind that had the shape of the atomic bomb explosion was easy to spot. But the other kind, the white round buds that peaked out of the earth with the whole length of their stems buried underground, needed careful searching.

Those white buds looked like caps and were the answer to the riddle. Who are those that come out wearing white caps, after rain showers. We had to be careful to get the white buds and their stems in good shape It meant careful digging, without letting the excitement of discovery overcome us.

Symbols of good luck

Mushroom gathering is still a pastime in the villages. There is a Myanmar simile: "Face beaming like one who has an armful of mushrooms."

Mushrooms also symbolize good luck gifts and money: if you had a dream in which you saw mushrooms, it means that some good fortune is on the way The appearance of mushrooms in your garden also means good luck, that is if you do not eat them without verifying whether they are poisonous or not.

The Myanmars are great mushroom eaters, but poisoning cases are rare; in rural areas it is almost unheard of. Perhaps people are guided by their native instincts and traditional knowledge.

Antidote to poisoning

The Myanmar housewife knows that mushrooms must always be cooked with watercress leaves, a dash of green chillies, not too much to make the dish hot, but to give flavour and a sprinkling of lime or lemon.

Watercress, green chillies and lemon juice each or altogether, would serve as an antidote to food poisoning. This is a matter of common sense which has been handed down to us.

Venturesome eating

Mushroom is a delicacy; it is also venturesome-eating. One is often haunted by the fear of poisoning. In Sacha Guitry's "Memoirs of a Cheat", the hero of the story survived when the rest of the family was killed by a dish of mushrooms. But it was only because he was not allowed to eat the dish as a punishment for his misbehaviour. So the story is not much help in giving us hints on how not to be poisoned by mushrooms.

Meal-time Companion When Young

There is a Myanmar riddle. "Meal-time companion when young, and bed-time companion when grown up... who is she? "

Can you guess? Please check any indelicate thought that may arise in your mind. She is only Bamboo. Young shoots make a good dish for rice meals; and big stalks make good flooring for houses and bedsteads as well. They also make head rests, a sort of hard "pillows"; they are ideal for catnaps on hot days.

A wholesome economical dish

With the first monsoon showers, bamboo shoots are seen in abundance in the markets. They come already boiled and shredded into thin strips; some are bright red and some yellow. You buy them and boil them again and strain off and cook with prawns or fish or pork or poultry. You need only a small portion of meat. It is an economical dish and it is wholesome.

Bamboo shoots may be made into a salad with onion crispies, sesamum seeds, bean powder and a sprinkling of lemon or lime juice. They may be cooked with other vegetables or fried with boiled beans.

Fermented bamboo shoots — a controversial food

There is also a special kind of bamboo shoots. the fermented kind. They come in big chunks soaked in brine and they smell. They are called sour bamboo shoots. They belong to the group of controversial foods whose taste is something that has to be cultivated.

A hot pot of sour bamboo shoots with pork or fish with a lot of vegetables is a favourite with many gourmets. This dish can be as elaborate as one wishes. Shark's fin, hard boiled pigeon eggs and such delicacies are often added.

Bamboo containers

Hollow bamboo sticks are often used as food containers. Tender tea leaves are picked and pressed into them; sour bamboo shoots are carried in huge hollow bamboos. Glutinous rice is packed into hollow bamboo with water and packed and sold in market places. Here, you find one of the cleanest and most sanitary food packings ever invented. Glutinous rice has a special flavour when it comes out of the bamboo, cylinder shaped with a thin film of bamboo around it.

Bamboo flooring, cool and smooth

So much for being a 'meal-time companion.' In rural areas, most houses have flooring made of split bamboos. There is a special kind called *wa-bo*, big, thick and strong; when split they are four or five inches wide. They are strung together with cane strips.

On hot summer days one of the pleasures enjoyed by the rustic folk is to lie on the clean cool smooth bamboo floor and feel the caress of the breeze that steals through the slits of the floor.

There is a folk tale that tells of a rustic who became a king and who longed for 'the cool smooth touch of the bamboo floor and the gentle breeze that came through the slits'.

Heir-looms

In central Myanmar, houses have, in their backyards, spacious movable platforms called *kut-pyits*. The frame is hard wood and the flooring is bamboo. On hot summer nights it is a meeting place for the family and friends and there is the pot of plain tea, jaggery and pickled tea and crispies to go with all the gossip and talk.

Those bamboo *kut-pyits* are memory haunted heirlooms. The bamboo flooring becomes seasoned with time and constant touch with humans. They have a beautiful 'polished' look which only time and nature could give.

Public rest places

Bamboo is abundant in woodlands; they are yours for the taking. For Myanmar Buddhists who love to do meritorious deeds like building *zayats*, public rest houses, they are a standby. One may not be rich enough to donate a concrete and steel affair, but one can just go into the woodlands and cut bamboo and build a platform under a spreading tamarind tree.

Such bamboo platforms, with a stand for one or two earthen pots of drinking water, give a welcome rest to the tired traveller. They are as much a part of the Myanmar scene as pagodas and toddy palms.

You can rest yourself on those platforms, have a snack of glutinous rice packed in hollow bamboo sticks, or drink sizzling toddy out of green, freshly cut bamboo cups, or rest your head on a head rest and meditate. Well, it takes all kinds.

Never a Poem as Lovely as a Tamarind Tree

The tamarind tree is an important feature in Myanmar life–tender leaves for salad and soups, young fruits pounded into pulp and cooked with a flavouring of garlic, chillies and onions, ripe fruits to make cool drinks — and interesting games to play with seeds . . .

Soups and salads

With the first showers, young tender tamarind leaves are in season; they are used for soups and salads. Thin soups with leaves thrown in are liked for their sour taste.

Tender leaves, mixed with shredded onions, dried prawn powder, and sesamun oil make a good salad. Sometimes boiling water is poured over the leaves to take away the rawness and sifted and mixed with sesamum seeds and a generous amount of fried onion crispies.

Ritual, fun and play with tender leaves

As children, we plucked and ate them raw. We first packed the leaves in banana leaves and buried the packet in the ground and jumped on it praying to the goddess of the earth to pour oil over the leaves.

After the ritual of dancing and stamping on the ground, we unearthed our treasure. I still remember the thrill of unwrapping the layers of banana leaves to discover the tamarind buds wet with 'oil'. We took mouthfuls fighting each other for an extra portion. Never mind what the grown-ups say, all this being humidity that made the thing wet.

An important feature in Myanmar life

The tamarind tree is an important feature in Myanmar life. As children we climbed the tree taking foothold on the gnarled knotted branches. Some times the crotch of an old tree afforded a spacious tree-house for us. Tamarind fruits serve the Myanmar through all stages of their growth; young tender fruits may be pounded into pulp and cooked with a flavouring of chillies, garlic and onions and fish paste. The dish needs a generous amount of oil to make it really tasty.

Then there comes in the life of the tamarind fruit, an adolescent period, when it is neither ripe nor green. The seed inside is not yet hardened and the outer shell is just beginning to separate itself from the kernel which is still soft and creamy and whitish yellow.

In Upper Myanmar this tamarind, called *kyetsun* is a favourite especially as it is available only for a few weeks before the fruit is ripe. It is cooked with salted fish, chillies, garlic and onions.

Ripe tamarind fruit recipes

When the fruit is ripe the kernel is dry and golden brown and the seeds are hard and black. The outer shell sheds itself even as the fruits are plucked. The seeds are taken out and the dried kernel is kept in glazed earthen jars for future use. There is nothing else to do for preservation; it stays good for the whole year until the new crop comes in.

One of the uses of tamarind fruit is to make cool sherbert. Soak equal portions of jaggery and tamarind in cold water for an hour and stir it thoroughly so that they melt. Then sift the liquid through a thin muslin cloth. This drink, even without ices, is a good standby for hot days. It also acts as a natural purgative.

Black shiny seeds to play with

I cannot leave out the black shiny seeds, so smooth to touch; they give us children many enchanted hours

of pleasure. They are our medium of exchange when playing shop-keeping. We could be billionaires with bags of tamarind seeds!

There is also a favourite game of scattering the seeds near a little pit dug in the ground for the purpose of pushing them one by one into the pit. It takes a lot of skill (and some cheating perhaps) to jerk the tip of the thumb against the seed so that it falls right into the hole.

A game immortalized in poetry

This game of seeds is exalted to poetic heights by U Toe, a poet of the early 19th century, in his *Ramaragan*, a Ramayana epic in Myanmar. The picture of Princess Sita absorbed in her game of seeds: her dress in sweet disorder, her tantrums at losing a game, the teasings of her maids, is one of the most beautiful passages in Myanmar poetry.

Well, how could anyone ever see a poem as lovely as a tamarind tree?]

Woodman Spare That Tree

Woodman, spare that tree!
Touch not a single bough!
In youth it sheltered me,
And I'll protect it now!
— G.P Morris (18-2-1864)

Some days ago, I had a heartbreaking experience in my garden. I had to have many trees cut down. The trouble with urban life is that trees — one of Nature's most beautiful handiworks — get in the way with electric and telephone wires and all other necessary evils of modern city life.

Even though I have, with luck, managed to get myself an oasis of green in this steel and concrete jungle, there are times when the quivering branches have to be cut away.

"That tree is getting in the way of —" people say. "That tree," they say . They do not care that a tree is an individual in its own right and it has a name, not just 'a tree'.

Trees have their moods, likes and dislikes. A tree lover always knows if a tree is happy or not. There is a silent communication between the trees and those who love them. Perhaps, it is in the Myanmar character to love the greenery of the land.

During the 1920s, when the national movement against the British colonial rule was at its height, the banner carried by the Myanmar people had green as one of the main colours; green is chosen to represent the verdant nature of the country.

The Myanmar monosyllabic word 'emerald' is a favourite word with poets and lovers and story tellers. The poet-lover sings of his longing to touch his lady's

tresses of 'emerald sheen' and adorn them with golden *padauk* flowers.

"An emerald shawl" often features in many folk tales. "Emerald shawl" sounds more lyrical in the Myanmar language. There is a kind of magic in the cadence especially when put in a song. Sometimes, an emerald shawl has magic powers. The gallant prince flew into the topless tower wherein pined the princess, the emerald shawl serving as wings.

The emerald shawl, albeit an instrument of seduction in one story, acts as veil of chastity in another tale. When the villain, an ogre (*belu*) or demi-god (*zawgyi*) tries to force unwelcome attentions on a helpless princess, she just throws her emerald shawl over her and no one can harm her so much for fantasy, now back to facts.

Back in the 1920s, Mandalay looms produced silk pieces patterned with green flecks; the pattern was called "rippling emerald tendrils". It was one of the fashion highlights of the day. Pop songs of that time often feature a swain "gallivanting in a silk sarong patterned with rippling emerald tendrils."

Greenery is a welcome relief especially in the arid lands of central Myanmar. One of these days, in the near future, we might see places like Tantkyee hill (opposite Nyaung-U and Bagan) "spilling emerald lights" on the wide brimming Ayeyarwady river.

But then, to achieve that we sing:

"Woodman, spare that tree!"

Stately Beauties of the Arid Plains

"When young the skirt she will wear,
Grownup, she casts it off to stand naked and bare.
Who is she?"

So goes the riddle. Can you guess who she is without your mind straying into the bounds of indelicacy?

She is the toddy palm, a feature in the back-drop of Myanmar landscape. Poets sing of them describing the stages of growth. When first they peep out of the earth, little spikes of green, they are called (*Kyay-myee*), 'parrot's tail'; then the 'parrot's tail' spreads out like a girl's head waving to her lover, it is called (*Let-hmyaw*) 'waving hand'.

Later when the young sapling reaches a height of five or six feet, about the height of humans, her shapely trunk is skirted with the cut-off ends of stems that are implanted on one another, in such a way that they look like a nest of many tiered frills turned upwards. The sapling so attired is called (*Thamee-hla*) 'beautiful daughter'.

The 'skirt' falls off as the palm grows taller. So there lies the answer to the riddle, the one who casts off her skirt when grown up.

A toddy palm grove on the arid plains of central Myanmar is an oasis, nay, a paradise that offers rest and tranquillity to many a weary traveller. Underneath the palms is a small hut roofed and walled entirely with palm leaves, refreshingly cool, a welcome shelter from the blazing sun. Inside the hut is a couch whose palm stem flooring is ready to fold you in her cool smooth embrace, as you come in hot and perspiring.

Of course, you do not go into the palm grove just to stretch on the rustic couch. The best is yet to be. You have seen, when you come in, the (*Htan-no*) 'toddy udders' as the branch of the palm whence the juice exudes is called. There the angel in the shape of a toddy palm climber comes in with a bunch of toddy pots on his shoulder. In the pots is the toddy palm juice.

"The subtle alchemist that in a trice.
Life's leaden metal into gold transmute."

In a few moments you have a royal banquet spread before you Dished on a mat of green banana leaves are chunks of chicken roasted on open fire, hot and succulent, garnished with quartered pieces of lime. The star attraction is the black earthen pot.

Oh, please do not turn away from the uncouth, black earthen pot. It is filled with the 'old familiar juice' which is sizzling with a crest of white foaming froth. Surely, these must be sprays of silvery clouds from whence the drink has fallen. The heavenly colours are now flying homewards in tiny bubbles.

You blow those bubbles away and dip the fresh bamboo cup into the pot. You sip the juice shimmering in the colours of a jay's wing. You enjoy the piquant taste and the tang that lingers. The thin white film covering the inside of the bamboo cup gives an exquisite flavour.

If only Old Khayyam had tasted this vintage, he would have immortalized it in his songs. So thinking, you fill the cup "that clears today of past regrets and future fears." Long live the toddy palm!

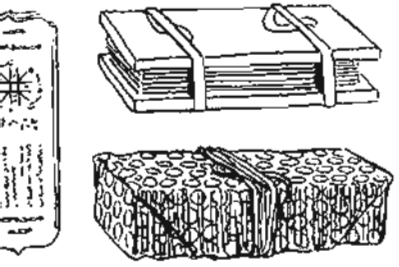
Oh! I Want to Go Where Palms are Swaying

"Oh, I want to go where palms are swaying".
"Oh, I want to go where palms are swaying".
Oh, I hear my ukulele say,
'Come on back, come on back'
Oh, I got my Honolulu blues!

I whined out the old familiar Hawaiian airs of my youthful days; because my old trusty typewriter threw a tantrum and spat out undecipherable hieroglyphics.

Oh, I wish I do not have to put up with ugly mechanized things. I wish I were back in the days when a grove of toddy palms was enough for a writer. There was toddy juice to drown his frustrations and toddy palm fronds to supply him with paper.

Toddy palm fronds had, for centuries, provided people with writing materials. Buddhist texts, works of poets, writers and historians were all recorded on palm leaves.



Even today, the Myanmars have their horoscopes scribed on palm leaves, complete with script, figures and symbols. But for this custom, the art of scribing on palm leaves would have died out. It takes an accomplished artist to write fine script and draw figures. A palm leaf horoscope is a work of art and a thing of beauty.

Each palm leaf manuscript of the old days has a small hole at the end and a coloured silken twine is run through the holes so that the leaves are stringed together. The leaves are then neatly stacked together between two hard wooden or bamboo strips. This stack or 'book' is wrapped up in coloured silk pieces and kept in lacquer boxes.

In monasteries and libraries such packets of manuscripts could be seen, an eloquent testimony of the diligent application of the writers of old. These survivors of wars, fires, vandalism and inclemencies of weather often make me wonder how those writers ever managed to produce the stuff. How did they do their drafts?

I take a sidelong glance at the waste paper basket filled to the brim with abortive scraps. It would not do for a writer of those days to scratch with his style on the palm leaves and throw them away. It took a lot of time, labour and patience to season the palm leaves to make them ready for scribing.

Corrections, if any at all, are rare, and they are indicated with small holes pierced with a pin. If I had to write that way my palm leaves would be like delicate Brussels lace! Perhaps I could arrange my type errors in such a way that they weave into beautiful patterns. Maybe that would be one way to create a work of art!

I do not think that writers of old went into seclusion to do their drafts in their minds so that they could put down on the palm leaves or dictate to their scribes at one sitting. Many of the writers were busy men, active in public life; some of them were men of action taking part in wars. How did they manage to put their works, poetry or prose in one go without any correction?

Since there is still a considerable collection of epistles written on palm leaves, people of those days must be indefatigable letter writers. And to think that all those were laboriously scribed on palm leaves.

If the writers of old were able to put their works down in one go, I am tempted to make a guess of how they acquired that ability. It is a guess which might be no worse than the next person's.

The teaching system of these days was to make children learn texts, both the pali and in vernacular by rote. Pali prayer texts, the Buddha's discourses both in pali and in vernacular were committed to memory. Later all the poem, songs and prose texts were learned

the same way. Since it was not possible to have costly manuscripts in possession, writers would have to depend on their store house of memory.

In this way people of those days were trained to have a retentive memory. Their minds were alert and sensitive. Many of the poets and song writers could compose their poems and songs extempore. People of my generation in their sixties still remember poets and song writers who could compose extempore to commemorate an occasion like a wedding or a name giving for a new baby.

Why, oh why have we lost the diligence and assiduity of the writers of old, why all these scraps in the waste paper basket? My mind had strayed. I began with old palm leaf manuscripts, now where am I? Better be back at the toddy palm grove and sing:

"Come fill the cup, and in the Fire of Spring,
The Winter Garment of Repentance fling: The Bird of Time has but a little way.
To fly — and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing."

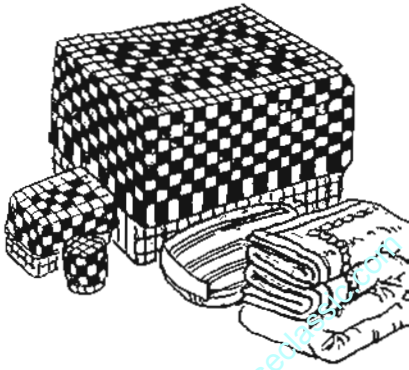
Boxes, Baskets, Baubles and Bastions

There seems to be no end of things gotten out of the toddy palm. There is yet one product which is a popular household equipment in rural and(urban homes. It is *htan-khauk-pha,* htan-khauk = toddy palm frond: pha= box or basket), it is called *pha* for short.

A *pha* is a box or basket woven with palm fronds. It is rectangular in shape and the lid is loose and when covered it fits to cover the four sides. A *pha* is strong and hardy. The cover is often woven in white and black squares, often with messages of goodwill or fair isle patterns.

Anyway you will need someone to pass a strong twine breadth wise while you press the *pha* with your knees. Make a noose and pull hard and fling the twine lengthwise and pull again and tie securely. There you are, the package is ready to take all the blows of the journey ahead.

Phas come in all sizes starting from small toys, sewing boxes to big packing cases. Big ones are good travellers. Light weight things like pillows, cushions, blankets and household linen can be pressed and squeezed into a *pha*; never mind if things are heaped high above the level. Just put the cover on and press hard with your body weight, and call in reinforcements if necessary.



Phas are very much sought after, especially at the pagoda festivals, where rows of stalls display products from all parts of the country. There are mats woven with fibres of toddy palm stems. They are smooth and cool, very good for hot summer days.

Enough of this subject of *phas,* let me go on to other products. Toddy palm fronds are stormed into strips and dyed in bright colours. They are then wo-

ven into necklaces of fantastic shapes. They are children's delight. A little girl could be a princess with a cache of jewellery.

One word of caution for those who would like to buy a *pha* at a pagoda festival. Say the name in full, *htan-khauk-pha*, not the shortened form, *pha*. The versatility of the Myanmar monosyllable can often lead to embarrassing situations.

It is amazing how toddy palms serve man starting from the seedlings to the mature stage. The little green spike shooting out of the earth is made into a fan. The edge is hemmed with a strip of coloured cloth and the stem is cut to make a handle.

When the fronds are grown big and hardy, gigantic fans are made out of them. Such fans are used by monks as sun-shades. It also serves to safeguard the modesty of the monks, who are not supposed to let their eyes wander away from the path they are taking

Toddy palm fronds are used as walling and roofing for huts, especially those watchouts on the farms and plantations. Since palm fronds are plentiful, farmers build the watch-out huts anew every year. The old ones are used as fuel. Toddy palm huts are cool and restful, just the thing for the hard working peasants.

Toddy palm trunks are like massive pillars too big and bulky for use as house posts. They are used as fencing round the villages. Villages in central Myanmar have toddy palm trunk walling and they have gates and sentry posts.

Villagers are proud of their village walling, which they say dates back to the days of Myanmar kings when armies built fortresses with the toddy palm trunks to hold the strategic positions. Villagers often vie with each other in hyperboles.

1st villager: Our village wall is so high that you can't get a view of the inside even if you stood on an elephant's back.

2nd villager: Is that so? Things must have changed a lot, since I was there *last week*. The walling was such that given a bamboo pole, a tortoise could have jumped right in there!

Sweet Savouries from Toddy Palms

Toddy palms are not merely decorative, not just a prop to put on a postcard above the little pagoda, its fronds way-laying the crescent moon in her heavenly path. The toddy palm juice shimmering with the colours of the jay's wing is a drink worthy of Omar Khayyam's song. When taken in moderation, it is a healthy strengthening drink for young and old. It helps people to bear the burning heat of summer in the Central Myanmar areas.

Products of toddy palm juice are many and varied. The syrup obtained from boiled juice is used in preparing indigenous medicines. When it is mixed with pop corn it makes a delectable sweet, that goes well with green tea.

The well-known and popular product is jaggery, sugary chunks, conveniently bite-size, sweet and tasty. Jaggery is a must in every Myanmar home. Children love it. Adults find it a soothing moderator after a rich heavy meal. Just take a bite and chase it down with hot green tea, it is refreshing.

Jaggery is an essential ingredient in recipes for Myanmar snacks; pan cakes, puddings and many of the sweet crispies. It is also a standby for minor ailments like colds and stomach upsets. Thin jaggery syrup flavoured with betel leaves helps to soothe the patient with a bad cold and slight temperature. Jaggery crushed and fried in cooking oil is a welcome diet for children with stomach upsets that cause too much bowel action.

Toddy palm gives delicious snacks even before it reaches the age of juice giving. It begins the supply right from the time the seeds take root in the ground. Toddy palm roots are dug out of the ground, when

they are about twelve or fourteen inches long, shapely tapering ones with loose brown sheaths.

The roots are roasted on open fire until the sheaths are burnt away and the white soft kernel inside is brown with a few black spots sprinkled over. The nutty smell of roasting brings the children to the fireside. It is one of the happy accidents that toddy roots come in season in the cold months of November and December.

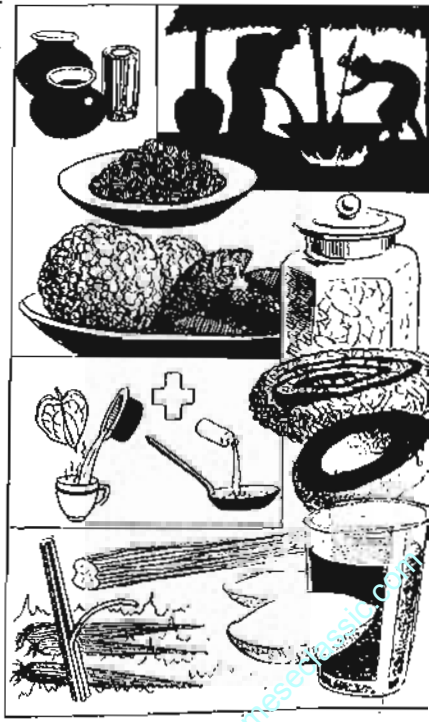
Children can hardly wait till the roots cool off. Risking burnt fingers they snatch them up and peel them with mild cries of distress; sucking the fingers every now and then. Now comes a very delicate operation. There runs down the root a cleavage line right in the middle.

You begin at the small tapered end to break — oh, slowly please — along the line and the root almost divides itself into two parts. Once you master the art, it is as easy as tearing along the perforated line. There, lo and behold, a long thin white stick comes out. It is in fact an embryo palm frond.

From then on granny takes over. With great care she spreads out the tender frond. She then tears the tiny strips along the line and weaves them into small animal figures, toy mats and boxes, there are ohs and ahs of appreciation as children fondle the toys.

It is good that children have almost forgotten the roasted kernel of the toddy root; because it gives the adults time to cut them into bite size and heap them on the plate. There is a bowl of sesamum oil and salt. You dip the root in oil and season it with salt and take it with green tea as chaser.

Young green toddy fruits provide a white kernal, soft, cool and sweet; an ideal fare for hot summer days. Ripe fruits give a yellow custardlike substance, that is squeezed out of the fibres covering the seed. The custard is mixed with rice batter and steamed in small cups. They are delicious with finely shredded coconut.



One word of caution though. Do not, for goodness' sake, try to make those custard cakes at home. I tried it once and it was such a disaster — an unholy mess of yellow — that I feel jaundiced even at the mere thought of it. Better buy it ready made from the market.

Bananas, Symbols, Rituals and Works of Art

What is a banana plant? Is it a palm or tree or shrub? Look it up in the encyclopaedia, you lazy bones, I scolded myself. So, I did and I did not get back to my typewriter for sometime, so absorbed I was, not in bananas, but in Banal, Banat, Banbridge, Banbury, and so on and so forth.

When I came to Bancroft, Marie Effie Wilton (1839-1921), English actress, I became so enchanted by the pictures of her playing Lady Teazel, that I was seized with a desire to reread the famous scene in *School for Scandal,* where Lady Teazel hides behind a folding screen.

'You're not writing a paper on Sheridan's plays,' I told myself sternly, 'get back to your bananas, you stupid clot'. So, I got back to bananas, I also went back to the days of my childhood when I stayed on my grandfather's estate, where bananas grew in thick groves.

Banana groves are beauty spots in the garden. They are cool and restful in the day-time, its gigantic oblong leaves waving welcome. On moonlit nights silvery beams dance on the leaves swaying in the breeze. It is a romantic scene, you almost expect a nymph to flit out of the growth.

On moonless nights, under the dim light of the stars, magic lurks in the banana groves and the flapping of the leaves lends an eerie atmosphere to the scene.

Even though one may be carried away by the uncanny beauty of the banana groves, one will not forget the sweet delicacies they will yield. There the flowering stalk hangs gracefully with the huge red bud

at the end. Up along the stalk are bunches of banana fruits arranged spirally. One stalk carries ten or twelve bunches.

A banana bunch is a thing of beauty and a joy to eat. The slight curve of the fruits lends the semicircle shape of the bunch a delicate grace and the golden yellow colour with black tops is one of the master-pieces of nature's colour schemes.

The banana bunch is not just a mere delicacy but an important item in the preparation of family rituals. One essential rite in the Myanmar Buddhist family is paying respects to the Five Revered Ones, namely the Buddha, His Teachings, His Order of Monks, Parents and Teachers. This paying of respects is done usually at the beginning of lent, the end of lent and new year. The ceremony is called *kadaw* ceremony

It is essential to have a *kadaw-pwe* on such occasions; *kadaw-pwe* means a tray of gifts for the Revered Ones, but a real *kadaw-pwe* is an arrangement of fruits and flowers on a tray or bowl. Two or three bunches of bananas are placed on array with the tops of the fruits turned upwards; a green coconut complete with stem sticking out is placed in the middle.

The bananas and coconut are the basic of the *kadaw-pwe*: a funnel of green banana leaf is stuck in the middle; it is filled with flowers and ferns. The bright yellow of bananas matches with the smooth velvety green of the coconut and the colours are effective when framed within the deep red of the lacquer tray.

No family occasion is complete without the *kadaw- pwe*, weddings, betrothals, house-warming, novitiation and ear-boring ceremonies, alms-giving and wakes.

The whole of the banana plant is involved in Buddhist family rites. The trunk is made into a beautiful shrine, a delicate fretwork. It is used for the ceremony of offering alms-food to the Buddha and His

eight disciples; it is called "the offering of alms-food to the nine Buddhas".

The images of the Buddha and his eight disciples are temporarily enshrined in the beautiful fretwork shrine during the ceremony. These shrines made of the banana trunks are works of art and the craftsmen spend hours of hard work to create fretwork patterns. They do not mind if the shrine lasts only a day or two, to have created a beautiful thing is enough joy for them.

Alms-food, rice, fruits and sweets are put in special cups made of green banana leaves. The cups are shaped like lotus flowers or birds. Banana leaves are cut into strips and woven into figures. Ephemeral things, but things of beauty. Beautiful, while they last, perhaps like life itself!

P.S In case you are interested, the banana plant is a herb, according to the New Universal Encyclopaedia.

Myanmar Cuisine

A Myanmar Rice Meal

The Myanmar takes two rice meals a day, that is, not counting the breakfast, the rice he takes with boiled peas and a dash of sesamum oil. It does not count, because it is not taken with curries as accompaniment.

The simplest rice meal is boiled rice with a sprinkling of oil and salt; infants are initiated to solids with soft boiled rice, a few drops of oil and salt. This simple fare can be tasty especially with long-grained Pathein rice.

Young mothers sing as they tenderly feed the children with morsels of rice:

> Oh! Moon king of the skies, Give my child
> rice sprinkled with oil
> Dished on solid gold tray!

Children pick up the song and they sing to the moon at night with their hearts full of hope for tomorrow when they will have a plate of hot steaming rice with a mouth-watering aroma of sesamum oil.

A simple fare of rice and dish of salted fish toasted on open fire again with a dash of sesamum oil is a welcome sight to the convalescent who had had to lead a blameless life of liquids for days.

The main rice meal of the day can be elaborate. Soup, thin and clear with green vegetables thrown in, is a must; a dish or two of fish or prawns or meat or poultry depending on the means of the family and of course, on the mood of the cook, as well.

The art of taking a Myanmar rice meal is in itself an art; because it calls for leisure and a relaxed state of mind. One cannot do justice to a rice meal if one is in a hurry, or if one's mind is not wholly on the business of eating.

All the dishes are put on the table. The Myanmar table is circular and only ten or twelve inches off the floor. People sit on small mats round the table.

Respect for the seniors

Younger members of the family put a little token morsel of rice and curry in the dish of the senior members as a sign of respect. Then each takes a helping of rice and heaps it on the plate. A spoonful of soup is taken to whet the appetite. Then follows a bit of curry just enough to mix with a little rice which is daintily carried with fingers to the lips. Soup acts as a chaser.

Small portions of rice are mixed with the curries, in such a way that each portion tastes different. One can try many variations, just a little bit of fish and a few bits of vegetables for this time, and then another with a generous helping of gravy from the curry, so on and so forth. The more there are different dishes, the more varieties one can try.

One of the most enjoyable rice meals I ever had was the one I had at a vegetable farm on the outskirts of the town. There under the cool shade of a gourd creeper pergola from whence hung gigantic gourds, we had our rice meal.

An unforgettable rice meal

Rice was steaming hot, so was the prawn soup into which slices of freshly picked gourd were thrown in with a flavouring of ginger. The star dish was *nga-pi-yay-gyo*, fish sauce. It is a special kind; varieties of fish are salted and packed in jars for a specified length of time. The fish retain their shape but they are so seasoned tender that all the bones fall apart when boiled in a cup of water; the sauce is thick and it gives out such an aroma that one feels like gulping it down like tea.

The sauce is put through the sieve so that it is free from bones. There are some ingredients to be added. Even as the sauce is boiling, dry chillies are put through a skewer and toasted on open fire; care must be taken not to burn them black. Cloves of garlic, an onion or two are toasted just enough to take

away the rawness. Green chillies may be added if one likes it extra hot.

The chillies, garlic and onions are pounded into a paste and added to the fish sauce. By the dish of fish sauce is a large plate of *tow-sa-yar*, vegetable snippets to be dipped in fish sauce. On that occasion, I remember, there were no less than twenty varieties; celery, lettuce, long beans, water cress boiled in tamarind pulp, young mangoes and lots of roots and fruits I could not name.

I put one of the vegetable snippets on my rice portion and topped it with a large spoonful of fish sauce. In went the rice down my throat, hot and spicy. I made noises — shee — shee — shoo — shoo —, I gulped down a spoonful of soup and sighed happily.

I tried different vegetable snippets with each mouthful of rice. There were no social graces; the air was thick with the noises of shee — shee — shoo — shoo — shoo— and glug — glug.

It was a rice meal I shall never forget!

Off-Beat Myanmar Foods

Local specialities

Myanmar, as any other country, has many varieties of foods. Things grow freely and easily and there are products that are only available in particular localities. Many times, the Myanmars themselves are surprised by unfamiliar foods.

People often speak rather vaguely of 'Upper Myanmar' foods and 'Lower Myanmar' foods. Roughly, the area round Mandalay, Sagaing and Bagan are considered Upper Myanmar, and Yangon and delta towns are Lower Myanmar.

Food stuffs of Upper Myanmar, rich in products like sesamum, groundnuts and beans, have an entirely different character from those of Lower Myanmar where fish and prawns are plentiful.

Though born in 'Upper Myanmar' I spent a good many years of my growing up in delta areas. I am more accustomed to the cuisine of fish and prawns.

It is therefore a treat for me to have a taste of local delicacies on our trips to Mandalay. They awaken happy memories of childhood, like for instance, peanut crispies, *phee-gyan* bananas, (those with corners) fried soft and tender in cooking oil — the never-fail goodies I often saw in my grandmother's many-tiered lacquer casket she carried on her head on sabbath day trips to the monastery.

Sesamum curd sour

My one favourite food is *hnan-phut-chin*, sesamum curd sour. It is made from lumps of oil cakes left over after cooking oil has been extracted. It is allowed to ferment with a dash of rice-water to give a sour taste.

This curd or paste is served with onions, garlic, celery and lemon leaves, all shredded fine and a sprinkling of cooking oil. This dish goes well with thin vegetable soup.

Once, on one of our trips to Mandalay, I expressed a wish for this dish to my brother who was our host. He was surprised that I should care that much for 'that common plebian food, poor man's fare'.

I had with me a dear friend, an American lady at that time, and to everyone's surprise, she enjoyed the dish. Then only, I learned from her that a similar kind of food is popular in Middle East countries: they do not put as much sesamum and the stuff is mostly bean curd with only a flavouring of sesamum.

Ours is hundred per cent sesamum, richer and tastier, I could not help remarking with a glow of smugness.

How to make sesamum curd

Since this delicacy is not available in Yangon markets, I had to prise out the recipe from the people up there. It is simple, fool-proof. Even I could do it!

Oil cakes are sold at any dry grocery store. They are heaped on baskets, and you can have them by the ton, if you like. They do not particularly look attractive, those black misshapen lumps. The shop-keeper stares at you, wondering why an elegant well-groomed lady should want them.

You will feel even worse when the shopman asks, "Do you keep cows? These are cattle-fodder." You buy them all the same, thanking him for his unwelcome information. Now comes the actual preparation of the nectar.

Put the cakes in a sieve and pour boiling water over them, and lo and behold, they are white and clean like driven snow! Put them in a basin and again pour another kettleful of boiling water and let it soak for an hour or so until the water cools off.

Now using your hands, stir it thoroughly crunching any lumps there might be. Sift out by handfuls, letting the stuff go through the water, so that any dust or particles may be washed away. This action is often compared to the 'sifting' of gold in Northern Myanmar areas.

You have the paste of curd; put it in a cloth bag and let the remaining water seep through. Some let it ferment by leaving it overnight but you may not care for the flavour. So, just add some lemon or lime juice to taste and mix with finely shredded onions, garlic, celery and lemon leaves and a dash of cooking oil.

This dish is frankly plebian, made from cattle folder. People call it *na-phut-chin* which means 'cattle folder turned sour,' instead of its real name *hnan-phut-chin*, 'sesamum curd sour.'

At any rate, the rose by any other name will smell as sweet and this dish is simply delicious!

More Off-beat Myanmar Foods

High status delicacy – to some

All countries have special kinds of food that need cultivated taste. That is to say, it is the kind of food the uninitiated may forget the social graces and turn away from, wrinkling her nose at the funny smell.

In the West too, there are certain foods, a high status delicacy to some, but to others, well-er-not quite. Such foods usually involve too much preparation for wide scale commercial production and too perishable to travel. Consequently they stay strictly within the circle of local gourmets, not well known to 'outsiders.'

One of the delicacies of Lower Myanmar or delta regions is fish sour and prawn sour. This food like Colommiers Demisel the hundreds of soft cheeses will not travel and therefore it is best eaten on location.

The season for this 'sour' is the last weeks of the monsoon and throughout the cold season. 'Prawn sour' is often preferred to 'fish sour,' because the taste and quality of the latter depends on the kind of fish it is made of.

Many varieties of fish-sour

There are many varieties of 'fish sour'; one of them the common and the most available kind is made of small fresh water fish. It is mixed with boiled rice and made into big lumps or packed in leaves. The big lumps are sliced and sold by the weight. The packed ones are favoured by the fastidious and hygiene-conscious people.

The best kinds of 'fish-sour' are *nga-phe* and *nga-gyin*. *Nga-gyin-chin* is made of chunks of white fish. *Nga-phe-chin* is tastier and it needs a more complicated process:

To make *nga-phe-chin* the flesh is scraped from *nga-phe,* white fresh water herring and the stuff is pounded to right consistency; it is then mixed with boiled rice and a dash of salt. The mixture is then moulded into 'cutlets' and packed in green banana leaves.

In Yangon markets, especially those near the waterfront, fish sour and prawn sour come straight from the steamers plying the delta towns. They are usually fresh and nice.

Fish sour and prawn sour are also available in Bago, an hour and a half drive from Yangon. They are neatly packed in green banana leaves and they have labels to tell you the date when it will 'ferment sour' enough to be eaten.

Can be eaten raw

One of the beauties of this kind of 'sour foods,' is that they can be eaten raw, garnished with shredded onions, garlic, celery and lemon leaves and a dash of cooking oil.

If liked, they can be 'fried', that is, simmer shredded onions and garlic in heated oil over the fire and add fish or prawn sour. Serve immediately with the usual garnishes of celery and lemon leaves. Green chillies may be added if you like it hot.

It is a pity that the best kind of 'fish sour' and 'prawn sour' are not easily available here in Yangon. If you have relatives or friends in one of those delta towns, you just cajole them into sending you packets of this delicacy periodically.

Fish or prawn prepared in a special way is eaten raw in other lands too. Japanese and Scandinavians have similar foods. From the little I know of them, one thing is certain; one has to cultivate the taste for them, especially their smell!

"Ah-myees" or Myanmar Relishes

To go with hot green tea

The Myanmars are very fond of snacks and relishes and there are many varieties. They are called *ah-myees* and they are usually taken with plain green tea often called Shan tea, or any other drinks.

Even though the Myanmars have adopted the habit of taking coffee with sugar and milk, green tea or plain tea is still a standby in many homes. A porcelain tea pot encased in an upholstered cane box and egg-shell tea cups often graces the living room of Myanmar homes.

A gulp of hot tea is a welcome drink in hot as well as cold weather perhaps I should say especially in hot weather; people think, hot plain tea works beautifully much better then iced drinks.

The simple and the most easily available relish to go with plain tea is jaggery and sugar-cane molasses. Taken at the end of a meal it clears the palate and helps the food to settle.

An item in cultural life

Of course one cannot leave out *laphet*, tea leaves plucked tender and pressed in bamboo containers. It is an important item in Myanmar cultural life. The Myanmar idiom, 'to offer betel, tobacco and *laphet*.' means hospitality and welcome.

In olden days litigants, after the settlement of the case at court, 'took *laphet* together,' which means that they accepted the decision and bore no ill will to each other.

In rural areas any invitation or announcement of a betrothal or marriage or a wake or housewarming or new baby is accompanied with a packet of *laphet*: it is

considered courteous and also an auspicious thing for happy occasions.

Laphet may be taken plain with a dish of sesamum oil and finely shredded raw garlic. The dish can be elaborated with toasted sesamum seeds, peanuts, garlic crispies. In many homes a lacquer salver filled with *laphet* and the accompanying savouries are ready for the visitors.

Finely shredded ginger, seasoned with lemon juice often goes with *laphet* and it is crisp and crunchy, neither hot nor biting and it balances the pungent taste of *laphet* with a mild touch of acidity.

Varieties of salted fish, toasted or deep fried also serve as *ah-myee* relish, not only with the plain tea but also with stronger drinks.

Relishes at drinking meets

Country yokels take dry fish relishes with toddy sizzling in coconut shell cups. City folks soak bits of toasted dry fish in tomato ketchup and chase it down with more swanky drinks.

The best relish recipes come from drinkers (or their women?): one of them is fresh water fish salad. A fair size fish is washed but not scraped off its scales and it is encased in clay and baked in charcoal fire. Then the white flesh is extracted and crushed and mixed with shredded onions, sliced cucumbers and sprinkled with lemon juice. Green chillies may be added if you like it hot.

This same salad, they say, is a never-fail pick me up for those with a hangover. It is supposed to have saved many lives but I am sure must have saved the loss of many working days.

Such relishes are so tempting that drinking meets often lay down a rule: "No *ah-myee* must be taken without drinks." I think it is not fair. Why should teetotalers be debarred from the niceties of life just because they do not have a stomach for strong drinks?

Food for Thought

Talking and writing, Not cooking

I never did realize the truth of the saying, "He who can does; he who cannot teaches," until I started writing articles on food. Before it is too late, I must confess that I only like collecting recipes and enjoying the dishes others cook and of course, talking and writing about them.

Next to eating, talking or writing about food is one of the most enjoyable pleasures of life. I like to inspire people to create toothsome delicacies by telling them how tasty a certain food is, and how easy it is to make.

Don't you dare say, it is propaganda; because it takes a consummate artist to make mouths water by a picturesque description of the goodies and make people run to the market to buy the stuff and to be back in the kitchen to cook.

One thing about the Myanmar rice meal is that it can be simple . . . . . just cooked rice and a dish of sesamum oil and salt or a sumptuous one with curries and relishes. There is a way for lazy cooks to arrange a makeshift meal; just cook the rice and run to the street corner and buy gourd fritters or *ba-yar-gyaw*, peas soaked in water and pounded into paste and fried deep in hot oil.

Fritters and crispies

These fritters and crispies are sold together with lettuce leaves, spring onions and a sauce made of tamarind pulp and crushed chillies and garlic. You dip a bite size bit of the crispie in the sauce and put it in the morsel of rice and top it with lettuce leaf and spring onion. Then chase down the mouthful with hot plain green tea.

There are two varieties of *ba-yar-gyaw*. . . . the

one made of yellow lentils and the other made of matpe, small round peas. The matpe crispie is much tastier then the one made of yellow lentils.

Matpe crispie is an Upper Myanmar product and some years ago it was not available in delta towns like Yangon. Even though it is sold in crispie kiosks here, those of Upper Myanmar towns like Mandalay are far more tasty (That's an Upper Myanmar speaking!)

To me this matpe crispie is associated with happy memories. Decades ago, long before the Inwa bridge was built, we made a boat trip from Sagaing (the town on the other side of the river opposite Mandalay) to Mingun, where the great bell is.

We left in the small hours of the morning when a heavy November mist hung low on the wide brimming waters of the Ayeyarwady. We huddled in the *sampan*, a flat-bottomed boat and dozed. As the sun's rays broke through the mist, we saw small sandy islets interlaced with rippling waters.

On some of those islands we saw palm-leaf huts crested with curls of filigree smoke; and what is more, the smell of deep frying crispies stole into our nostrils.

Snacks on the sandy isles on the Ayeyarwady

By unanimous consent our boat was moored to the sand bank. We had fun paddling in the shallow water, it was just deep enough to reach our knees. It was wonderful to be able to have a paddly pool right in the middle of the wide river. We played until the grown-ups called us to have our morning meal.

We had, of course, matpe crispies straight out of the sizzling oil, and there was *yeimohn*, which is a kind of pan-cake made by spreading rice batter over the heated griddle. It was sprinkled over with peas and shredded spring onions. These pan-cakes go well with crispies.

By the way, you might see similar pan-cakes here in Yangon, but not exactly the same; they are fried crisp. The real *yeimohn* is not fried; it is just spread over the griddle and pasted with oil so that it is soft and pliant like a piece of cloth. It melts in the mouth.

I wonder if they still have those huts on the islets which festooned the Ayeyarwady river in the months of November, December. Much as I wanted to, I never had a chance to go boating along the river and have a go at paddling on the sand pools this time with my grand-children, and enjoy those crispies and pan-cakes.

The matpe crispies here are not as good as those sold on the sandy islets. Something is lacking, maybe, it is those palm leaf huts, paddling in the pools, and all the things that once went with the crispies. Maybe, but no, let's face it, it is YOUTH, that is sadly lacking.

Crispies Galore

If someone were to ask me to speak on our national institutions (no one has, so far), I would begin with *hu-thee-gyaw* (gourd fritters), which no Myanmar can do without.

These sunny days, you walk along any road; you will see on the wayside a little thatched hut where a woman sits by the blazing fireplace on which is placed a large *dai-oh*(frying pan) half filled with sizzling oil.

The *dai-oh* can hardly be called a *frying pan*, though used for frying all right; it is no flat pan but a huge iron pot concave in shape. A dugout fireplace makes a good seat for its curved base.

The *dai-oh* can take a lot of oil and the woman while waiting for the oil to heat up prepares the gourd fritters. Young tender gourd is used; pieces are cut into fingers and soaked in batter made of rice flour. As wisps of smoke rise from the surface of the heated oil the gourd fingers are put into it. They are fried till they become golden brown.

(*Note:* It is always a woman who runs the show; even if you see a man around remember he is only second in command. Myanmar women are always in charge of important things like crispie shops and they leave the less important things to men!)

Around the hut are a few low tables each laid with a pot of plain tea, tea cups, plate of lettuce and corriander leaves and small dish of sauce. This sauce is a real appetiser; it is a concoction of hot chilli pulp, a dash of garlic and tamarind juice.

You sit on one of the low wooden stools around the table and gulp down a cup of hot plain tea and bawl for a plate of gourd fritters. If you are early you wait drinking plain tea, which is free of charge, and watch the gourd fritters swim in smoking oil as the fire underneath crackles and blazes.

Perhaps some unbidden and unwelcome thought might come to you, a reminder of the cautionary tales you had heard in childhood, those tales of hell and fire. You try to switch off those thoughts by nibbling green lettuce with chilli sauce.

At last the *bu-thee-gyaw* fritters would come right out of the sizzling oil. It is a favourite Myanmar snack It is taken with lettuce, corriander leaves and chilli sauce and with hot plain tea as chaser. In the same shop you can also get other verieties, crispies made of shredded onions, bananas, potato chips to name only a few. All these are made with rice flour batter and fried in oil.

Glutinous rice flour, jaggery, peanuts and sesamum seeds also feature in some of the varieties. The most well known is *mon-see-gyaw*, flat pancake. The basic mixture is glutinous rice flour sweetened with jaggery; the batter is ladled out into hot oily griddle; as the batter begins to thicken and crinkle at the edges, sesamum seeds, peanuts and coconut shreds are sprinkled on the surface. When it is golden brown it is put on a bamboo seive to drain.

The other kind of crispie not as elaborate as *mon-see-gyaw* is *mon-let-kauk* or bracelet crispie; it is shaped like a bracelet, something like a doughnut. It is a doughnut anyway only it is made of glutinous rice flour. The dough is kneaded and rolled and made into bracelets and deep fried. It is unsweetened and it is taken with jaggery syrup.

One can hardly speak of Myanmar crispies without mentioning the *ba-yar-gyaw*, one of the commonest kind. Dried peas are soaked in water overnight and pounded into paste and deep fried; it is seasoned with onions, garlic and chillies. There are several varieties of peas too and each tastes different, but all of them good.

Crispie shops are a plenty on festival grounds which is often filled with the aroma of deep frying Why get yourself a splitting headache by just taking in the smells, better enjoy your favourite crispie and give yourself a good time with the inevitable headache and a stomach ache as a bonus. One thing about crispies is that it is no fun taking them home to eat: they are best eaten right at the shop with all the paraphernalia and aromas. They are worth all the things you suffer the morning after.

In Praise of Glutinous Rice

Glutinous rice, never used for full rice meals, is a favourite snack . . . plain steamed dish goes well with hot coffee at breakfast . . . it is sold at markets, steamed in banana leaves . . . another variety is baked in hollow bamboo sticks . . .

My heart leaps up when I behold hot steaming glutinous rice heaped in a bamboo basket lined with fresh green banana leaves, the aroma, blended with a whiff of banana leaves, is something that goes straight to my heart and down into the stomach, making my mouth water.

Out comes my twenty-five pya coin and quick follows a transaction with the woman sitting behind the basket. Now I have in hand a green leaf packet of steamed glutinous rice complete with a generous sprinkling of shredded coconut and sesamum seeds.

I always take the opportunity of enjoying my favourite snack when I do my shopping for the family meals.There is one problem though.I cannot wait till I get home; it is too much for my resistance. I open the packet, balancing my heavy shopping basket in the crook of my arm and nibble the contents of my precious packet, a none too easy feat, but not the kind of performance that will win any prize for propriety.

Glutinous rice, never used for full rice meals, is a favourite Myanmar snack, especially for breakfast. plain steamed dish goes well with hot coffee. It may be taken with boiled peas soaked in sesamum oil. There are two kinds of rice, white and black; the black kind has a racy flavour and is more crunchy.

There are many varieties made out of this rice. It is cooked in oil and taken with fried chicken or fried fish. When I travel by train along the Yangon-Mandalay line I always look forward to the stop at Bago station where hawkers sell this bill of fare.

Glutinous rice is also steamed or baked in packets; banana leaves are mostly used for packing; but in some localities toddy palm leaves are used. Such kind and those baked in hollow bamboo have a pleasing flavour. Once the monsoon is over, there will come pagoda festivals, with their mile-long rows of stalls, a gastronomical wonderland and gourmet's delight.

One of the features of pagoda festivals is a bazaar of stalls with mountainous heaps of *mohn-lay-pway*, large circular wafers, made of glutinous rice flour, paper-thin, light as air, as its name suggests and very brittle. They are crunchy and munchable; they are sold strung on a bamboo strip. You buy them in bunches of fives or tens and jostle in the crowd showering on your fellow beings bits of white flakes as you chew them.

Mohn-phet-htoks, small pyramid shape rice flour cakes, packed and steamed in banana leaves (a kind of ravioli) made a good sweet dish with their stuffing of shredded coconut and jaggery. It is interesting to know that the same kind is part of the trimmings in the ritual of solemnizing a Malaysian wedding ceremony, as demon-strated at Mrs. Dani Kassim's residence sometime ago, for the benefit of the International Cultural Group.

The Chinese style glutinous rice packets have pork or chicken stuffing; and the circular cake, fried in oil, one of the items of the Chinese New Year feast, is also made from glutinous rice flour.

At Christmas the Myanmar Christian community make dol-dol, a concoction of black glutinous rice flour, sugar, coconut and a sprinkling of peanuts very rich and tasty. I think it is a variation of *hto-mohn* from Mandalay where a similar thing is made in white rice flour instead of black.

From Pathein comes a kind of *halawa*, perhaps,

a Burmanization of the famous Indian sweet. The main ingredient is glutinous rice flour; it is sweet, nice and tasty; it goes well with plain green tea.

Of course I cannot leave out *hta-ma-ne*, the concoction of glutinous rice, coconut, peanuts, sessamum seeds flavoured with ginger which is part of the harvest festival in the month of *Ta-bo-dwe* which falls somewhere in February.

Well, why doesn't someone compile a book of recipes featuring glutinous rice? No, not me. I only like to eat and talk about them. As for cooking, it takes a genius to be a true artist of the kitchen.

The Love-potion that Works One Way Only

Digestion upset

That Monday morning. I read my own piece on glutinous rice (believe me, it was the first thing I read), and I became so moved by the description of the flavour and taste of steamed glutinous rice that I treated myself to a sumptuous breakfast featuring the delicacy.

Now with the date line for my column close at hand I have hardly recovered from an acute attack of indigestion. At least, I can say that I am one of the rare species who practise what they preach. I hope my readers were not be so carried away by the account of delicious snacks as I have been, lest it should upset their digestion.

Of course, it is every scribbler's dream to touch the heart of the reader; with the rattle of the typewriter in my ears punctuated by belches (excuse me). I feel happy to know that I have moved someone's heart, even if it was my own.

Faint hearts and love-potions

It reminds me of the story of a young man who tried to win the object of his affections by using a love-potion. The Myanmar youths of olden days believed that love-potions, talismans and charms helped them in their wooing. A faint-heart could be a gallant and win the heart of a coy maiden with such aids.

There were witch doctors and local wise men who were only too willing to help for a fee. The recipes were varied; there were those which must be sprayed on the face and hair of the swain, so that he would

look charming to the girl. But it was believed that the most effective was something that could be taken orally by the girl favour the young man desired.

Double potion needed

Once a young man went to a wise man and begged for something that might help him in his courtship. Since the girl was fond of chewing betel, the wise man gave the young man a betel quid in which the love-potion was put. He was to go to the girl and offer it to her to chew. The man was not satisfied; he wanted to have another betel quid, in case one was not enough. So the wise man gave him another.

The young man went to the girl at the usual courting time in the afternoon when the girl sat on the veranda, spinning. After some pleasantries, he offered her the betel quid, which she accepted with thanks. The young man watched her chew it, fascinated by the dainty way she lined the contour of her tips with the tips of her little finger, so that the betel juice would not spill out.

In praise of betel quid

She commented on the flavour of the betel quid, how sweet it was, so on and so forth. The young man was pleased; the potion must be working beautifully. He recited a song extolling the ingredients of the betel quid:

"From Ta-dar-Oo, come the soft tender leaves
Flavoured with tobacco from Nga-myar,
Betel nuts from Toungoo,
Lime from Sagaing and cutch from Pyay,
Made up of all these — this betel quid,
Oh chew softly — softly chew".

Ta-da-Oo, Nga-myar, Toungoo, Sagaing and Pyay are towns still well known for the said products, betel leaves, tobacco, betel nuts, lime, and cutch; the ingredients for making a betel quid.

The swain's finest hour

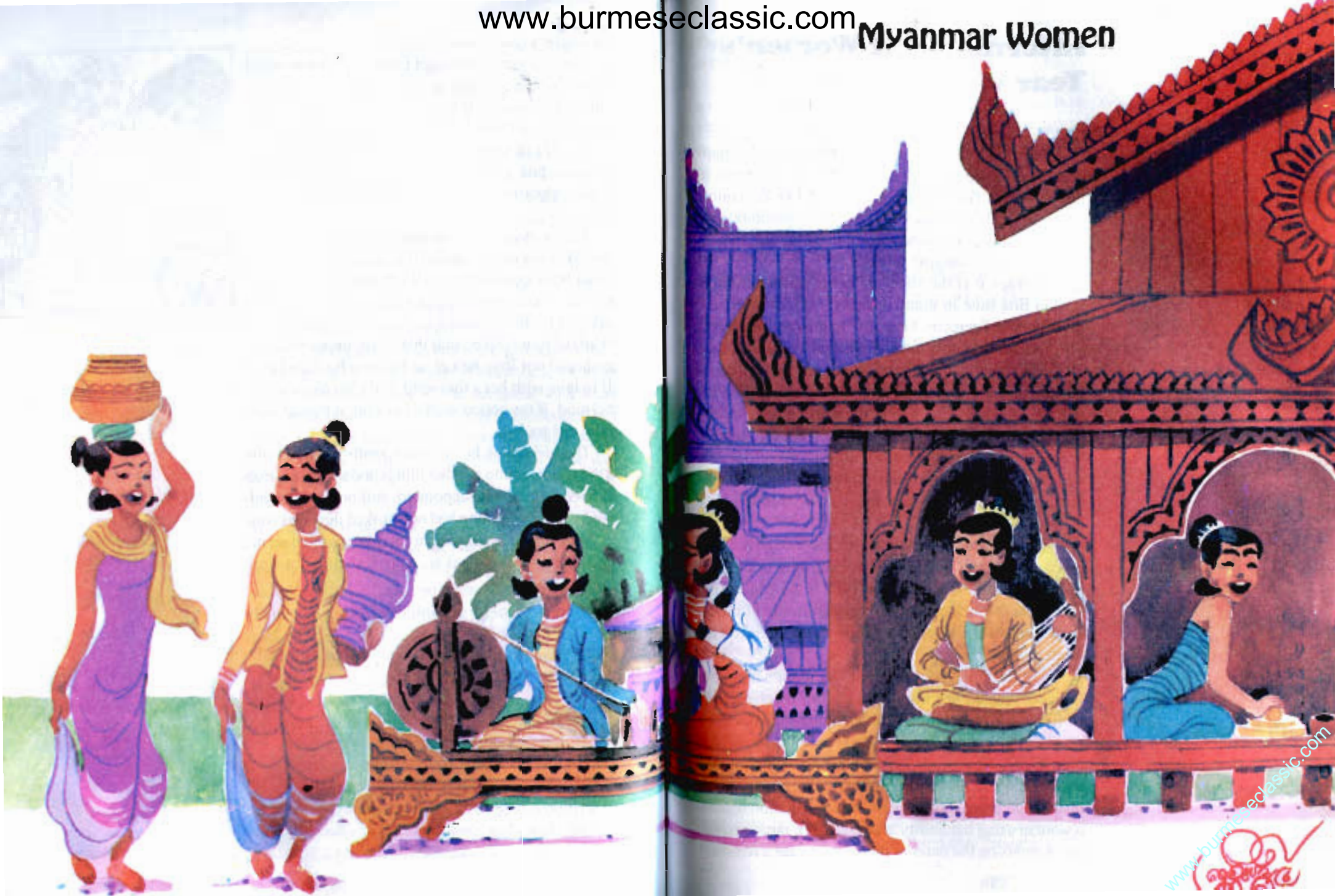
The girl smiled and said that the quid was all the sweeter because of poetic wit. The young man was excited; he thought this was his finest hour. So he pressed his suit. To his surprise, the girl would not say yes. He thought it was impossible, because the wise man had said that this love-potion had never failed, supporting the statement with stories of evidence.

The young man felt for sure that the potion must work. He would try it again. But instead of giving the second betel quid to the girl he chewed it himself because he wanted to find out for himself just how it worked. He chewed it and he found that he loved the girl all the more. So he said that it was impossible that she should not love him at all because he found himself in love with her a thousand fold after chewing the betel quid. If the potion worked on him, it should work on the girl too!

The girl shook her head tolerantly, and tactfully led the conversation to other things and the young man had to come home disappointed, still not understanding why the love-potion had not worked the other way.

Now, the eloquence of my writing worked on me wonderfully and I do not see why it should not work on others as well!

Myanmar Women



International Women's Year

(1) What is feminism?

With IWY in the offing, a writer who also happens to be a woman naturally turns her thoughts in that direction. But the flow of thought, like the course of true love, does not run smooth. Many questions waylay and confuse me whenever I think of the role of women in this changing world.

Perhaps it is the shock of being taken seriously for the first time in many decades. "It is important," said the UN Secretary-General "that every one gives serious attention now to International Women's Year 1975, and to how the role of women in society could be substantially improved all over the world. We are talking, after all, about half of the world's population - The significance of the Year will be what we make it. We could, with the help of all of you, make it a year which will leave an imprint on history, not only the history of women's advancement but also that of people all over the world."

Going over the literature available-though not very much, I am afraid, – I think above all, right thinking is important if all the activities of IWY is to be meaningful. There is much confusion, because some of the articulations of the Women's Libbers and feminists are often misleading.

For example, take the term "feminist"; many intelligent women are wary of declaring themselves to be feminists. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, at the triennial Congress of the International Alliance of Women, held at New Delhi, November 1974 observed: "I do not normally consider myself a feminist - But if "feminist" means that there should be no discrimi-nation against a woman using her ability and talent, if it means equality of rights on the basis of merit, then I am a feminist

But it seems that some women want to escape being a woman."

It is true some women feminists talk and write as if women must try to escape being a woman. It is very misleading. It confuses the women and gives some men the chance of talking disparagingly of women's movements.

By being a feminist, according to Mrs. Gandhi, it does not mean that women must imitate men; it means that they should try to deepen and strengthen their own personality. Women must first accept the difference, but there are basic human qualities which are common to men and women which are no less important.

In trying to determine the role of women in the changing times, the discussion is usually pivoted on one point: Should women be given the role of housekeeper, child bearer, and plaything or must they necessarily seek fulfilment outside the home, since being just wife and mother is meaningless?

Women's movement has always insisted that its objective is not a job for every woman, but freedom of choice and opportunity for choice. This, of course, does not, in any way unduly emphasize the importance of career as fulfilment to a woman.

In spite of all that, the trend of popular opinion seems to be running on the two extremes. There are some feminists who say: Every woman has to work or she is nothing.

On the other hand there are vehement responses to Women's Lib, like for instance a book by Dr. Goldberg, a sociologist, who defended the natural superiority of men in "The Inevitability of Patriarchy."

Dr. Goldberg develops a theory of his own after drawing on research on human biology and summaries of anthropological field research. He claims that not only have men run the show (and they have always been in charge of everything they thought worth-

while) but also that they will always be. Patriarchy is inevitable.

Such extremes of opinion do not help much towards constructive action. Hurling invectives across the sex lines will not get us anywhere. If we are to build a future, a brave new world, so to say, we must have an unbiased view of the past as well as the present.

This sends my thoughts back to my own impression of growing up as a Myanmar woman during the last five decades, how smug we have always been in the thought: Myanmar women are free: they enjoy equal status with men. Then what should IWY mean to us? This, I will discuss in my next article.

(2) Undercurrent of male chauvinism

The main object of IWY is promotion of equality of men and women. Since Myanmar women are supposed to enjoy equal status as men, what should IWY mean to us?

Myanmar women first would have to rise above the smugness and complacency to see what could and should be done about the role they are to play in society. They must take a hard cold look at themselves and ask: what contribution have we given to the development of our country?

Since the future could only be built on the heritage of the past, perhaps they should look a few decades back, to the days of the colonial regime, the struggle for independence, the building of a new state.

Myanmar women never seem to have any need for liberation movements throughout history. They never have known impediments like purdah or bound feet. Their right to own property had never been challenged. In fact, they control the family finances. "Men just hand over their earnings to their wives..." This statement never fails to bring ohs and ahs of admiration from women of other nationalities.

Many foreign writers are impressed by the freedom Myanmar women enjoy. They, rather than the men, sit in the market stalls and run a large proportion of the nation's retail trade.

In spite of all this, I have a feeling that there is an undercurrent of male chauvinism in the relationship between men and women in society. That also could be damaging to women as much as any written law. This, I speak from personal experience, is shared perhaps by many of the Myanmar women.

In the family, sons are considered superior to daughters. Girls are expected to wait hand and foot on the boys. The allocation of tasks began early. Girls cook, wash and sew while boys play and study. "Myanmar women are free..." no purdah, no bound feet..." was the refrain that nipped any objection in the bud. If Myanmar women are equal in status as men, men certainly are more equal.

Women down to my generation were groomed to be good wives and mothers and nothing else. (I use past tense... hopefully). Women must find fulfilment in marriage and motherhood; nothing else. It was the "nothing else" that used to infuriate me.

It is only fair to say that many girls accepted the secondary position with good grace and grew up to be normal happy women. But once in a while some misfit got born in society and went about trying to upset all the accepted values.

Here, before going into reactions and discordant notes, I must dwell on the lingo, idiom and reading matter prevalent in those days; because they played a part in the making or unmaking of a woman. "A daughter in the family is the best slave." this was often considered a congratulatory expression when a baby girl was born. It was more of a consolation for not having a son.

"A male dog is of higher status than a woman." This admonition was often doled out whenever a woman tried to come to her own as an individual. "A

woman will destroy a kingdom..." This they said to prove that women could not be trusted with tasks that needed wisdom.

In the days of my growing up, the legacy of writings during the latter Konbaung Era, the last dynasty to rule Myanmar before British annexation, was very much alive. I could not but help being struck by the way writers and poets of those times wrote disparagingly of women. Many coined idioms and sayings to put women in an inferior place.

Never in the history of Myanmar literature had there been such writing. Was it because during the early years of the 18th century, there had been a queen, Me Nu, who, as a power behind the throne, played havoc with the country's affairs? Was it because it was Thibaw's queen (a descendant of the much hated Me Nu) who was supposed to be responsible for the massacre of the royal princes? Was it because people held her responsible for the final Myanmar defeat in the Third Anglo-Myanmar war? During the early years of the nineties, however, there seemed to be reaction against these writings. Some writers attempted to elevate women insisting that they should not feel inferior. One of the pioneers in the field was Ledipandita U Maung Gyi, a learned scholar and prolific writer of prose and poetry.

I shall say more on the subject in my next article-Reactions and Responses to Male Chauvinism.

(3) Responses and reactions to male chauvinism

In the nineteen-twenties, after the First Great War, nationalist movements began to gain momentum. Women freely participated in the movements and it was then that women were encouraged to come out from the narrow precincts of their homes and contribute towards the national cause.

The idea of women doing their share of work in

the political field was widely propagated through newspapers and magazines. In those days, the two leading monthly magazines were The Sun and The Dagon. They commanded readership both among the young and old. The reading matter consisted of short stories and articles of general interest.

In those days, many parents of growing children had already decided that anything that did not come from Buddhist scriptures was trash and not fit to be read by anyone. There were many homes where even prestigious magazines like the Sun and The Dagon were not allowed.

Editors therefore put in articles that would help and instruct young people to be better persons, so that the magazines would be regarded with a little more favour by the parents.

Somewhere in 1924-25, The Dagon began publishing a series of articles by Ledipandita U Maung Gyi, a scholar, poet and writer. They were life stories of the Buddha's women disciples, retold with a special slant on human interest. These stories were avidly read and since they drove home the point that there is no discrimination of sex in Buddhism, they were greatly appreciated by girls.

It was the same Ledipandita U Maung Gyi, who also ran another series of articles in the Dagon. The style of the articles was epistolary, a lady from Yangon writing to another lady in Mandalay, who wrote a reply in the next issue. Later, many "ladies" from other towns joined in and the letters became a popular feature.

For quite a long time no one besides the editors knew that the sedate scholar U Maung Gyi was the author of the series.

It was indeed the ingenuity of U Maung Gyi, who in the role of "ladies" captivated the readers with the breezy, gossipy letters which became a source of information not only on arts and letters but also on the

local histories of the places which are supposed to be the ladies' home towns.

To all this was added the feministic flavour as some of the letters dwelt on the achievements of the women in history. It was a decided departure from the writings of yesterday-those which ran down women. It seemed that women had begun to be appreciated as a potential force, especially in the country's struggle for independence.

(4) Education of women – a sheer waste?

Whatever opportunities the education system in the colonial days had to offer, sending girls to school to get "modern education" was popularly considered a part of the grooming to be wife and mother. It was a final polish for potential husband-catchers.

Marriage was the only career for women. That was the normal pattern. But outside the family circle, forces were at work. Contemporary writings exhorted women to come out and use their talents in the service of the country.

Magazines and newspapers often featured news stories of Myanmar women who achieved success. Women like for instance, Dr. Daw Saw Sa, Dr. Daw Yin May in the field of medicine, Daw Me Me Khin and Daw Phwa Yin in the legal profession, Daw Mya Sein, an Oxford M.A., who represented Myanmar at the League of Nations Conference, and Daw Sann, the first Myanmar newspaper-woman.

There were inevitably, some girls who were impressed by such examples, and they aspired to higher education and achievement. Parents were not too willing to continue the girls' schooling after eleven plus. The main reason was that education was expensive and the boys needed it more than the girls, who would eventually find husbands to support them. Boys, on the other hand, had to be bread earners of the family.

Under such circumstances, any girl who was bent on continuing her studies had to prove herself, by competing hard with the boys. She had to show that she could do "better" than boys. "As good as" was not good enough. She had to pass every year with credit, only then would she be somewhat grudgingly considered worthwhile to be given "modern education."

At school, she had more battles to fight. Chances were that she might have to go to a boys' school, as those exclusively for girls were not many, usually none in small towns. So, she found herself with one or two other girls for company in a class of thirty or so.

After putting up with class-room bullies' teasings and pigtail-pullings, and having her ribbon bows snatched and stolen, the only thing she could do was to beat the boys at lessons, beat them right and left.

Most girls did not think it worth-while to go against such odds, so they, perhaps wisely, gave up early and started being nice young ladies at home. As for the girl who went on with her studies, her troubles had just begun. Gaining credits at school did not find favour either with the family or friends.

"She is so clever, what a pity she's a girl... if only she were a boy!" was the refrain played on with the most exasperating repetition. Nor was this all; always in the back-ground was the non-stop reminder: girls must be trained to be good housewives, or else.

Having to study for exams was no excuse for the girl to be exempted from household chores, which was a *must*. With whatever time and energy left over a girl was expected to do well in studies. Either she passed at the end of each school term, or she left school and stayed at home.

Once a girl got over the hurdles and went as far as matriculation, she faced more problems. It was usually not possible for the family to send her to college to be, perhaps, another Daw Mya Sein or Dr Daw Yin May. "There are boys – they must be given the best

education the family can give." Sounds reasonable, but there was something else.

It was the barrier against economic freedom for girls born into middle class gentility–daughters of government officers and landed gentry. There was snobbery which decreed that no daughter must go out to work. If she was given "modern education" it was to make her a fine lady, a worthy wife of an officer, perhaps.

So the girl lost the much commended freedom of Myanmar women who held retail trade or kept a shop. She had no choice but to try and catch a suitable husband, since any ordinary office job like that of a clerk, or a typist would be below the family's dignity. Problems faced by women who had no means to rise up to be a Dr. Daw Yin May or a Daw Mya Sein were many. These, I shall present in my next article–Myanmar Women and Careers.

(5) Myanmar women and careers in the 1930s

It is surprising that there should be prejudice against women taking office jobs when most of the retail shops have always been run by women. Perhaps keeping shop and petty trade had long been regarded as "women's work", but to have women at the office desk was something different or alien.

Even then a new generation of white collar women was rising. One of the first jobs to be accepted as suitable and proper was teaching. A popular dog-gerel of those days runs:

Don't ever a school marm adore.
Nor with finger tickle your sore,
If ever a school marm you adore,
Hen-pecked you will ever be,
And If with finger you tickle the sore,
Poison and infection will pursue thee!

That meant school marms were not regarded as good bargains in the marriage market. It was still important that women should sell in the matrimonial fair. Families were therefore shame-faced and apologetic about having a working girl in the family. "You know it's a pity to let her education go waste..."

Every attempt had to be made to wipe away the impression that any girl had to help out with the family finances. "It is only for a while before she decides to get married-you know; there have been so many offers"... It was still how many offers of marriage a girl had that gave her prestige, not her achievements in school or at her career.

The idea of a married woman keeping her job was preposterous. It would damage her husband's image. Even though there might be perfectly good reasons for a married woman holding on to her job,-like having to support a widowed mother with young children... such reasons were not recognized. It was the snobbery of the 'general class' and it was considered even more humiliating having to depend on "a woman's earnings".

Since a married woman had to be explained away with excuses and apologies, she earned herself an unflatering image of "a woman who does not wish to stay at home". The husband of such a one often cut a sorry figure, the one who never had a square meal, whose buttons were never sewed on et cetera, et cetera. It was one of those situations where people were generous with epithets like "never".

Such attitude often gave a sensitive woman a queen size guilt complex. She had to try extra hard to be a good wife "as good as anyone who stays at home", because whatever contribution she might make towards the family budget did not count as anything woman-wise, or in the womanly way.

At work, a married woman, therefore, was often regarded as a liability; since she was too over-burdened with household cares. She was usually dead beat when she reached the office desk; for one thing she

had to live up to the tradition that men must be waited on hand and foot, and that women must always be at men's beck and call. The brain-washing of her growing years was not without effect after all.

Women taking jobs were not taken seriously-just a stop-gap while looking for a suitable husband. Hence departmental heads would rather appoint men than women; and they could hardly be blamed for that attitude, for it was only too true that many women left their jobs after marriage.

Women in the department created problems, they said. Single ones were not dedicated, because they had their eyes on eligible men who would take them away from their desks. Having married women meant upset schedule every now and then because of maternity leave absences... that is not counting the casual ones because of other domestic demands.

At the same time economic pressures were at work. It was not always possible for a family to live on one person's earnings and more women entered offices as clerks and secretaries. Some took advantage of the professional courses at the university, like medicine in the first instance, and law at a much later decade.

Then came political unrest, agitation against the colonial rule. Public media went on with exhortations to women to come forward. If women had so far got but a grudging tolerance in careers, they found themselves a potential force in political organizations. More horizons were opened out for women. Here again they came up against the old enemy – male chauvinism. This will be the subject of my next article.

(6) More horizons for Myanmar women... male chauvinism again!

As economic pressures drove women to seek jobs outside the home, they inevitably became exposed to influences other than the usual brainwashings at home.

Since she had to work with men at offices it was no longer considered immodest to talk to men without the usual lowering of eyes and such coy gestures.

Fashions and modes changed perceptibly. Dresses became more revealing. Instead of the thick opaque cottons for blouses, thin transparent material came to be used. Sleeves became shorter and narrower. Blouses that used to be worn an inch or so under the waist line were shortened so that the hourglass figure was revealed to the best advantage.

With the on-coming tide of nationalism and the agitation for the boycott of foreign goods, transparent blouses became an object of criticism and censure. Since home-spun materials though opaque came in attractive colours and patterns, they did not, in any way, detract the feminine charm. Highlight on the curves and waist lines was effective but modest.

Conservativism in dress was given a death-blow when the public media began propagating health culture, exhorting women to take part in sport. Until then, any girl who played badminton in her own backyard was considered "ultra-modern" or "westernized".

Appearance of sports women wearing shorts-when women's *longyis*(sarongs) were worn just above the ankles-created a controversy. Some columnists (men, of course) ridiculed them mercilessly, but many stood on the women's side.

Jar-nai-gyaw Ma Ma Lay, a well-known woman in contemporary letters and journalism defended the sports women in her columns. She made a humble request to the attackers: "Sirs, please do not look at things with the eyes of 'kilaisa' only."

The word "kilaisa" is a term borrowed from pali. Whatever the original meaning might be, it is used in Myanmar language to describe sensual leering in the worst possible taste. That expression did the work beautifully on that occasion and it muzzled many mouths.

There was yet another force that helped women to liberate themselves, namely national movements against the colonial rule. Since there was no necessity for women to agitate for their rights, most of their organizations became more or less subsidiary forces for political parties.

For one thing, politicians were spared of the task of making special promises to women, "since they already enjoy equal status with men". In those days the struggle for independence was a common cause and a unifying factor.

Political parties of the day made full use of women. They had more news-value. The presence of women at meetings and conferences excited the interest of the populace, and a good public attendance was assured that way. But the number of women who rose to policy making and executive posts was almost nil.

Before going into the whys and wherefores of the matter, there was yet no less important role the women of those days played in the country's struggle for independence. It was nothing new or exciting but just to keep the home fires burning, while the men were braving the dangers and privations of revolutionary patriots.

When the men threw themselves in to the country's fight for independence, they also threw away their chances of being good providers; it was their women... mothers, wives or sisters, who ran the family business; trade or farm or home industry. This they did with good grace and willingness, this was their share in the building of an independent state. It must be noted, however, that such supporters of the cause were usually women with little, if any, English or vernacular education; they just knew a little vernacular and some working knowledge of arithmetic. Those with formal education, naturally, were white collar workers usually in government service, so, any participation in political movements was out of the question.

Girls from university and schools often participated in student movements, but their interest in politics lasted only as long as their college or school days. They usually faded out of the picture sooner or later. Thus, the bulk of the participants in the national movements were women who stayed within the bounds of traditional activities-keeping house, running the family business like retail shops, home industry or farms. And they did it so efficiently that the men could leave it entirely in their hands. This situation became more and more apparent in war time. The role of Myanmar women in war time will be the subject of my next article.

(7) Myanmar women in war-time

The Second World War came to Myanmar like a tornado sweeping off all sense of security. With many people the bottom just fell out. It was impossible to think what might happen the next moment. People were dazed with disbelief.

Whatever political changes the war, invasion and military occupation brought about in Myanmar, the social upheaval was shattering. Just a short time ago any rank of white collar workers, from clerks to officers in government and mercantile services were regarded with respect; their jobs were secure and even prestigious unlike those of private traders.

With the coming of the war and occupation, pre-war status symbols lost their lustre. During the first months of the war white collar workers trudged along the corridors of offices with credentials in hand hoping for a job. Even as their meagre savings dwindled away, trades-people with little formal education were well on their way to be mini-millionaires – in inflated currency.

It was then that Myanmar women with their traditional aptitude for trade began to dominate the scene. Even those who had so long lived on their husband's

salaries began to show a talent which they never thought they had.

Many women began selling things they did not quite need like jewellery, crockery, pieces of furniture for mere survival. Soon they found themselves selling not only their own things but other people's as well. Even before they realized women found themselves acting as agents or brokers, bringing together sellers and buyers-a spare-time activity with a fat commission to earn.

Even those who were not talented enough to throw themselves into such business found some modest ways of earning money. There are many varieties of pancakes made out of rice flour and jaggery, and anyone with a basic knowledge of cookery could learn to make any of those delicacies. Many women found it profitable to open a stall at home and sell their concoctions, which sold like what they were-hot cakes!

Consequently the family life pattern of those days ran something like this: the man of the family went to office; the wife either went round on her commission agent's errands or sat in her stall at home and sold pancakes or whatever snack she was good at making.

What usually happened was that the wife earned more from her home snack kiosk than her husband did at office, since the salaries could no longer keep pace with the rocketing inflation. The man's salary was only a fraction of the household expenditure. The wives who were smart enough to be commission agents belonged to the super tax level.

What might seem strange to a non-Myanmar would be the way Myanmar men took the whole thing. No man had the least tinge of resentment that his image might be defaced by the fact that the whole family lived off his wife's earnings.

The men wore what their wives bought for them, carried sumptuous lunch-boxes to office, something they could not afford but for their wives' income. They

made no attempt to keep the situation secret and they treated the whole thing as a big joke. "The man of the family goes to office to earn – not money, but the neighbour's respect!" This became a popular epigram.

Nor did the women complain. They went on cheerfully, because what they did was after the tradition of the Four Great Ladies of the Buddhist parables- "Look what Lady Madi did; she went along with her exiled husband and went out daily to collect fruits for him and children. This attitude also enhanced the man, as the one who might be a Buddha one day!"

The war also opened out a new horizon for women... namely, armed forces. Women played an important role in the resistance movement. There were many unsung heroines who laid down their lives for the country. Their courage, intelligence, and their willingness to do their duty won the ungrudging respect and admiration of their male comrades.

Here, none too honourable mention must be made of the feckless white collar women who had neither the talent for trade and business, nor for concocting delicacies. She just wasted away at her office desk to earn a month's salary which might equal a commission agent's takings of one day. And she was spoiling her husband's image by being a career woman.

But the post-war years saw a different image of a career woman; this will be the subject of my next article.

(8) Women in post-war Myanmar

With the end of the war, men, women, young people were geared into activity, each trying to make up for the lapse in their lives. Men tried to pick up their careers, young people their education. Many women in twenties and thirties, those whose formal education had been cut off by war, early marriage, or both enrolled in university or sat for degree examina-

tions studying privately. Many took office jobs to help their husbands through college.

The old prejudice against women going out to work in offices was wearing off. Parents become more enthusiastic about educating the daughters and they approved of their going out to work. Many decided that it was a better investment to educate girls, because as an old cliché says, "A son is yours until he marries; but a daughter is ever yours."

A career girl was an asset to the family, because she was easier than a son to be bullied into handing over her salary. "Look how much we had to spend on your education..." Moreover, a son's salary belonged to his wife; whereas a daughter, even if she married, still considered her upkeep as her husband's responsibility, so the parents could make as much demands as they liked on her salary... which, according to the law that "gives women equal status with men," belongs solely to the wife; the husband has no claim over it.

Such was the complete reversal of attitude towards the education of girls. Parents were not too eager to marry off their girls who had any professional talent and means.

The number of married women with jobs outside the home increased. The reason usually was economic necessity but more often it was a status symbol. A career wife, instead of spoiling the husband's image, enhanced him.

However, many post-war Myanmar women often are hardly able to enjoy their new found freedom and opportunities (form now on, it is going to be present tense) because they find themselves over-burdened with responsibilities.

These days too many things are expected of them. With keen competition around she has to try hard to hold on to her job, and at the same time keep house as good as any woman who stays at home. This is important, because any lapse in house work would mean that

she neglects her family just because she enjoys her job.

Husbands, no doubt, are more appreciative of the wives" talent and they have more respect for women than those of the previous generation did. But old ways die hard. Most men in their forties and fifties still stick to the idea that women are best used at home, where they should wait hand and foot on the men.

For such men, even if wives go out to work – and it is considered an act of indulgence on their part to let their women go out to work-wives are expected to cook and keep house as well as any woman who does not go out to work. To them, the idea of men sharing the household chores is preposterous. So much as rinsing a saucer would tarnish his manly dignity.

The younger generation of men are more accommodating. They accept the principle of partnership in marriage and they do not mind helping the wives with household chores. It is definitely a help.

Even with all these changes in attitudes, life is becoming more and more complicated. It is not easy to achieve a harmonious family life in homes where both husband and wife go out to work. Sometimes the family is spilt up, when one partner gets transferred to another place.

Some departments are humane enough to make arrangements whenever it is possible to keep their employees happy, but many just do not care. For instance, two Senior Teachers Mr. A' and Mr. B were sent out from the same school in Yangon to a district town. Now, Mr. A's wife was also a Senior Teacher working in the same school and she would be very happy to be transferred along with her husband in place of Mr. B. She made an application to this effect, but it was not to be. Mr. B, and not Mr. A's wife must be transferred as originally directed for the simple reason that Mr. B had never been transferred before.

Myanmar family pattern is a close knit one and

the feeling of kinship is very strong. Even today it is quite normal for young married people to stay with their parents. There is also a close kinship with uncles, aunts and cousins.

The Myanmar women have gained much ground no doubt; there are doctors, laywers, engineers more than ever before. But there are problems, very delicate ones. So, where do we, Myanmar women go from here? This will be the subject of my concluding article.

(9) Where do we go from here?

For the present, Myanmar women today seem to have the best of everything; they enjoy "equal status" with men and there are opportunities to express themselves. But all this does not mean that they can afford to be smug.

It does not do any good to make a scape-goat of male chauvinism for whatever failure or difficulty women have to face in pursuit of their careers, or, to use the threadbare cliché-in their search for identity.

If the potential work power of female population is to be exploited for the betterment of society both men and women will have to readjust their views and attitudes. There are admittedly lots of things that could be done constitutionally by passing laws and regulations, but many more would have to be individual tasks.

For example, take the plight of women working outside the homes as seen from news item about a recent study – United Nation November 21. (By Agnes Leon). It says- "While the study indicates an increasing trend in women's employments outside their home, the role of home maker is still assigned primarily to the women; and she is expected to perfonn that role - the study shows that an employed married woman works more hours than an employed man. And whether employed or unemployed, women shoulder almost all the burden of the housework and care of the children."

The report calls for "fundamental changes in the relationships and behaviours of the family members..."

The question of who should be minding the baby or who should do the dishes after meal in a home where both husband and wife go out to work, cannot be decided by laws. The "fundamental change in the relationships and behaviours of family members" can only be achieved by facing the hard facts of modern living.

Women's natural talents like running the home and bringing up the young should not be underestimated. Bernard Shaw once said, such tasks have so long been unpaid and taken for granted that "many foolish people do not think it is work at all."

Women, it must not be forgotten, are also individuals. They have their own likes and dislikes. There are women who are born house-wives, and to them house-wives is their whole existence. If they choose to be house-wives and be happy in their choice, why quarrel with them? they are also doing their share of social duty.

Allocation of work in human society should be according to talent and aptitude; it is as insensible to decide that women should be only house-wives and mothers, as to insist that every woman married or single should have a career outside the home.

Freedom of choice should mean not only to choose to be career women, but also to be ordinary house-wives. Today's trend seems to be that women are brainwashed to think that a woman without a job is nothing; to be a mere housewife means failure. It is as bad as, if not worse than, the housewife-oriented ideology of yesterday.

Changes in human relationships and behaviours could be brought about by individual effort. And individual effort could rise out of clear and right thinking, which, in turn must be guided through the mass media, and public education.

It is not enough that women just fall into the rat

race for careers without stopping to think whether they have the special aptitude or talent for any chosen field. Nor would it contribute anything towards the betterment of society by seeking a career, just because it is expected or because it is a status symbol.

Last but not least, Myanmar women should not forget their cultural roots and moral values regarding home and family. Such traditions will have to be upheld for society will surely be poorer for the loss of them.

In conclusion, I wish to admit that what I have so far covered in this series of articles is sketchy. There are still many gaps to be filled. It is my hope that more competent writers will help in filling those gaps.

Women in Buddhism

The Buddha, in his discourses, never slighted the role of women, not only in his personal life, but also in his mission of teaching the truth he had found. He began his life as a Sakkya prince and he left his parents, wife, Princess Yosodhara, and baby son, and took to the woods to search for the way, that would lead to the cessation of suffering.

One of his first acts, on returning home after his enlightenment, was to speak publicly of princess Yosodhara's virtue and how she had been good and faithful, not only in this life, but in many other lives as well.

One beauty about stories of the people of the Buddha's time is that some of the incidents in their previous lives were often revealed by the omniscient Buddha, as occasion demanded. Princess Yosodhara's virtue is illustrated in many stories, which today live not only in literature, but in popular songs, plays and poems

The love that lasted many lives

The story of the Buddha-to-be and his mate (the one who became princess Yosodhara), began eons of years ago, in the time of Dipankara Buddha, the fourth of the twenty-eight Buddhas, who had gone before the one whom we know as the Gotama Buddha. Dipankara Buddha was coming with a retinue of monks to a town, where a large audience waited for him to pay their respects. He stood on the bank of a small stream where no cross-over bridge had been built.

It seemed that the Buddha and his monks arrived a little earlier than expected, because a young hermit named Sumeda was right there with his spade digging up stones to pave a pathway across the stream. The

young hermit threw himself prostrate before the Buddha so that the Buddha might walk over him.

Dipankara Buddha declined, saying that the young hermit would one day be a Buddha like himself. It was a great moment for the young hermit Sumeda, to hear from the lips of the Buddha; "You , my son, will be a Buddha like me ... "

There was a general rejoicing to hear the young hermit so honoured. Of course, it would take billions and billions of lives of practising the cardinal virtues of a Boddhisat. It also meant innumerable lives of steadfast courage, determination and sacrifice to attain Buddha hood. The road before him that he must tread was like an endless expanse of burning charcoal, as deep and wide as the universe; the Great One who was determined to be the Buddha must not flinch to tread that fearsome path, until he attained the goal of Buddhahood.

The young hermit Sumeda knew only too well what it meant to strive for Buddhahood. He was happy that he was qualified to strive for such a goal. At that time, among the audience, was a young weaver maid, who was filled with admiration for the young hermit. She made an offering of lotus flowers at the Buddha's feet and made a wish; that she might be reborn in all her lives to come as the young hermit's help-mate and companion.

That was how it began, the love story, so to say that lasted not only one life, but many lives.

Female disciples of the Buddha

During his ministry of forty-five years, the Buddha spoke as highly of his female disciples as of his monks. There was Maha-pajapati, the Buddha's stepmother, who nursed him as her very own, when his mother died seven days after his birth.

It was due to the lady's entreaty and insistence that the Buddha granted her ordination into the order and

thus founded the order of nuns or *theris*. Princess Yasodhara was among the first who entered the order and attained the highest stage of enlightenment.

Today, there is only the order of monks but not of the *theris*. Even though there are nuns, they are no longer of the same status as the order of monks.

The life stories of the Buddha's female disciples also include those of the lay women. Lay disciples, it seemed, played an important role in the propagation of the truth the Buddha taught.

The Buddha's counsel on marriage

There was lady Visakha, born of a fabulously rich family, later married into a family of the same status, but of a different faith. Her story lives today as an excellent guide to women; because in her story, there is a wealth of wisdom and advice to, perhaps, women of all time.

When Visakha was given in marriage to Migara's son, in a far-away town of Savatti, her father gave her ten admonitions, many of which even to this day, are good pieces of marriage counselling. To quote only two of them, namely; one, carry not the indoor fire outside; two, carry not the outdoor fire inside.

Carry not the indoor fire outside means, if you see any fault in your father-in-law or your husband, say nothing about it when you go to other houses; carry not the outdoor fire inside means, if either men or women in your neighbours' houses speak ill of your father-in-law or your husband, you must not repeat it to your family. This piece of advice holds good any time, anywhere.

In accordance with the custom of the day and rule of her cast, Visakha went to live with her husband's family in the faraway town. "Whither thou goest, I go, thy people are my people, thy country, my country ... " she might say, but not 'thy god, my god' because her husband's family worshipped the naked ascetics.

Needless to say, Visakha's early years of married life were beset with problems. It was her wisdom and strength of character that finally converted her husband's family to follow the Buddha's path. Her father-in-law, Migara, after hearing the Buddha's sermon, was so moved that he declared. "Today henceforth, Visakha is my mother .... " She came to be known as the mother of Migara.

Visakha .... leader of female disciples

Visakha was one of the supporters of the Buddha and his monks. She saw to it that they had no lack of food, robes, shelter or medicine. She was the leader of the female disciples, and in his discourses with her the Buddha gave blueprints of happiness and success for women.

In one of his discourses the Buddha said;

"Oh, Visakha, to be a success in life, a woman must practise four virtues, namely she has the affairs of household and family well in hand, and goes about managing them efficiently, from preparing wool to household chores. She is skilled and diligent and never idle, always seeking ways and means to do better; she is very capable.

Secondly, she knows how to look after relatives, friends and slaves. She knows every niche and corner of the household and who is doing what, and whether he does it well or not. She looks after the sick and ailing and attends to the needy and the poor.

Thirdly, she does only the things that delight her husband. Fourthly, she looks after the property, land, grain, silver and gold, her husband has earned for her and family.

Such a woman, Visakha, is a success in life."

A virtuous woman who can find?

This discourse, perhaps might remind the readers of the lines in the Bible, proverbs, Chapter 13.

"A virtuous woman who can find?
For her price is far above rubies,
The heart of her husband trusteth in her,
And he shall have no lack of gain
She seeketh wool and flax.
And worketh willingly with her hands.
She riseth also while it is yet night,
And giveth meat to her household.
She spreadeth out her hand to the poor;
Yea, she reacheth forth her hand to the needy."

Visakha was one of the pillars of the Buddhist society of her time. She was responsible for many rules of conduct for monks and nuns and also for the taming and conversion of wayward women.

Once Visakha had to look after five hundred young women whose husbands were away from home. The young women gave themselves to drink and staged a scandalous drinking bout, singing and dancing. Visakha took them to the Buddha who brought them to their senses and established them in mindfulness. They were so tamed.

Visakha lived to a ripe old age. She kept all her life the appearance of a girl of sixteen. It is said that no one could tell who was Visakha, when she sat among her daughters, grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters. Only when she stood up her old bones creaked and gave her away.

Visakha's joy of life

Visakha is an example of what great service a lay disciple could do to the cause of Buddhism; she brought happiness and peace among her kinsmen and friends. She had as much capacity for work as for the enjoyment of life.

She could enjoy life with great gusto. Once she built a great monastery and offered it to the Buddha and his monks. She was so filled with a joy of achievement that she walked round the monastery surrounded by

her children and descendants, dancing and singing;

"When shall I give the gift of a monastery, a pleasing dwelling place plastered with cement and mortar?

Fulfilled is my desire"

Some of the monks were surprised that Visakha should sing; they thought she had gone mad. The Buddha explained how Visakha in one of her past lives had made a wish that she might be the donor of a monastery to the Buddha and his monks. The Buddha ended his discourse with the words.

"Monks, even as out of a great heap of flowers of various kinds, a skillful garland-maker makes all manner of garlands of flowers even so the mind of Visakha inclines to the doing of all manner of good deeds."

A woman like anyone else, anywhere, any time

The story of Visakha lives today in the hearts of Buddhists, may be because, it is a story of a lay-woman closer to people than the *theris* or nuns. Visakha is very much a woman like anyone else, she had marriage problems, social difficulties, and sometimes ran into awkward situations with governments officials.

Once, her relatives at home sent her costly presents and the customs officials levied an impossible amount of tax on them. She appealed to the king many times, but the king had neither the time nor inclination to see into these matters. All she could do was to take refuge in the Buddha's comforting sermons.

Buddhism; no anti-feminism

Buddhism, says a western writer, knows nothing of the persistent anti-feminism of other eastern religions. The most essential task for every Buddhist is to gain insight into the Buddha's teachings and this could be achieved by anyone, man or woman. *Nibbana*, or the highest stage of enlightenment is, to many a long way off, but there are other stages of insight, or in other words, other fruits of the great truth the Buddha taught

to be gained; and such stages are within the reach of laymen and house-holders. Visakha and many other lay disciples stand as living examples of what a lay Buddhist can achieve.

The story of another lady, Matika-mata, a lady disciple, is a good illustrating that there is no discrimination of the sexes in Buddhism. The lady built a monastery for the Buddha's monks and looked after their needs.

One day, she asked the monks to teach her to practise meditation; the monks taught her verbatim of what the Buddha had taught them.

The lady who went ahead of the monks

Matika-mata practised along with the monk but she went ahead of them and attained insight while the monks were still struggling. In Buddhism knowing the method, through reading books or hearing sermon, is one thing and to practise and see for oneself the light of Truth is another.

Matika-mata, in her newly-attained wisdom, saw that none of the monks had attained insight. She also saw that the monks could not attain insight unless certain creature comforts were satisfied. So, she saw to their needs in such a way that no sooner had the monks wished for some particular food than their wish was fulfilled in exactly the way that they wished it.

The monks were embarrassed, thinking that the lady must be a mindreader. They put more effort in their practice and soon attained insight. They reported back to the Buddha of their achievement and praised the lady with deep gratitude.Matika-mata, not only went ahead in her achievement, but even helped the monks to gain insight.

The nuns or *theris* "Free ... Gloriously free!"

So much for lay disciples. Then come the *theris* or nuns, the ladies, who renounced the worldly life to enter the Buddha's order. As nuns, they might not be as

close to worldings as Visakha, but they too started as laywomen. Their life stories are human stories of their struggle to attain inner peace.

The lives of the *theris* are found in the verses or psalms uttered by them at the moment of the attaining insight; each psalm is an autobiography in a nut-shell. These verses had been rendered into English by Mrs.Rhys Davids.

Some of the psalms should be battle hyms for those of the women's lib. movement. There was one lady, who after breaking away from worldly bonds sang out;

"O free indeed! O gloriously free am I!"

These nuns or *theris* had laid dawn all social position and domestic happiness; they had lost their world; but in exchange, they won the status of an individual free from all fetters.

How should a woman's nature hinder us?

Once, mara, the evil spirit, taunted Soma, a high-born lady who entered the Buddha's Order thus;

"What vantage-ground the sages may attain is
hard to reach. With her two-finger consciousness.
That is no woman competent to gain!"

The evil one meant that a woman's sense went only as far as testing the boiled rice grain with her two fingers to see if it is cooked; so, how could this "two-finger sense"gain insight? Soma, the *theri*, rebuked the evil one;

"How should a woman's nature hinder us?
Whose hearts are firmly set, who ever move
With growing knowledge onward in the Path?"

A poor ill-used house-wife freed from drudgery

Not all those who attained insight were rich high born ladies. Here is a poor ill-used housewife who entered the Order. One day, as she sat in meditation, she attained insight; in her moment of triumph, she cried,

"O woman well set free! How free I am!
How thoroughly free from kitchen drudgery!
Me stained and squalid among my cooking pots
Purged now of all my former lust and hate,
I dwell, musing at ease beneath the shade
Of spreading, boughs ... oh, but 'tis well with me!"

The order of nuns or *theris* in the Buddha's time consisted of womrn from all walks of life, princesses, commoners and courtesans. There was Ambapali, the famous courtesan. She was so beautiful in her youth that there was strife among the princes, each desiring her for his own. At last they solved the problem making her a courtesan.

Song of a former courtesan

Ambapali became the Buddha's lay disciple and she built a monastery for him and the monks. Later she entered the Order and she soon attained insight. In her psalm of triumph, she described how she gained insight into the Buddha's teaching, namely impermance and decay;

"Like the coils of a snake the full beauty of the
thighs of me. They with the waste of years are even
as stems of bamboo. So and not otherwise runneth
the rune , the word of the Soothsayer."

She went over the decay of her own-beautiful body in twenty verses and she ended each statemnent with the realization of the word of the Soothsayer, in other words, the Buddha, who never said otherwise. Her psalms are reminiscnent of Francois Villon's

The complaint of a helm-maker grown old:

"Such is the end of human grance;
The arms grown short and hands all thrawn;
Shoulders bowed out of their place;
Breasts all shrivelled up and gone;
The haunches like the paps withdrawn;
The thighs no longer like to thighs,
Withered and mottled like brawn ... "

Women like Ambapali were once vain of their

beauty and success; they had once devoured the virtue of many with "manifold wiles"; and then came the day when they lost all their beauty. But it was not the end. Because they followed the Buddha's way, they gained something above all beauty, namely insight into the Truth. This, they achieved, by strenuous contemplation on their shrunken body, age-weary, weak and unsightly.

Human moving stories

There is a wealth of reading and contemplation in the psalms of the *theris* and nuns, whose stories are human and moving. There is the story of Kondalakesi, who became a wandering ascetic, a disciple of the Jains. She was famous for her intellectual prowess. She went from place to place challenging any sage to engage in intellsctual discussions with her. One day, she met one of the Buddha's disciples, who defeated her.

Thenceforth she was converted to the Buddha's way and later, she attained enlightement. This is only her life story as an ascetic; but she a colourful past as a lay woman.

Born to wealth and position, she was so proud that she could not find any man who she could love enogh to marry. One day, looking out of the window, she saw a bandit being led to execution. She fell in love with him at first sight and she managed to get him saved by means of bribery, so that she might love and cherish him as her lord and master.

The union did not last however, for the bandit got tired of her. One day, he asked her to come out with him to a picnic on the hills. Once on top of a lonely hill, he told her to prepare herself for the death, for he was going to hurl her over the cliff. Kondalakesi asked for favour of embracing him for the last time, which he granted. She held him in her arms in a last embrace. loosened her arms lingeringly and gave him a desperate push over the cliff.

A *nat* or a spirit dwelling on the hill saw this and praised her.

"Not in every case is man wiser ever;
Woman, too, when swift to see, may prove as clever."

She did not go back home; she bacame a wandering ascetic, until she came to the Buddha.

Performing Arts

The triumvirate of the Myanmar stage

Daw Ah Mar's book *Aung-ba-la, Po Sein, Sein-ga-done*, a result of years of painstaking research and study, not only breathes life into The triumvirate of *minthas* who ruled the Myanmar *zat* stage for half a century, but also recreates the atmosphere of the earlier of the twentieth century.

The chronological data of the three great theatrical personalities runs thus:

Aung-ba-la 1882-1913
Sein-ga-done 1875-1929
Po Sein 1881-1952

Today, there survive only a few who had seen Aung-ba-la on *zat* stage, but to many of us who had grown up during the pre-war days, The name spells magic and enchantment. For, in those days, discs of Aung-ba-la's songs were played in many homes, spiced with running commentaries from the elders who hugged the great artiste's memory to their hearts.

To be able to appreciate the Myanmar *zat*, knowledge of the language is essential even though the story theme is well supported by songs and orchestra. Myanmar *zat* is neither a play, nor a musical nor a ballet, nor an opera, but it contains a little of each of the characteristics of the so named theatrical arts. *Mintha* is the male lead and *minthami*, his female counterpart; they dance, sing, speak and act as they present the story and *zats* run the whole night from nine or ten till dawn.

Daw Ah Mar's book awakens in us nostalgic memories of the wide open spaces round a famous pagoda where the annual festival was being held. It was a wonderland of colourful stalls where one might shop for anything from glazed earthen pots to silk and

silver wares. And of course, there would be *zat-pwes*... Po Sein's and Sein-ga-done's.

Two large canvas tents were set up a few yards away from each other and the sound of *be-hti*(ဗေဟတိ) boomed out from one tent and the challenge was answered by a louder one from the other tent. Crowds began to fill the festival grounds and the two canvas tents blossomed forth with bulbs of electric lights, generated by their own engines.

People began to gather round the box-offices of the canvas tents and greeted one another: "Which one are you going to see, Po Sein or Sein-ga-done?"

Then there followed a spirited discussion on the two great reigning kings of the *zat* theatre.

"There's none like Po Sein in eloquence, Sein-ga-done comes nowhere near him in this art."

"But Sein-ga-done has his own inimitable charm. He is dignified, not flippant like Po Sein."

"Po Sein is exciting to watch.... he is daring and original. His eloquence enthralls the audience."

"Sein-ga-done may not be loquacious like Po Sein but his intonation is perfect and every word carries depth. He never uses gestures, he would rather hold the audience with his cool grace and dignity."

"How I wish Aung-ba-la were still alive, no *minthami* can compete with him in feminine roles he played. I still remember seeing him for the first time. He came on the stage, dressed as a female dancer, mind you, and the first thought that come was, "How on earth am I going to bear with this thing as a *minthami* tonight?" But as he sang, spoke and danced he became gradually so feminine that when he addressed the *mintha* with the affectionate monosyllable *maung*, it was so full of tenderness and love that I almost stood up and answered."

Aung-ba-la, though dead and gone for a decade or so, still ruled the *zat* stage and many minthamis often sang his songs and dances to the delight of the audi-

ences. His art lives on even to this day on the *zat* as well as on the puppet stage.

Aung-ba-la was a fantastic personality who became a legend in his own short life. He achieved fame playing female leads in the days when the great Prima Donna Ma Htwe Lay (who had performed at the court of Myanmar kings) the divine Sarah of the Myanmar zat stage had barely vacated her throne and when there was no death of female artistes(*minthamis*). Aung-ba-la was one of Ma Htwe Lay's pupils and the great *minthami's* art had found a worthy exponent in Aung-ba-la.

Aung-ba-la played female leads to Po Sein and Sein-ga-done, and Po Sein, who never allowed anyone to shadow him on the stage, is said to have found Aung-ba-la a formidable rival. As a mere male who beat the female artistes at their own game, Aung-ba-la became the darling of the Myanmar *zat* stage.

When he died at the age of thirty-one at Mandalay, his funeral and the mass mourning that followed rivalled that of Valentino's. The people of Mandalay gave a funeral fit to be a king's and orations and obsequies live on today as fine literary pieces. True to the Myanmar character, the solemnities of Aung-ba-la's funeral were not allowed to go without a touch of wit and humour. Soon after the funeral there appeared in the newspaper a *tay-dat* (Myanmar sonnet composed of eighteen lines) condemning the fair sex for shamelessly flaunting their grief for Aung-ba-la. Of course, the language of the poem, to say the least, was colourful, hardly the kind spoken in the presence of, or in reference to ladies.

The next issue carried a reply, a *tay-dat* from the 'ladies', who showed that their vocabulary was as picturesque as their brothers. Later someone wrote yet another *tay-dat* childing them to stop all that nonsense, since the matter must have been started by some jealous indignant young men, because the fair ones would

rather weep over Aung-ba-la's hier than spare a glance to them... so alive and handsome.

Daw Ah Mar's book with texts of song sung by the Great Three, is an achievement in belles-lettres.... which, in my humble opinion, is nothing, when compared to the bitter-sweet memories it awakens in old fogeys like us, making us young and enchanted once again.

The art of Myanmar Zat-pwe

zat; story: *pwe*; show: *zat-pwe*; Myanmar musical play: *mintha;* male lead: *minthami*; female lead: *ngo-gyin*; wailing song: *nha-par-thwar*, duet dance and song: *lun-khan*; tragic scene.

There is no nation on the face of the earth so fond of fun and laughter and theatrical entertainment as the Myanmar. For a Myanmar, from the moment he is pushed into the world, his first wah-wah is accompanied by *saing* (music of the orchestra played to celebrate any event), and throughout his life's journey, everything that happens to him, or everything he does is accompanied by *saing;* this goes on, until he leaves the world with *saing* playing the dolorous note of the Monkey King's Lament that being the title of the funeral music.

Without the benefit of *saing*(ဆိုင်းမပါ ဗုဒ္ဓပါ) is a popular Myanmar idiom to describe any dull, uninteresting event or something unceremonious or unheralded. A person arriving without any previous notice is often remarked upon as arriving without the benefit of *saing*.

The art of Myanmar *zat-pwe* is one of the subtlest and most elusive of arts and trying to explan it is like capturing a moon beam to analyze its power over lovers and poets.

Zat-pwe is deeply rooted in the traditions of the country and has many conventions which are not easily understood by a casual spectator. Myanmar's monarchical past has given the *zat-pwe* the glorious music and songs as well as court dramas of great poetic beauty. Most of the *zats* (stories or plots) are drawn from Buddhist scriptures and from there, the *zat* artistes draw their inspiration and help to interpret to the laymen the Buddhist thought and way of life.

Since the elements of the opera, ballet and musical are woven into the *zat-pwe*, the whole thing is a wonderful piece created by the teamwork of artistes; but the artistes themselves are fiercely individualistic, each expressing himself or herself with such freedom that it makes you marvel at the spontaneous coordination that is finally achieved.

Because of its individual style, that is characteristic of the Myanmar, we cannot look at *zat-pwe* through coloured spectacles of foreign manufacture... which mistake I made, when I viewed it with eyes dimmed by half-baked ideas I had gathered, after scanning through ancient Greek dramas, Shakespeare and modern English plays for the purpose of passing an examination.

In those days I had so much to say about *zat* conventions and practices; "There is no classification of tragedy and comedy, it lacks realism, no proper attention is given to the plot, the scenes are long drawn-out, there is no unity of time or space. There's the *nha-par-thwar* scene, with one *mintha* and six or eight *minthamis* singing and dancing; it's hardly decent, because it is like flinging the *mintha's* Cassanova activities in the public's face. As for *lun-khan* why should there be *ngo-gyins* (wailing songs) enough to make us a nation of pessimists?... et cetera, et cetera." Yes, there was a time when I said all these and much more.

Today, I take back all the things I had said and I feel both humble and happy in the realisation that I had been blind to the beauties of the *zat-pwe* which I

recently discovered after thirty years of turning my impertinent back upon the traditional Myanmar entertainment.

Today, *zat-pwe* is still misinterpreted and much injustice is being done to it in futile attempts to evict decadent influences that are as natural as weeds in a flower garden. One cannot be too careful not to injure the blooms in pruning away the undesirable undergrowths.

Nha-par-thwar scene in the old days used to be a duet, dancing and singing, with one *mintha* and one *minthami*. Later, probably to meet the demands of the audience, the artistes introduced new attractions, hence one *mintha* with many *minthamis* in the scene.

The dancing and singing of each *minthami* in *nha-par-thwar* scene symbolize different facets of feminine charm and the *mintha* responds with varying moods to match each act. One of the arts of a *mintha* is part of *nha-par-thwar*; not only has he to do the duet dance and sing, he must also have subtle artistry in reciprocating the infinite variety of his *minthamis*

The *nha-par-thwar* scene in the hands of a consummate artist blossoms forth as a thing of beauty, but when a lesser performer enacts it, it becomes nothing but a vulgar sham, a Cassanova shamelessly flaunting his amours and bringing out the worst side of man's baser instincts.

Ngo-gyins(wailing songs) used to worry me a lot: "There are too many of them in *zat-pwes* enough to drive the whole country mad; we shall become a nation of pessimists . . ." Now I realise all that kind of high and mighty talk is nothing but a pose, a wiser-than-thou attitude acquired through having a smattering of education; for when Daw Ah Mar's book on the three great *minthas*, *Aung-ba-la, Po Sein, Sein-ga-done* came out complete with texts of *ngogyins* sung by the great three, I found myself warbling the half-forgotten airs of my youngers days to the astonishment of my family. Only then did I remember how I had enjoyed them both at *zat-pwe* and on the discs played on the trusty gramophone, fitted with a fluted horn.

I have discovered that *ngo-gyin* is not a dolorous wailing song as it literallu suggests. *Zat-pwe* being partly operatic, most of the dialogue is wholly or party sung to music of the orchestra and *ngo-gyin* is somewhat, if not wholly, similar to the arias of the western operas. *Ngo-gyins* are sung both as soliloquies and also in dialogue and they are sung to express lyrical emotion.

The histrionic and singing art of *ngo-gyin* deserves a comprehensive treatment with reference to texts sung by great artistes, and with the help of Daw Ah Mar's book and colourful snippets I managed to pick up from my recent rediscovery through seeing Shwe-Mahn Tin Maung's *zat-pwe*, I hope to present the art of *ngo-gyin* more fully some day.

Suffice it to say for the present that the art of *ngo-gyin*, like that of *nha-par-thwar*, needs a really accomplished artist to bring out its beauties.

One of the many mistakes I made in assessing *zat-pwe* is that I deplored the lack of realism, which I now realise is a stupid thing; for, who wants realism in the fantastic world of makebelieve created by dance, song and music? If I was not prepared to be transported into a realm of 'suspension of disbelief' I should not have gone to a *zat-pwe* in the first place. I should rather be left to wallow in the slime of realities that life has to offer in abundance, today, or any day.

Zat-pwe is thoroughly Myanmar, very much in keeping with the national character, and I hope I shall ever be Myanmar enough to enjoy its beauties that custom cannot stale. I hope I shall never be such a dull piece of goods, that the stirring music of *nat-chin*, the music of the *nat-ka-daw* dance which usually opens a *zat-pwe* fails to make my heart beat to its

tune. I pray that I may never have a soul so dead that the dance of the *belus*, *zawgyis*, and *nagas* fails to fill me with a sences of wonder and insight into human aspirations symbolized by these mythical creatures.

The Magic of Myanmar Zat-Pwe

Myanmar zat pwes have not lost their hold on us in spite of the invasion of movies and other forms of entertainment. One essential feature in the Myanmar zat-pwe is that we do not look for realism on the Myanmar stage. The dance, song and music build a fantastic world of make believe. That is why the zat-pwe cannot be appreciated when one tends to be rational.

The purpose of *zat-pwe* is to entertain and to convey a few truths for us to live by. Most of the stories enacted are from the Buddha's birth stories whose moral values are universally recognized.

Nuggets of wisdom

Decades ago, people from rural areas owed their education to monasteries and *zat-pwe* in that order. Many of the great artistes of the Myanmar stage learned literature in monasteries and they gave the audience nuggets of wisdom through their songs and lines spoken on the stage.

Stage characters

Like all dramatic arts, the Myanmar stage has its own stock in trade characters like *belu* (ogre), *zawgyi* (demi-god with miraculous powers), *nat* (celestial being), *naga* (sea dragon) and *yathe* (hermit). There are also dramatic situations that help to symbolise certain abstracts ideas.

Belu, naga, zawgyi and *nat* are colourful characters that are sheer delight to the audience. The *belu*

dance is a poetic composition of grace, ruthless virility and elusive swiftness, the one that fills the audience with awe and admiration. The *zawgyi* dance is colourful, thrilling, and full of gusto and bounce.

One does not naturally pause to think if there is such a creature as *belu* or *zawgyi*. One does not put poetry under a microscope. These mythical dances are to be enjoyed, not to be rationalised.

Many of the dramatic stories are not credible; for instance, the story of the princess born out of a lotus bud. It is neither rational nor scientific; but who wants to be that, when we are watching the beautiful princess come out of the lotus bud singing:

At the soft tender caress of zephyr
The *padonma* lotus petals unfold;
And I, the goddess maid, come forth. . .
ရွှေပဒုံ လွှာအချပ်ကိုလ၊
လေအဟုန် လာ၍ခတ်စဉ်က၊
ကညာနတ် ထွက်ခဲ့တယ်။

The princess born out of a lotus bud symbolises the flawless virtue of the princess and her ethereal beauty. The whole scene with all the dance and music is a hymn to womanhood.

Virtue versus sin

One of the popular scenes in Myanmar *zat* is the seduction of the virtuous woman by either a *belu* or a *zawgyi*. In Rama *zat*, the princess is left alone in the forest with a line drawn around her; she must not go beyond the line drawn on the ground. Then the *belu* comes in the guise of a holy man and tells the princess he will not accept her offerings unless she comes out of the bounds. It is presumed that the *belu* cannot cross the line drawn on the ground and take her away.

To the rational mind, it sounds ridiculous that a *belu* cannot cross the line drawn on the ground. But then, the line symbolises the bound of propriety that a

virtuous wife should not overstep. When the princess goes beyond that bound, she exposes herself to the evil machinations of the *belu*.

***Zat-pwe*; medium of education**

This is meant to be a warning to women. In the days of our grandmother there were few books to read, no women's magazines, no lonely hearts column. *Zat-pwes* were the medium of their education.

It is a stroke of genius that the villain who tempts the virtuous heroine is either a *belu* or a *zawgyi*. The drama of conflict is between virtue (personified by the heroine) and sin (personified by the *belu* or *zawgyi*). Sin is not represented in a repulsive form, in which case, it might be easier for the heroine to resist, but it will weaken the dramatic force.

When sin is personified in the attractive figure of either a *belu* or *zawgyi*, conflict becomes more intense. In representing sin as colourful characters the dramatics must have been carried away by their own emotions. When Milton presented Satan he could not help adding colourful strokes that came very near glorifying the villain. It is human to be attracted by the glamour of sin, as moths are by the glare of light.

Sin appears on the stage virile, graceful, ruthless, and full of dignity like *belu*, or sometimes colourful, mysterious, playful and teasing like the *zawgyi*. The resistance of the virtuous woman against such an antagonist heightens the drama.

Mythical beings: no play complete without them

One of the mythical characters that seems to be most unsatisfactory is the *nat* without whom no play is complete, even though he does not seem to do anything at all. His function is, however, as indispensable in Myanmar drama as the Chorus is in Greek drama. They are commentators, not emotionally involved in the plot.

The play moves on, its characters loving, hating, laughing, weeping, everyone tossed by the waves of passion, but there has to be a character who is like a rock even though everyone around him has gone berserk. Such a character in Greek plays is the Chorus, usually represented as Father Time.

Our *nats* and hermits serve the same function as the Chorus, but they are more attractive. Unlike the Chorus they do not stand apart from the plot. They participlate in the plot but do not interfere with it.

Dramatic conventions

The example of the part played by the *nat* or a hermit can be illustrated by a stock dramatic plot. A baby prince is left in a burial ground, because there is a war going on between his father and another king. The baby is picked up by a poor goat-herd and brought up as his own son. Since the next scene must show the baby as sixteen-year-old, something has to be done to bridge the passage of time. So in between the two scenes, a hermit or a *nat* comes out and comments on the evils of war and greed and soliloquises on the fate of the young prince in the house of a poor goat-herd; to make things easy for him, the *nat* or the hermit bathes the baby in a magic pond. And lo! and behold! a young prince rises out of the pond with appropriate music and songs uttering declamations.

Deus ex machina

We ask why should this hermit or the *nat* with such miraculous powers appear only after things have gone too bad? Where was he when all the war and killing took place? Why can't he prevent the horrid war that deprives the baby of his parents? But then we forget that if the *nat* or the hermit could prevent that war there would be no plot, no *zat* at all.

We come to see the *pwe* not to ask questions but to enjoy. And it is often through the lines spoken by

the *nat* or hermit that some special message or moral lesson is conveyed to us.

It is complete suspension of disbelief, sheer delight in music and songs we seek in a *zat pwe*. All this and moral lessons too!

How to enjoy a Myanmar zat-pwe

The first thing to know about enjoying a Myanmar zat-pwe is that you must be prepared to stay the whole night, that is from 9 p.m to 6 a.m. You cannot go about it casually as you go to the flicks. You have to organise the expendition with efficiency.

First, get as much space as you can afford in the theatre, a huge rambling tent of bamboo matting. You can book spaces marked with numbered bamboo mats It is advisable to allot one mat for one person although two or three can sit comfortably on one mat.

After getting the space not too far or near the stage, you leave home at about 8 p.m. taking quite a few things you will need for the night. The list should be;

One carpet, big enough to cover the space booked.

As many small cushions or pillows as you can get,

Light cotton Myanmar *saungs* or covers,

A big flask of tea or coffee.

Oranges or any other fruits in season,

A dish of *letphet* (picked tea) and *gyin-thok* (ginger):

This last named item can be bought from *pwe-zay* (eatable stalls), a gastronomical wonderland of Myanmar delicacies which are yours for the taking provided you have a strong stomach.

Carrying your things, you wade through the crowd into the *zat-yon* (theatre) easy . . . easy, for you might step on some sleeping child or knock over somebody's cheroot, for many *zat-pwe* fans are already before you and they have already settled in their places.

At long last you find the mats whose numbers matched those on your tickets. You shoo away the squatters as tactfully as your patience allows and you spread the carpet and put the cushions to mark the 'border', so that others will not encroach on your territory. You put the basket of eatables in the middle and sit down stretching your legs. . . oh, I almost forgot, you wear comfortable clothes and you shove your slippers under the carpet. If you feel like having extra comfort, a quilt or a light mattress should be taken along. Now you can have a smoke, no need to fear of choking, the *zat-yon* is well-ventilated, you can see the moon and stars through the chinks of bamboo mat roofing and I hope you have not forgotten to bring the ash-tray.

Before you, the scarlet velvet curtain hangs on the stage, enhanced by the lights, and you try to imagine the mysteries that are going to be unfolded tonight, for the programme is rather vague, the first part of the show being a musical play with contemporary theme and the latter part, a presentation of a story from the Jatakas or Dhammapada, a story as well known to the Myanmar public as *Hamlet* is to the English theatre-goers.

Going to a Myanmar *zat-pwe* is an aesthetic adventure, for you never know what you will see, that is, unless you have seen the same programme before, but the possibility is remote, for *zat-pwe* programmes are varied.

So, there is nothing for you to do but lounge on your cushions with your feet wrapped up in cotton *saungs* (covers) and take a few mouthfuls of *letphet* or *gyin-thok* and look around. The Myanmar orchestra stands on the left of the stage and the figure of a unicorn, scintillating with gilt and glass mosaic, looks proudly over the circular row of small drums (*bons*). As the huge drum boomed *behti*, the coloured balls hanging on the stand fly to and fro.

Of course you are not in a hurry for the show to begin. *Zat-pwe* is not meant for those who are too

absorbed in the rat race to enjoy the beauties life has to offer... one of the best, if not the best being Myanmar *zat-pwe*. Myanmar *zat-pwe* is for those who are not afraid of waiving away the mundane affairs, to step into a world of fantasy where prosaic things are not allowed to enter.

Personally speaking, enjoyment of the Myanmar *zat-pwe* is a rediscovery. I had spent my impressionable years with relatives who never missed the performance of Sein-ga-done or Po Sein at the festivals, but it is thirty years since I went to a Myanmar *zat-pwe*,... since I left my home-town to settle down in Yangon where cinema houses blazed with posters of foreign films.

It is Daw Ah Mar's book *Aungbala, Po Sein, Sein-ga-done* that recreated the art of the three great *minthas*, of the *zat-pwe* stage, and awakens old memories, and urges me to go out to recapture the old magic of enjoying a *zat-pwe*. Shwe Mahn Tin Maung was the reigning king of the *zat-pwe* stage after the Great Po Sein was no more. It is gratifying to know Shwe Mahn Tin Maung carrying on the tradition of the Myanmar *zat*, the art of which is a balm to overwrought souls.

Myanmar *zat-pwe* is a national institution, educator of the masses, a store-house of culture where foklore, scripture stories, Buddhist thought, and social ethics mingle with music, songs and dances and are communicated to the people, and above all it is a fount of life-giving nectar, without which we Myanmar people would not have survived through all these civil strifes, wars and invasions.

Do not for goodness sake be worried by objections to having an all night long performance. Attempts have been made these four decades by well-meaning persons to shorten the performance, but the artistes and audience agree that nothing less than an all night's performance will do, so that's that. You

can't get a bus to go back home in the middle of the night anyway.

Only after you have seen through the all-night performance... lounging comfortably on cushions, sucking oranges, you realise the beauties of the Myanmar *zat-pwe*, a sumptuous dish of serious contemplation, drama, wit, and humour presented with songs, dances and music.

In the morning you are relaxed and happy, not at all like the mornings you wake up after tossing on a sleepless bed. The following day you switch off the phone, leave a message for the world that you are dead... and sleep the whole day. Late in the afternoon, you will wake up, a giant refreshed, equal to face life for quite a while to come.

I am glad I rediscovered the art of enjoying a Myanmar *zat-pwe* in time to stop me from becoming an interfering mum-in-law and shortly an over-anxious doddering granny.

The nativity of Bodhisatta on *zat-pwe* stage

Prince Siddattha, who was to be the Buddha, the Enlightened One, was born in the Sakya clan, whose country lay along the southern edge of Nepal. Its capital was Kapilavastu, and it was on a journey from it that his mother, Queen Maya, gave birth to a son in the lumbini garden which lie just over the modern border of Nepal . The mother was in her fifties and she passed away, seven days after the child was born, and her sister Pajapati Gautami nursed him as her own.

Such is the story of Bodhisatta's nativity and the *zat-pwe* stage presentation of the episode is a colourful tapestry of myth and reality, the sublime and the earthy, fantasy and realism. It is also a happy blend of ingenious dramatisation and the actors' virtuosity, supported by the orchestra.

The dramatist (most of the lines are written by UAung Sein, a veteran *mintha*) blends the theme with elements of a noble tragedy... namely, the scandal of barrenness in the Sakya royal family, wagging tongues both at home and aboard, family gossip started by the queen's own brother, who thinks his sister's failure to bear an heir a stain on his prestige, resentments and retaliations, the unlikely prospect of this royal couple having an heir in their fifties, and the unkind com-

ments that lead to the queen's making a journey to her home town to get even with her relatives, her confinement on the way, her passing, and her brother and her husband quarrelling over who should give the burial rites, and, lastly, the voice of Maya from the celestial regions, that brings peace and tranquility to the sorrowing hearts ... the result is a fine piece of drama after the tradition of the Sanskrit theatre, the aim of which is to evoke a sentiment or rasa. It is therefore, totally different from western drama, where the importance is placed on a plot worked through psychological conflict.

Myanmar *zat-pwe* is deeply rooted in the traditions of the past and conventions like the three unities, so important in western drama, are quite irrelevant, nor can *zat-pwe* plays be classified as tragedies or comedies, for they usually include both comic and tragic events and the audience, culturally Buddhist, is accustomed to follow the story through eons of years and rounds of rebirth, as the characters are born and reborn in human abode or in the celestial regions.

The dialogue is either in song or in recitative, the kind of rhyme is only possible in a monosyllabic language, and it is supported by the orchestral music as befits the mood of the scene. The glorious beat of the royal drum transports the audience into the courtly palaces, and with the tune of the *kyo* that is suggestive of the flight of the winged angels among the spheres, we find ourselves in the goodly company of the celestials.

While the mortals down on earth are busy scandal mongering over the queen's inability to bear an heir, the celestials above discuss among themselves that it is time for their compatriot the Bodhisatta, in Tusita (a celestial region), to be reborn in the human abode, so that he could consummate the purpose of attaining Buddhahood.

When the Budhisatta is informed that he would have to be reborn as a human being, he expresses in a

beautiful recitative, his reluctance to leave the heavenly state, that is essentially of human hearts.

Bodhisatta's recitative, though technically called *ngo-gyin*, is not a wailing song, as the name suggests, and it does not give an impression of Bodhisattta weeping because he does not want to be born a human being.

That the Bodhisatta, after having fulfilled his ten paramis (perfections leading to Buddhahood) for four *asenkkheyas* and hundred thousand *kappas*, during which he went through the round of rebirths, and observed practices like "giving away his eyes as many times as there are stars in heavens, shed blood as multitudinous as the oceans", ... should be reluctant to leave his heavenly estate and be reborn as a human, heightens the drama and exalted the struggle of the Bodhisatta, who, in spite of his resolution to attain Buddhahood, so that he could save the multitude from suffering, had to fight every inch of the way.

Bodhisatta recovers his resolve and realises that he is to be born to Queen Maya, consort of Sododhana and also that the life span of his mother completes itself seven days after his birth. He then bade farewell to his fellow celestials, in a beautiful lyrical speech and the curtain falls to soft haunting music.

The scene where Queen Maya breaks the news to her lord is one of the best in the play. As soon as she wakes up from a beautiful dream, she calls her servants and tells them they need no longer hang down their heads in shame as a barren woman's servants, and while they rejoice, the orchestra plays the glorious royal drum announcing the king's coming.

The queen tells her servants that this time she is not going to stand her lord's patronising airs as, "doing a favour to come to the a barren woman's chamber", instead, she is going to act proud, proud of the son she is carrying. She sits on her couch, her back turned to her lord.

The king is surprised at the unwonted behaviour of his consort and knows that it could mean only one thing... the fulfilment of their life-long prayer. Then follows the dialogue in lyrical recitative, earthy and intimate as can be between a couple facing the prospect of having their first child in their fifties, at the same time rising to sublime heights as befits the occasion.... the conception of Bodhisatta.

The happiness of the king and his consort is not allowed to pass without a discordant note. When the brahmins are called to read the queen's dream, the older Brahmin puts up two fingers, and says that the child would either be a *cettavate*, king of the world, or become an ascetic and Buddha, who will, save all sentient being from suffering. The younger brahmin, puts up only one finger, and declares, "The child will without any alternative, become the Buddha". The king is perturbed, for, he wants his son to carry on the sakya tradition and excel his forbearers by becoming a *cettavate*.

Kondinnya, for it is the latter brahmin's name, would not retract his statement, even at the risk of angering the king. The courtiers whisper to him that the king's anger is to be feared like the fiery look of the dragon; but Kondinnya refused to say otherwise. He shows his conviction by declaring that he would go and wait from Uruvela wood for the Bodhisatta, who will one day renounce his regal state and consummate his resolve to attain Buddhahood.

The episode of Kondinnya awakens in the audience a feeling of awe and wonder, not so much for the brahmin who has courage of his conviction, as for the one, who later becomes the leader of the five Disciples, privileged to hear the Buddha's First Sermon. That this young brahmin gave up the prospect of royal favours, and become as ascetic to wait for thirty five years!

The king naturally clings to the other brahmin's prophecy that the child would become a *cettavate*. He

sends a minister to the queen's brother, a king of another city state with the news of the coming child. The minister delivers the news, but instead of being honoured as a welcome guest, is jeered and mocked, for ,"whoever heard of a woman of fifty having a first child?" they say.

The minister comes home, crest-fallen and the queen hearing of her own brother's disparaging remarks, asks of the king a boon, namely to allow her to go home to her brother just to show him her mettle.

This scene gives the audience a peep into the domestic drama that takes place in the palace of a sakya king of two thousand five hundred years ago ... a proud selfwilled queen, determined at all costs to get even with her relatives, and playing on her doting indulgent husband, who cannot bear to let her go out of his sight.

The scene is mostly in song and recitative and Shwe Mahn Tin Maung plays King Sododhana with warmth and humanity and he expresses the emotions of a man no longer young, about to become a father, facing the necessity of letting his wife make a perilous journey. He voices his exasperation and indignation in arias of fine poetry, interwoven with emphatic recitative pieces.

No less impressive is the *minthami* Aung Than Tin's playing of Queen Maya, a queen among women, and yet ostracized and shamed as "a barren woman"; even by her kith and kin. The journey to her brother's city is a point of honour. At the same time she is also a woman who knows she will have her own way with her husband.

The scene is not without humourous touches like the king scolding his peers for being but a poor help in entreating his queen to stay, and such touches are so spentaneous and true to life .... life, with all its hopes and fears, laughter and tears, dignity and impudence. all intermingling with one another.

The most moving part of the scene is the queen taking leave of her lord, who finally has to give way. She kneels at her lord's feet and bows down three times with a beautiful recitative asking his forgiveness for the trespasses that might be, as the music plays a soft note. She then slowly walks round her lord three times with her hands still clapsed in the shape of a lotus bud.

The king, his head bowed down in sorrow, scarcely looks at her, and only his hand waves farewell as she walks backwards, her face still towards her lord and the curtain falls.

Queen Maya's journey, attended by the celestials whose voices are heard off stage, reminding one another of their duties, as the orchestra plays heavenly music, comes to a stop at Lumbini Gardens.

Bodhisatta's nativity scene is any actress's challenge , for, though the mother of Bodhisatta, she has to convey the plight of a woman, no longer young, having a child in the woods, away from home and her lord. In her recitative, she sadly remembers how she has taken the journey against the wish of her lord. Even with the celestials guarding over her, (which the audience knows though she may not), she longs for Her lord's presence.

Such human emotions enhance the scene, when the flower branch miraculously desends into her hands and the moment of nativity draws near as she stands, surrounded by her maidens... a painting comes to life. With soft music playing she speaks a short recitative addressing her unborn son "who is reposing in the bejewelled casket to come into The world", as the lotus opens to the first golden ray of dawn.

Darkness envelopes the stage and the soft light falls on the figure of a boy in princely attire taking seven steps declaring: *aggo ham asmi lokassa, ietlo'ham asmi lokassa*. "It is I who am at the top of the world, it is I who am first born of the world!"

From such sublime heights, the scene switches

back to Maya's Death scene with all the heartbreak that humans are heir to. The meeting of Sododhana and the queen's brother over her hier is a stormy scene, each blaming the other for the queen's death. Swords are drawn as they argue over who should give the queen's burial rites. Suddenly Queen Maya's voice from the celestial regions is heard reproving them all and the play ends with a note of peace and tranquility. Never before was deus ex machina introduced with greater satisfaction to the audience.The audience goes home with the promise of great things to come, namely the Bodhisatta, who would become the Buddha to lead all sentient beins to the Right path of Deliverance from suffering.

On the Light Fantastic Toe

News of the Myanmar cultural troupe making headlines in the United States fills my heart with pride for national heritage and the talented artistes whose dedication to their art is receiving due recognition.

The Myanmar's love of music, dance and plays, in fact all kinds of entertainment, is well known and it is often carried to what many would call extremes. The Myanmar musical plays are performed throughout the night till the small hours of the morning. During festival seasons, many public thoroughfares are often blocked by 'stages' set up for music and dances, performed in open air for all to see.

With the Myanmar, nothing is ever complete without drums and music.

The Myanmar orchestra is performed for all occasions, alms-giving feasts, novitiation ceremony and other family celebrations. Although rarely seen in cities like Yangon, funerals in provincial towns are still attended by orchestra.

Paul Edmonds, in his book *Peacocks and Pagodas* said of the Myanmar; ". . . their funerals are not the lugubrious affairs to which we are accustomed in Europe. They employ a band, not to increase the gloom and depression, but to dispel it. The function of the band is to drive away sorrow, and instead of playing dead marches and requiems... the Myanmar rattle away at their happiest and most cheerful tune. I cannot escape a lurking suspicion that the Myanmar in this matter show more sense than we do, and though personally I shouldn't choose the Merry Widow Waltz,

for my own final ceremony I think I should prefer it to the Dead March in Saul."

Well, this is how a foreigner sees us. It reminds me of a folk song sung to folk music;

"So I'm not to lie dead in peace? Then I'll rise once again
Even if it is to stop
That orchestra-man, San Mya
From making hell of a noise!"

The love of dance and music starts early in the growing years. Children play with cymbals and drums and one of the games we girls loved to play was the game of 'dance and trip'. We borrowed our mothers' sarongs so that they trailed on the floor like the dancer's skirt. With the long silk stole and fan, we were 'costumed for the performance'.

We imitated the way the dancer swung her feet to push away the immense folds of her trailing skirt, a virtuoso performance of grace and elegance; our own imitation often had hilarious results like falling on our faces. It was sheer magic, though, and it was great fun; we girls were glamorous stars for the moment.

Perhaps, tucked away in many a girl's heart is a dream – that of foot-lights, booming orchestra and hoofings on the stage, it is a sweet dream; it never fades even though limbs grow heavy with age, because every time she sees a performance, she lives that dream again forgetting for the moment all the uncouthness and clumsiness of her own attempts of the younger days.

The only kind of comment I got from my long suffering friends was: "If you give such performances, you'll soon build yourself a brick mansion from the brick-bats people throw at you!"

Well, I might add, if the Carnegie Hall ever needs an extension, please call 31136 . . .

Myanma marionette theatre

No pagoda festival in Myanmar is complete without a marionette show. Festivals come after paddy is harvested and when farmers can look forward to a shortspell of leisure. What is more, they have hard cash to spend.

The stubble plains where people had, some time before, worked hard at harvesting are now a scene of revelry. Caravans of bullock carts loaded with pilgrims, and some of them carrying wares to sell, camp under the huge tamarind trees.

On the river side, barges are moored and people gather round to see what products they have to sell. The most interesting of them all is the barge carrying the marionette troupe.

Soon the festival ground is filled with people. You walk along the line of stalls where you can buy products from far and near–glazed earthen-ware, handwoven cottons, bamboo and cane baskets, mats, woodwork, boxes made of toddy palm leaves which come in all sizes, from the smallest toy things to huge packing cases, their outsides are woven in attractive designs.

The festival has all the trimmings of a trade fair; ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds, and of course, marionette shows. The stage for the show is built of bamboo. Tradition decrees that it is not built with its back to the village. It slopes slightly towards the audience who sit on the ground; they bring their own mats. It is an open air show.

Marionette stage

The stage is bare except for a green branch stuck in the middle against the white backdrop about two and half feet high and a *kadaw-pwe*, which is an ar-

rangement of two bunches of bananas and green coconut on a tray decorated with flowers wrapped in green banana leaves.

Kadaw-pwe literally means an offering of respect; it is an important item in any Myanmar celebration both in family circles and in public.

Ritual dance

The show opens witht the ritual dance performed by a female marionette to pay respects to the guardian spirits of the area. It is a formality to 'pay respects to those to whom respect is due'; through this dance the troupe requests the powers that be to waive away all the dangers that may be lurking on the festival grounds. The ritual dance is exciting and boisterous; the marionette in red and pink costume dances to the booming of the orchestra. The opening bars of the song call for a crescendo and connoisseurs judge the vocal virtuosity of the troupe by the way the ritual song is sung.

The orchestra men also show their artistry and prowess that match the song and dance of the votaress the manipulator of which has to take the challenge and give an exhibition of his dexterity. In this way the ritual dances serve as a 'trailer' for the audience.

Primeval forest scene

After the ritual dance comes the dance of the animals and mythical beings in the primeval forest. It is also supposed to be the beginning of the world. The orchestra prelude the scene with boisterous music which symbolizes chaos before the earth came into being.

The first to appear is the horse; according to the Buddhist concept of the universe, the first planet to appear on the firmameant is *Asavani*, the galaxy of stars shaped like a horse's head. The coming of the horse therefore tells the audience that the earth and the sky have come into being out of the chaos.

After the horse comes the elephant, stepping with grace and dignity. Soon the stage is full of animals, tigers on the prowl, birds in the air, and the monkey up to his antics.

Mythical beings like the dragon, ogre and *zawgyi* (demigod or magician) also come in the dance. They lend an air of fantasy, glamour and the mysterious beauty of the wilds.

The play; scenery and props

Scenic background, until recently was not used because marionettes show better against the white background. The props used are not many; tree branch to convey the idea of a forest, the throne for the king's audience hall and the couch for the boudoir.

The play invariably opens with the king holding court. Sometimes this scene is hardly part of the story. The court scene however tells the audience that after the primeval forest scene, human society with law and order has come into being. The king and the ministers, in the course of their conversation, reveal where the action of the play is to take place and who are to be the main characters. In this way the scene 'lays the foundation of the plot' as the saying goes.

One thing about the Myanma marionette show is that its strength lies in the lyrical beauty and the epic grandeur of the dialogue which is rendered in song, arias, recitatives and commentaries in rhymed prose supported by the orchestra.

Usually it takes two to present a marionette on the stage, one to recite or sing and the other to manipulate the strings in co-ordination. Sometimes an artiste might be able to do both but such ones are rare.

Importance of the court scene

There is a saying that no play is complete without the royal court scene with the king and ministers, but it is a fact that the scene is boring to the audience. It is,

however, considered auspicious to open the play with this scene. In the colonial days, it was a reminder of Myanmar's sovereignty which had been lost. The glorious music of the orchestra and the song in praise of the king and his realm awakened nostalgic memories in the old who passed them on to the young.

The duet dance

After the court scene comes the much awaited *hna-par-thwar*, the duet dance which is a love scene. The scene does not do much to help the story move forward; it only represents the two leading characters of the play in the state of lyrical happiness.

The scene calls for the artiste's mastery of singing, elocution and histrionics and the co-ordination of marionettes to the texts of the songs and recitatives, and the music of the orchestra.

All-night performance

The marionette show goes on all through the night. This often makes a non-Myanmar ask in surprise: "How is it possible? Why all night?" The Myanmars in turn are surprised by the questions. As long as they remember, the shows go on all night; never mind how or why.

Every now and then some well-meaning people make attempts to shorten the duration of the show but with little success. Some say that if the show finishes in the middle of the night, it is not easy to get transport home. In rural areas, people come from other villages over long distances and they come prepared to stay the whole night. Others say that the Myanmars love fun, music and entertainment in such a prodigious manner that they are content with nothing less than whole night entertainment.

Leisure and easy-going ways may have something to do with this. Today even though leisure is much curtailed, all-night shows go on and they are

enjoyed not only in small towns and rural areas but in cities too.

The magic of the marionettes

It is often a wonder to many that people can sit through the night and watch the antics of the marionettes. In small towns and villages they still do, although there is much less of this kind in cities. The enchantment of the marionettes is still dominant.

The Myanmars go to a *pwe* or theatre and relax; they look forward to entertainment. As they settle down in their seats in an open-air marionette show they have with them peanuts, crispies and all sorts of delicacies to chew as they talk; never mind if they miss some of the dialogues. It is just the king and his ministers talking 'shop'.

The dance of animals, a delight to children enthralls the adults as well, even more so, because they can understand the song and the music that accompanies each character.

As the *nhe*(oboe)pipes eerily like the winds howling through the dark caverns and the boom of the big drum crashes into the air, the ogre in dark green costume steps out, graceful and lithe, and yet awesome like an animal on the prowl; he is handsome if in a grotesque way ruthless and powerful, half-god, half-animal. His dance steps, like master strokes of an artist's brush bring out all the qualities of his personality.

Zawgyi, the magician or the demigod, resplendent in red flaming dress is full of vigour; he leaps and flies; he is a symbol of power, the one who with his magic wand can do wonders. The *zawgyi* marionette is considered the most complicated and difficult to manipulate. The one who handles the *minthami*, the prima donna, also does the *zawgyi* too. It is not easy to say which is more difficult to manipulate, prima donna has to know the steps of other marionettes too. Some-

times the story says that the heroine is to be disguised as a *zawgyi*; she is helped by a good spirit who thinks that she takes that disguise for safety. So there it is – the prima donna must convey the idea of being a *zawgyi*. Since change of costume is not "done" in the marionette theatre, the prima donna remains herself. She cannot fly or leap like a real *zawgyi*. As the orchestra plays the music of the *zawgyi* dance, she manages to create the illusion of her disguise by doing a few steps and gestures that are characteristic.

Customs and traditions

Marionette theatre has strict rules laid down by tradition. Dolls, especially the leading characters must be made of *yamanai* wood (clogwood) and each must be made to be a replica of a human down to the smallest detail. Even animals must be made that way.

There is never change of roles; each retains once and for all the character he or she is to play, be it king, spirit, ogre or *zawgyi*. Each puppet is treated with the respect it is due.

Marionettes are kept in two separate chests called the Right Chest and the Left Chest. King, prince, princess, ministers, hermit and all the 'senior'ones are kept in the Right Chest; the 'lesser' ones like animals, clowns are put away in the Left Chest.

There are specific rules of entrances and exits. Those who are supposed to have supernormal powers like the *zawgyi* and the spirits enter the stage 'flying' over the white backdrop and exit the same way. The elephant enters from the right, the tiger from the left so on and so forth.

Spiritual kinship

The marionettes fashioned to represent humans or spirits are very close to their manipulators. Hours before the show starts the artiste sits with his marionette on his lap, prinking it and even talking to it.

There is an idiom among the performing artistes 'to be possesed by *lamaing* spirit', who is the patron of performing artistes. 'They believe that they can give the best performance only when they are possessed by *lamaing*.

With the marionetteers, it is even more important, because the puppet they manipulate too must be possessed; the two must be one in spirit, the artiste must give something, nay, perhaps all of himself to the marionette. That is why manipulators keep close to their puppets even in non-performing hours.

Each marionette is a complete embodiment of the role he enacts, king or ogre or *zawgyi*, in every inch of its whole visible appearance. To the manipulator it is a real thing and he himself is the creator who can give life to the marionette.

The aura of mystery: strong cultural roots

There is an aura of mystery in the Myanma marionette theatre; taboos, conventions and superstitions. May be it is because this art springs from strong cultural roots.

It was in 1776, during the reign of Singu Min, that an officer in charge of performing arts, U Thaw, was commissioned by the king to create a new art form.

By that time, Myanma drama with its accompaniment of music, song and dance had already been enriched by Thai artistes who were part of the trophies of the Myanmar campaigns to Thailand.

Masques were performed to enact the story of Ramayana in the king's court, but commoners had only folk music and dances, hardly any drama. Perhaps the marionette theatre first brought the finer form of dramatic art to the common people.

A compromise

Tradition says that the marionette theatre came into being as a compromise between man's need for

entertainment and the Myanma sense of propriety.

It was but three or four decades ago that it was considered highly improper for a man and a woman who were not a married couple to make a twosome in public. Demonstration of affection in public, so much as holding hands even between married couples, was one of the things that 'was not done'.

All the same, people need love and romance, not only in songs, poems and stories but also in audio-visual action. There is also the need for, public information and instruction especially on the teachings of the Buddha.

This ran into problems: one, performers are reluctant to play the role of holy persons, like the Bodhisatta (the One who is to be the Buddha), who is often an important character in plays; two, Myanma sense of propriety would not allow man and woman to act as married couple or lovers on the stage; this would be even more frowned upon when the performers were not married to each other.

U Thaw's plan

U Thaw, therefore, planned a marionette troupe which called for strict discipline as laid down by the teachings of the Buddha and at the same time which allowed as much aesthetic freedom as possible for the performers. Every marionette must have a special meaning and every scene was meant not only to entertain but also to instruct.

U Thaw decided to have 28 marionettes for the troupe. According to the Buddhist analysis, the physical body of a living being is a component of 28 material phenomena.Perhaps U Thaw wanted to establish the fact that his creation of the marionette troupe was firmly based on the Buddha's teachings.

The 28 marionettes were:

Ritual dancers	2
Horse	1

Elephants (one white & one black)	2
Tiger	1
Monkey	1
Parakeet	1
Dragon	1
Ogres	2
Zawgyi	1
Ministers	4
King	1
Prince	1
Princess	1
Elder Prince	2
Brahman	1
Hermit	1
Celestials	2
Old Woman	1
Clowns	2

Forerunners of regular theatre

Marionette characters are considered the forerunners of the regular theatre. Myanma drama is deeply in the tradition of the marionette theatre. The same set of characters appear on the regular stage with human performers.

It has become a tradition that living men and women should dance as though pulled by strings just as the marionetteer's highest achievement is to make his puppet dance like a living human being. One of the well known dance steps for living dancers is 'puppet's quick run'.

Carl Hagemann is quoted in *Puppets and Auto mata*. "The puppets play better than real actors; they make a much better theatre than men. Their performances are more powerful artistically because of the absence of curbing humanity they are presented symbolically with the highest intensity of expression, all reality has vanished."

Not mechanics but art

In most marionette plays in all parts of the world, and especially in Myanmar, very little attempt is made to persuade the audience that the puppets are anything but what they are. In the Myanma marionette stage, the white backdrop is about waist high and the manipulators are visible to the audience.

Perhaps the god-like attitude the manipulators assume towards the creatures helps them succeed in making the audience forget their presence altogether. A mysterious power casts a spell over children and grown-ups alike so that they are bewitched into seeing living creatures of flesh and blood. The spectator sees only what he wants to see and as his imagination makes its contribution, he sees much more.

The manipulators pour themselves, emotions and all, into the puppets and they are like one possessed by *lamaing* as believed by the performing artistes. It is their ART.

Artistes who do not give up

Today Myanma marionette theatre admittedly has lost much of its artistry and popularity; decadence has set in and many are already tolling the knell. As an organized form of entertainment, it has lost its popularity in urban areas.

But the spirit dies hard. Once in a while we hear over the radio a veteran marionetteer giving an exposition of his art. There are today many artistes scattered all over the country, each holding fast to his art and puppet.

You go into their humble homes and talk to them, and they bring out of a huge balsa wood box, an old rag-bag and lo and behold! there comes out a prince or a princess or a *zawgyi* or an ogre.

Life-like puppets bedecked in silks, satins and sequins contrast pathetically with their impoverished but ever-smiling masters.

Maybe marionette stage in Myanmar is not what is used to be, but its art still lives in the hearts of the people and the artistes.

(*Note:* "At the end of the last century Myanma marionetteers gave a special performance at the Folies-Bergeres, in Paris, which was received with great enthusiasm. A magnificent complete puppet theatre from Myanmar is in the possession of the Ethnographische-Museum in Munich."__ *Puppet and Automata by* Max von Boehn, Dover Publications, Inc. New York.)

Festivals

Hail to Thee *Tha-Gyar-Min*

Once again, we welcome *Tha-gyar-min*, King of the Celestials, who, as the legend says comes down to the human abode to bring in the new year.

Every new year, we read the *Thingyansar* a single sheet hand bill, a kind of oracle which gives the information on what to expect in the coming year. It tells us how *Tha-gyar-min* is coming down; on what animal he will be riding, and what he will carry in his hands.

People foretell the future from the paraphernalia that he carries about him.

Who is *Tha-gyar-min* and what he does

Tha-gyar-min is one of the celestials who is very close to us. We kind of believe in him like people believe in Santa Claus.Never mind if he is someone borrowed from Hindu mythology. We have made him our very own. He is very much alive in folklore and Buddhist parables.

Tha-gyar-min is regarded as the custodian of the Buddhist teachings; he is responsible for seeing that people live in accordance with the Buddha's Way. He must see that justice is done; he must save the good and let the bad get their deserts.

He must switch his attention to the human abode as soon as his downy couch hardens, which is a kind of reminder that someone down here needs help. In stories and plays, whenever the hero or heroine calls for help, SWISH! he comes down in the form of a human being, a good samaritan.

So, when you stand in the blazing summer heat, waiting for transport, getting more and more desperate to see crowded buses pass by, be sure to call upon him. Of course he may not appear to you in his glory, but

some good-hearted friend in a car may offer you a lift. Remember, the ways of the celestials are strange.

Complaints to *Tha-gyar-min*

U Ponnya, our poet and dramatist of the last century left for posterity a series of *taydats* eighteen line sonnets, calling upon Tha-gyar-min to cast his watchful eyes upon this human abode and do something about the state of affairs. The poet did not mince his words in chiding the King of the Celestials for his seeming neglect of duties. Here are some of the excerpts:

"Oh, thou, who wouldst not come, even though thy couch hardens ten times over.

What? Drunk deep in pleasures sensual? No, this simply won't do!"

"Whatever happened to thy eyes that number a thousand? Have they all gone dim? In that case let me present thee with a pair of diamond lens."

"Whatever happened to thy high-powered thunder bolts? Are they in the workshop being repaired or serviced?"

"Oh, Tha-gyar-min, thou lazybones, as inert as thy own likeness we have there sculptured on the flagpole near the pagoda!"

These sonnets keep *Tha-gyar-min* closer than ever to us. Many legends of pagodas have him as a central character, like for instance, the story of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

***Tha-gyar-min* and Shwedagon Pagoda**

According to the legend, *Tha-gyar-min*, as the custodian of Buddha's teachings was responsible for the founding of the city of Dagon, as Yangon was called in those days, and also for the building of the great pagoda, wherein the Buddha's relics were to be enshrined.

King Okkalapa, the founder and king of Dagon was the son of a girl called Me Lamu, who was born of a flower.

The story begins as in all folklore; with a hermit in the forest. One day he saw a huge flower and brought it to his place. Out of that flower a beautiful girl was born. She was reared as his own daughter. One day, *Tha-gyar-min*, reminded of course by his faithful couch, saw her and knew that she was destined to be the mother of a great king, the founder of Dagon city, and also that the son was to be sired by no other person than himself, the King of the Celestials.

So, *Tha-gyar-min* came down to the human abode in the form of a handsome youngman and asked the hermit for the hand of Me Lamu.

King Okkalapa was born of the union, and his name lives today as the name of a satellite town in Yangon. There, today, an old pagoda has been restored and it is called Me Lamu Pagoda, and it was believed to have been built by Me Lamu.

Tha-gyar-min's influence on Buddhist thought and action is considerable. He comes down to bring in the new year; he has with him two parchments, one of gold and the other, a dog-hide.He puts the names of good people on the gold parchments, and those of the bad on the dog-hide. Let's hope we have ours on the gold!

A Season of Giving

Novitiation: important family ritual

These April days, there is music in the air; wherever you go, you see marquees by the roadside; inside them are sets of yellow robes: black alms-bowls, umbrellas, and leather slippers laid out amidst flowers and coloured paper streamers. Right at the entrance a notice board announces that a mass novitiation ceremony is to be held during the water festival, and that your contribution in cash or kind is welcome.

Such places are centres of activity during the water festival; each centre is organized either by the people of the locality or by those who are in the same profession like stall-keepers at a market, trishaw men, taxi-drivers or bus-men. They pool their resourses to do deeds of merit like novitiation.

With trimmings

Novitiation is of vital importance in a Buddhist family; boys are sent to the monastery where they stay as novices for a week or more; their heads are shaved and they wear the yellow robes, go on alms rounds with their black bowls and keep precepts.

Parents consider it a great privilege to novitiate their sons, that is, in fact, giving their own flesh and blood into the Buddha's Order of the Sangha. Those who do not have sons of their own novitiate others people sons, so that they do not miss such a great deed of merit.

It is also a meritorious deed on the part of the one novitiated, for he gives himself into the Buddha's Order; he gives up the wordly pleasures and lives a life of austerity and discipline even if it is for a short time.

No man's life is considered complete and fulfilled unless he is novitiated; it is a must for a Buddhist man. Parents consider it to be an act of most neglectful omission, if they fail to novitiate their sons. It is a fervent hope of grand-parents to see their progeny novitiated and also to contribute some thing towards the celebration.

That is why people are ever ready to help those of limited means to novitiate their sons; and one of the new year communal activities is to organized mass novitiations when everyone comes forward with whatever contribution he can afford either in cash or, kind.

Acts of giving

A novitiation ceremony can be very simple. The parents send the boy to the monastery where a senior monk will shave his head and invest him with yellow robes, which the parents usually provide:

However, with the Myanmar love of fun and music, such an occasion is rarely allowed to go without the trimmings of music, dance and procession. Of course people also like to give alms to monks to mark the event-which in fact, is optional.

The boys to be novitiated are dressed in princely costumes resplendent in silk and sequins. They ride on caparisoned horses shaded with golden umbrellas; the parents and family members carry sets of yellow robes decorated with lotus flowers; then come a bevy of damsels carrying offerings in lacquer trays; the prettiest girl has the honour of carrying ornate betel box; followed by music troupes and dancers.

In cities like Yangon, the procession has lost much of the traditional grandeur because the praticipants usually ride in cars and buses; but the golden umbrellas and music troupes are still there:

Such processions are reminiscent of Prince Siddattha's renunciation of his home and family and royal splendour on the fateful night he rode out of the palace

grounds to take to the woods, where he spent the next six years practising ascetic virtues until he gained wisdom and became the Buddha, the Enlightened One who could teach the way to end suffering.

A Season of Giving

Buddhists, as a first step toward following the Buddha's teaching, do acts of *dhana* or giving; giving their time and money for the communal novitiation of boys; the boys on their part give themselves into the Buddha's Order, into the life of discipline and austerity.

This is the season of giving; giving alms to monks; giving respects to parents, teachers, and elders; snacks of glutinous rice, jaggery and coconut are made at home and distributed among the neighbours. Shampoo mixture, a concoction of vegetable fruits and brine of tree barks is given away freely.

Even the poorest will do their good deeds fetching water for old people to bathe and shampoo. Such are the deeds of the April season, when trees are laden with golden padauk blossoms and the scent of the star flowers fill the air. All these are done in accompaniment to the sweet sounds of the drums cymbals and flutes. A happy water festival to you all!

A Letter to *Tha-Gyar-Min*

At home, I am in charge of what is known as the Department of Useless Information – a self-appointed post, but the right person in the right place, to be sure.

Like most departmental heads, I am often snowed under paper work, correspondence and things, you know, I am sending a letter to *Tha-gyar-min*, King of the Celestials, who is supposed to come down to us every year to celebrate the water festival, prior to new year. It is pretty decent of him, I must say.

Your Excellency,

Even though I'm nearly three score years old, I believe in you. I do not worry if you ever come down to us every year, or even if there were such as YOU, at all. I do not mind if you are someone borrowed from Hindu myths; to me, whether you are Indra, or *Sakkya* or Zeus or *Tha-gyar-min*, it is all right with me. Let me repeat, I believe in you.

Blueprint of good behaviour

In our younger days, our parents and elders told us that we must be on our best behaviour during the three days of the water festival. We should not kill, or steal, lie or use bad language, quarrel or hurt others, because you would put our names on the parchment of dog-hide, which meant disgrace and punishment. Those who are good would have their names inscribed on the gold plate, the roll of honour.

It is a kind of blueprint of good behaviour for us for the whole year, to be rectified when the next *Thingyan* season comes round.

I hope you do have my name on your gold plate every time you come down, don't you? Certainly; you'll remember the little girl with a small hair-knot on top

with a circular fringe around, the one who was always trying to be good, which usually meant keeping the hot temper under control.

We still read the *Thin-gyan-sar*, a single sheet hand-bill, on which is printed all the information of what to expect in the coming year. It is a kind of oracle sheet for us. It also tells us how you are coming down to us; this year you will be riding on a dragon, holding a bow and arrows in one hand and a spear in the other.

There is also a set of instructions for each of us born on a particular day of the week. It runs something like this: "those born on Sunday should wear *gan-gaw* flowers in the hair after shampooing and those born on Monday should wear – " so on and so forth.

Old tradition still alive

Your Excellency, you will be glad to hear that we still shampoo with boiled soap acacia fruit and strips of bark from linden-bloom tree. We give it to our neighbours. Many prefer this concoction to modern manufactured stuff, because it is fresh, cool and pure.

We make this offering of shampoo to older people and we personally help them to bathe and wash the hair, a service we love to do. I hope you get all these down on your gold plate. We also have fun too, nice clean fun with dear friends sprinkling scented water. With pepole we love and know so well all the teasing and playing go with the spirit of the season. But not when a band of hooligans from nowhere springs on us with water hoses.

The true spirit of the water-festival

I am only afraid, the water festival being what it is today, – with all the wanton waste of water and money and energy, especially in cities like Yangon, you will run out of dog-hides and no celestial scribe would be able to keep up with the misdeeds of the people during the days of the water festival.

I hope you will bring a few high-powered thunder bolts and scare those people out of their skins. Water throwing is no longer a friendly sport but it has become an act of aggression on the cars and pedestrians; cars are often damaged by rough handling and there are accidents, many serious.

O, *Tha-gyar-min* please teach our people the true spirit of *Thingyan* festival. Please remind them of the importance of water in an agricultural country like ours and that it is in the spirit of expectation of good rain for the crops that we celebrate this festival and welcome the new year.

Meaningful rituals

By the way, have you, by any chance, met some celestials of other lands, like for instance, Har the Mighty of Scandinavia? Did he ever tell you that people in his area welcome the new year with bonfires because, in that part of the world, they need warmth and light, like we need rain and water here.

Many of the ancient rituals anywhere make sense if we only probe into their origins. So, please remind our people to make the water festival meaningful.

I am telling you all this because I beleive in you. I still beleive that you are interested in the welfare of humans. I even believe that your soft downy couch hardens like stone, when there is injustice and corruption down here, a signal for you to take action. Come to think of it, these days you must be practically lying on a couch of stones or even iron spikes, the way things are down here, what with the juvenile delinquency and road-devilry and the terror of pickpockets who leave their blade marks on ladies' behinds as easily as on their handbags..... Have you become immune to them like a Hindu fakir?

A Happy NewYear – my best regards to your family-

I beg to remain,
Your Excellency,
The one who believes in you.

The Call

Tiny bird chirps
from the gate comes the song.
It's time, dear youngest sis,
for us to cook alms food.
The crown of rice meal,
We shall pluck for our Lord,
The three-legged tray make ready.
Let's strike the triangular brass gong
of tones sweet and mellow
On with the candle lights!

The days from the last week of July to October are the days of Buddhist lent. It is the time for doing good deeds like alms giving, fasting and quiet meditation.

It is the time when members of the Buddha's order are not allowed to sleep out of their monastery compounds or stay away overnight. During the wet monsoon months they too are supposed to spend their time in study and contemplation. The lay people, therefore, take it to be their duty to see that members of the Order do not have to worry about their needs. Hence the ceremony of offering yellow robes and candles.

Sons of the family at the monastery

In small towns and villages the sons of the family are usually sent out to the monastery to stay there for a while as *koyins* or novices. The women of the house get up early to prepare food for them.

This is not as much an act to gain merit as an act of love. How easy it must be to give service to the Buddha's Order when one's own beloved kin is a member!

Crown of cooked rice

In villages rice is cooked in earthen pots with humped lids. So when the rice is cooked, the topmost part takes the shape of the lid. This part of the rice rises higher than the rest and forms a peak. This crown of the rice pot is reserved for the highest and noblest – the Lord Buddha. It is "plucked" as one might the choicest fruit for offering.

The offering of the crown of rice with fruits and sweets is made at the household shrine. On the three legged lacquer tray are miniature alms bowls and flower vases and candles. As the older sister puts finishing touches to offerings the youngest sister strikes the triangular brass gong to declare to all sentient beings that a good deed has been done.

Human interest

This little song is simpl and yet full of beauty. It is a picture of calm serene Lenten morning.

Into the solemn religious occasion is interwoven a delicate tracery of human interest like the eager voice of the elder sister gently coaxing her sleepy little sister to get up and cook alms food.

There is the sweet chirping of the little bird from the gate reminding the girls of their sacred Lenten duties. The mellow tones of the triangular brass gong is a familiar Lenten sound and is fitting end to the song.

The poem is by Minthuwun and you will find it in the little book of poems called *A Child's Garden of Verses.*

Our Brother *Koyin*

It is the custom of Buddhist families to send the sons to the *kyaung* (monastery) where they stay for a few days as *koyins* (novices) receiving religious instruction under the *phongyis* (monks).

One of the duties of *koyins* is to go on daily alms round in the early morning. The faithful of the village put their offering of rice curries and sweets in the alms bowls. Often a *phongyi kyaung tha* (a boy from the monastery) follows the monk and *koyin* with two three-legged trays carried on the ends of a pole balanced on his shoulders. Small cup on the two trays receive all the food that cannot go into the *thabeik* (alms bowls) carried by monks and *koyins.*

As might be expected, the family of the *koyins* will take special care to prepare alms food. The sister, anxious for her brother who has to stay away from home, harkens to the sound of the triangular gong that heralds the coming of the koyin on his alms round.

Hark! from the village's brow
comes ting-a-ling
of the triangular gong.
Our novice of the bamboo grove kyaung
on his alms round he'll come.
Hurry, please with the alms food bowl.

Little boy away from home

The young sister, eyes sharpened by love and absence, looks at her brother and asks:

"Our brother koyin,
why so pale and wan?
Aren't you well
We all ask."
The koyin answers,
"I'm all right, little sister,
pray tell them all
I'm only a bit tired,

walking on alms rounds
down the village lane."

The young sister still has more anxieties for her *koyin*. Monasteries are often ruled under the iron discipline of a *kapiya* a lay disciple usually an old man who is the general factotum to the presiding monk – a regular sergeant-major of the institution.

Anxious young sister

The littlest sister fears that the old tyrant might rap on her *koyin's* shaven head.

The old kapiya
They say he's a terror.
Oh, I fear he"ll rap
On my koyin's shaven head.

The doting sister, in concern for her brother cooks hit favourite dish and puts it on the tray carried by the *phongyi kyaung tha*, the boy from the monastery. As ill luck would have it, the clumsy boy slipped on the road and all the cups were broken.

"Yestermorn, I cook'd with care your
favourite curry for you, dear koyin.
Alas, the boy slipped on the village
lane and all the bowls were broken!"

The simple songs give us a sidelight on Lenten activities. A season for doing meritorious deeds, people often take the opportunity to do what is considered one of the highest and noblest deeds, namely, to give one's own flesh and blood to the Order of the Buddha. They may not be able to give away their sons for the whole life time, but at least they can let them stay for a few days at the monastery.

Whilst willing to do their duty as good Buddhists, to deny themselves the company of their loved brother is not easy for the women of the family. Their feelings find expression in ardent enquiries and overzealous attentions. Such little things enhance their good deed and add human touch to the solemn religious activities.

Fast Day

"Mother
When you go to *kyaung* tomorrow,
On your head the red lac tray,
I'll come with you. Do not leave me.
I'm so dull when you're away,"
"If you are naughty, for a stick, dear,
How His Holiness will call."
'I be naughty! I"ll sit telling,
Like saint, many beads withal.
I'll come. I'llcome."

A poem by Minthuwun. Translated by G.H. Luce.

Going to the monastery: preparation

This delightful poem gives us a picture of family activities on a lenten sabbath morning. Mother is busy with her preparations to go to the *kyaung* (monastery) where she will spend the day. She will do good deeds like keeping sabbath, paying respects to the monks, and what a relief from the cares of the household!

Of course she has had to do extra work on the day before. There are special dishes to offer as alms food. On the sabbath day she has put all the food in the red lacquer casket and there her little wayward son is wheedling and coaxing her to take him along to the monastery.

It is quite common for children to go along with their parents to the monastery, which is usually on the outskirts of the town, set in spacious grounds well shaded with trees. They can play to their heart's content without much disturbing the monks. Monasteries are also places where childrden get their first religious training. They will be taught a few short prayers, to give respects to the monks and a few odd jobs in the service of the monastery like sweeping the grounds

Old fashioned lacquer casket

Although mother meant to take the boy along to

the monastery she wants to make sure that he will behave. She does not think the monk will call for a stick, she just wants to get the boy into a proper frame of mind, and the child's reply is delightful. He will be on his best behaviour. He will sit with his eyes downcast like a saint telling his beads.

The boy's center of interest must have been the red lac tray: an important utensil, so full of goodies to eat. How the boy must have watched his mother take off the top which is a goblet underneath it being a shallow tray with cigars, matches and betel leaves; when it is taken off another bigger tray is revealed, perhaps full of pickled tea, groundnut seed and peafritters.

So tier after tier is taken down each full of mouthwatering delicacies; the last and main part of the bowl is white steaming rice. Of course the boy, however indulged, will not be allowed to touch anything until each portion is laid aside to be offered to the monks; good discipline for the boy.

Gracious living

At present lacquer caskets are seldom used in towns, the beautiful things being replaced by ugly utility carriers, which have to be carried by the handle and hung by your side, making you walk with a lopsided gait.

The old fashioned lacquer casket lends grace and elegance to the bearer.

The older woman carries the simpler model on her head with an air of dignity. The younger woman often prefers the model that she can cradle in one arm and balanced on her lips: This model is small waisted so that a maiden can carry it with her head held high and eyes modestly downcast.

If you find in your home a red lacquer bowl that granny used to take to the monastery, treasure it, for it is the symbols of an older and more gracious way of life.

The Dawn of Hope

Three-fold Buddhist anniversary

Myanmar new year begins with sprays of cooling water showering to friends with loving kindness and goodwill. Come Kason, the second month of the year, and once again water is poured, this time on the sacred tree, the Bodhi tree, the tree of Enlightenment.

The full-moon of Kason month, is a three fold anniversary: the birth of prince Siddatha, the Buddha-to-be, His Enlightenment at the foot of the Bodhi tree, and the passing of the Buddha into *Nibbana*.

Such episodes in the Buddha's life live on to this day, after 25 centuries, in poems, songs, plays, paintings, sculptures, and last but not least, in the hearts of the Buddhists. Most emphasis is naturally laid on paying respects to the sacred tree in rememberance of the Buddha's Enlightenment. That particular day brought to all beings, hope of deliverance from Suffering.

The glorious moment 2500 years ago

On that morning, there was nothing but peace and beauty. Flowers unfolded their soft petals and threw open their treasure chests of sweetness. The air was filled with the songs of birds. Far and near into the homes of men, there spread an unknown peace. All evil hearts grew gentler.

The Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, radiant, rejoicing and strong, and from His lips poured forth the words beginning *Anekajatisangsarang*. It was a glorious moment. He had, for many lives sought 'who wrought these prisons of the senses, sorrow fraught.' On that morning, He could declare: "I know thee, never shall thou build again these walls of pain."

After 45 years of teaching the Truth He had found, the Buddha passed away to *Nibbana* on the full-moon day of Kason. His last admonition to His disciples was:

"Always be mindful: never let your selves slip into negligence and forgetfulness.Buddhists celebrated these anniverseries in various ways, according to the Buddha's teachings. They give alms, or keep precepts, or practise meditation. The Buddha's teachings are remembered in all the meritorious deeds. Since such deeds are done mostly communally, the custom of going to local pagodas in groups is observed for many generations.

Good deeds, songs, music and dances

Men and women of all ages go to local pagodas in procession to pour water on the sacred tree. Young women carry water pots on their heads, none too heavy but just enough to lend them a Balinese grace as they walk along. Red earthen pots topped with green banana leaves give a picturesque effect, especially with flower-bedecked chignons hanging down maiden's napes.

The processions, as usual, are attended by music troupes. The Myanmar folk music troupe consists of simple instruments, namely, the drum, cymbals, bamboo clappers and flute. With one or two mountebanks dancing to the snappy tunes, one can have all the fun and merriment. One does not have to be specially talented to be able to play these instruments, nor anyone to be a Nureyev to do those dance steps. Anyone can join in.

The songs usually run something playful and teasing like for instance...

Come along my pretty maid
I'll take thee right to Nibbana
For it's the goal I'll strive
For thee and me, for thee and me.
Thou art all goodness and virtue
Ever bent on doing deeds of merit
Oh, look, thy beauteous face all damp
With beads of perspiration, oh
Do not strain so much my dear,
Let me help thee - let me carry the pot for thee

Idiosyncracies?

This is one of the idiosyncracies of Myanmar ways and customs. The Buddhist religion teaches negation of all worldly desires. Here, the ardent swain is asking his maid to come along with him to the Goal of *Nibbana*, the Cessation of all desire.

Of course, *Nibbana* is the goal for all Buddhists to strive for; but it is still a long, long way to go. There is a plenty to enjoy on the way to the Goal. Naturally one wants a helpmate and companion for the long journey through the cycle of rebirth. The Buddha to be had Princess Yasodhara to share His many lives until He attained Buddhahood.

That is why Myanmar love songs often contain affirmations of love and faith that shall last the long journey through *samsara*, or the round of rebirths.

"We will cross over this infinite samsara together, untill we reach the peaceful shore of Nibbana."

So shall many lovers make a wish, as they pour water on the sacred Bodhi-tree.

Lenten Memories

Now that it is Buddhist lent, I should perhaps fill my hours with holy thoughts, as a self-respecting woman of my age should. Easier said than done.

Rummy (as those Wodehouse characters say), whenever I try to think good and pure thoughts, I always go back to the days when the world was fresh and young and nothing could ever go wrong.

How can anything go wrong on a day in the lenten season, the day that began with the tinkling of *doo-wei-wei* from the triangular brass gong and the rich sing-song voice announcing. "*Oh, ba-wun-taw* good friends, our companions, companions-in-doing-meritorious deeds, please wake up, do wake up and prepare alms food for reverend *sangha*, wake up, please, good friends."

The announcement was couched in poetic prose with well known familiar pali words like *ba-wun-taw* (good people) thrown in for style and elegance.

A pleasant awakening

With the tinkling of the triangular brass gong in your ears, you roll, in your bed from one side to the other murmuring, 'So, the sabbath day has come again, oh.' You listen to the lingering notes and pull yourself up to go down to the kitchen to prepare alms food.

It is still in semi-darkness, but not at all gloomy, for the air is filled with promise of the coming day. It is lovely to be woken up by the tinkling of the triangular brass gong and recitation in a sing-song voice. It is far more pleasant to be jerked up by the blaring of loud-speakers, that inspired only colourful epithets that would not help to go through the gates of celestial regions where you hope to go in afterlife.

Ushers-in-to heaven

How aptly are the organizers of these benevolent activities called *neik-ban-saw* – ushers- in-to heaven. They are the members of the communal groups called *wut-thins* or service groups and they play an important part in the life of the community. Such *wut-thin* activities, although rarely seen nowadays in cities like Yangon, are very much alive in small towns. In cities like Mandalay, where old customs and traditions are still very much in evidence, *wut-thins* with all their paraphernalia still operate.

The members of the *wut-thins* wear all white suits, white jackets and white *longyis*. They go round collecting alms for monasteries or pagodas. Some carry silver bowls to receive coins. To receive alms food there are large three-legged lacquer trays with sets of small bowls: they are beautiful things with red domed covers. Each tray is suspended from cords attached to the yoke. With the tray hanging in the middle two men shoulder the yoke at each end. Sometimes the yoke is painted red and splashed over with gold and glass mosaic patterns.

Dawn procession – music and chantings

The procession is led by a man blowing the conch. Next comes the huge triangular brass gong suspended on a pole carried by two men, one of them striking it in tune to the chanting, a none too easy feat. The carriers of the three-legged trays follow. Sometimes, the procession is accompanied by a music troupe of drums, cymbals and flute. It is still twilight, the stars blinking even as dawn begins to steal on the horizon. The air is filled with music with intervals of singsong chanting and the tinkling of the brass gong. Light shine through the window panes and people come out with their alms, which are respectfully deposited in the lacquer bowls and receptacles.

Wut-thins also go on their rounds in the afternoon,

the day before sabbath day, in the same grand manner to collect dry goods like rice and such necessities for the monastery.

Living in Yangon, we do not see *wut-thins* and the ushers-in-to-heaven, at least not often. What shall I do without them? Who will usher me into the celestial regions?

Blossoms of the Dhamma

Everything goes with music

"July, August, Rain and Flood," goes a Myanmar saying. July brings in the lenten season. True to the Myanmar character, the lenten season even though it is associated with self-denial, quiet contemplation and meritorious deeds, begins with music and festivities. In Myanmar, nothing ever goes without music and songs.

Even as the older people make preparations for fasting and offerings for monks, young people busy themselves with organising *doh bat* music troupes and dances. On the fullmoon day both young and old will go to the monastery with lenten offerings.

Love songs with humour

There will be nonsensical songs like the maid asking her swain to hurry with the elopement, for marriages are taboo during the lent. This has nothing whatsoever to do with any religious concept. It probably originated from the way of life. Monsoon is a busy paddy planting season and the bulk of the Myanmar population being rural, it is, of course, more convenient to celebrate weddings only after the harvest is safely home. So there is nothing left for the impatient lovers but to rush off before the lent begins.

"Oh, my love, fell a *Kokko* tree
And cut it quick!
Make a cart,
But then, it takes too long,
Why worry, my love,
There's Ma Boke Sone
Her spacious hip for us to ride

To ride on merrily,
Merrily all the way to happiness."

The journey to the monastery is usually taken on foot. The older people, dressed in sober clothes lead the way and they are followed by young women carrying lacquer trays loaded with robes and candles. The procession is given a merry send-off by a group of *kalathas* (boisterous youths) with drums, cymbals, flutes. One or two young men dressed in motley costume perform dance steps which equals, if not surpasses, the sailor's horn-pipe in liveliness.

Sobriety and festivity

One rarely sees such harmony between the older generation and the young. It is as if the 'generation gap' has been filled and what is more, smoothed by the music of the *doh bat*, nonsense songs and lively dances.

This blending of sobriety and festivity is to celebrate the anniversary of the Buddha's First Sermon at Isipatana, an open space, the site of the famous Migadaya or Deer Park. It is meet that the Buddha should deliver His Sutta in the wide open spaces, where deer were allowed to wander free. It was the place where peace reigned, and where the running stag and the chasing tiger stopped in their tracks to nestle close to each other in loving friendship.

The Buddha's first sermon

The Sutta that brings peace to beings was first heard more than twenty-five centuries ago and the Four Noble Truths, namely Suffering, the Origin of Suffering, Ceasing of Suffering, and the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering are still with us to be striven for and realized. The Light of Dhamma still helps us who are stumbling in the dark and leads us to Enlightenment.

One unique thing about the Sutta first heard in the wide open spaces, where tiger and deer lived in peace,

is that it does not bind men in dogmas and beliefs. Man is free, as free as the skies above to believe and act accordingly. There is none to punish or reward. He reaps the harvest of what he has sown.

The Path laid down by the Sutta is not hidden in a labyrinth of terms and phraseology. It is the Middle Way between the two extremes of devotion to the pleasures of the senses and the practice of self mortification. It is the Eight-fold Noble Path, to wit: Right view, Right resolution, Right speech, Right Action, Right Means of Living, Right Exertion, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.

To have Right View is put first and foremost in the Eight-fold Noble Path and it is the key to the attainment of Wisdom. Thera Kondanna, the Buddha's disciple, who was the first to attain Enlightenment on seeing how the minds of certain worldlings were mastered by wrong ideas, said:

Many the motley pictures in the world.
Enjoyed within this earth's circumference,
Inciting, I do note, man's purposes,
Fair-seeming hopes, and linked with fierce desire,
As dusty by the wind upchurned the rain-cloud lays.
So are those purposes composed and quenched
When he by wisdom doth discern and see.
(Psalms of the Brethern by Mrs. Rhys Davies)

Goodwill and loving kindness

Perhaps, many of us may not be able to fully graps the Truth the Buddha teaches, but contemplation and meditation gives us strength to face life. We may not renounce the wordly life. We may not renounce the worldly life altogether, but with the Dhamma enshrined in our heart, we can spread goodwill and loving kindness all round. Our feet may be deep in mire but our hands can strive to reach for the blossoms of Enlightenment that hang above us.

Blossoms of Wisdom – that reminds me. Waso is

also a season of flowers. There comes the sound of music from the *dohbat* troupe that leads young men and women who will roam the woodlands to pick flowers: These flowers gathered in joy and love, will be offered to the images of the Buddha. As they bow down before the likeness of the Enlightened One, serenity comes to even the most boisterous and mischievous of the gang as each prays:

"May we, one day, don the Blossoms of the Dhamma."

The Spirit of Thadingyut

Sunny days after rains

"Only a few days to Thadingyut, and the skies are still hanging low with dark clouds."Such is the thought that hangs over us as the end of the lenten season draws near.

We have had enough of the torrential rains and the accompanying hazards, like colds and influenza. Forgotten are the days when we prayed for showers as we were scorched by the blazing April heat. We longed for rain then, as if we never know that the beautiful drizzle scintillating in the rays of sunshine would later be a murky sheet of torrents that confronted us almost every day for four months.

Now, we long for days warm and dry with lots of sunshine, when our mildewed clothes will have an airing. Perhaps I should not be too wrapped up (both literally and figuratively) in mildewed clothes and too preoccupied with the thought of turning the house inside out for cleaning; for, it is the time women do the 'spring' cleaning, or rather Thadingyut cleaning.

Full-moon day 2,500 years ago

I do try my best to raise myself from such mundane thoughts. "Forget your damp mildewed things for a while,"I told myself, "just think how it must have looked on the Full-moon day of Thadingyut, twentyfive hundred years ago."

It was when the Buddha, after spending the lenten season at the celestials abode, preaching his mother, now reborn a celestial being, came down to the abode of the humans. Attended by an entourage of celestials, the Buddha descended by the bejewelled ladder.

as the heavenly music mingled with the boisterous gusto of the drums and flutes, that the earth bound humans played to welcome the Buddha.

This self-same scene is recreated during the Thadingyut festival when we have illuminations all over the cities, small towns and villages. There will be a lots of festivities with music, songs and dancing, for here in our land everything goes with music. The colloquial idiom, which may be rendered in English as, without the benefit of the orchestra (ဆိုင်းမပါဖုံမပါ), is used to describe any event that is uninteresting, unheralded and not properly enhanced.

A month of weddings

Skies begin to clear and hope springs in my breast, as sunbeams spill out of the clouds. Silver embossed cards pour in. "Weddings, weddings and more weddings", I muttered happily. How young lovers must have welcomed this season, for marriages are tabooed during the lent.

Of course, many morden young people try to ignore the custom and insist on getting married during the lent. After all, this taboo originated from social and economic conditions of the by-gone days, when communications were difficult during the rains; and the people were busy in the fields, so it was prudent to wait till Thadingyut.

Even then, weddings during the lent are still rare. Most lovers would rather wait for Thadingyut than risk raised eye-brows at the uncommon hurry to get married during the lent.

Anyway, it is more fun to begin one's married life amidst festivites. Illumination, music, songs and dancing will be all over the town . In some quarters, people collect donations to decorate their streets with festoons of electric lights. Amateur dancing and music troupes are organised to give free entertainment to the spectators.

Lights festival in the country

Personally speaking, I think Thadingyut is more fun in small towns and villages, a partiality perhaps, since I hailed from a small town myself. Living here amidst the blare of amplifiers and electric lights, I often long for the *see-mee* lights; they are small earthen saucers filled with sesamum oil wherein pieces of cotton are used as wicks. Little tongues of flame quivering in the breeze lend an uncanny beauty to the scene steeped in the silvery beam of the full moon.

More friendly and intimate

Festivities in small towns and villages are more friendly and intimate. The entertainment troupes may not be star-studded, with film stars and well known vocalists taking part, but, there is a lot of love and appreciation. The girl with all the make-up and sequinned costume, pretending to be a prima donna, is the snub-nosed girl next door. You think she is wonderful, even if she sings a little off key and her dancing not exactly professional.

In small towns, you are personally involved in the festive celebrations, and you care a good deal because everyone is your friend. In big cities, however, you can hardly feel that it is your festival, there is too much noise and glare and you do not know who is who in the celebrations.

Perhaps, I am just a complaining old fogey, but I can hardly see the spirit of Thadingyut in the noisy gaudiness and ostentations of the city festival.

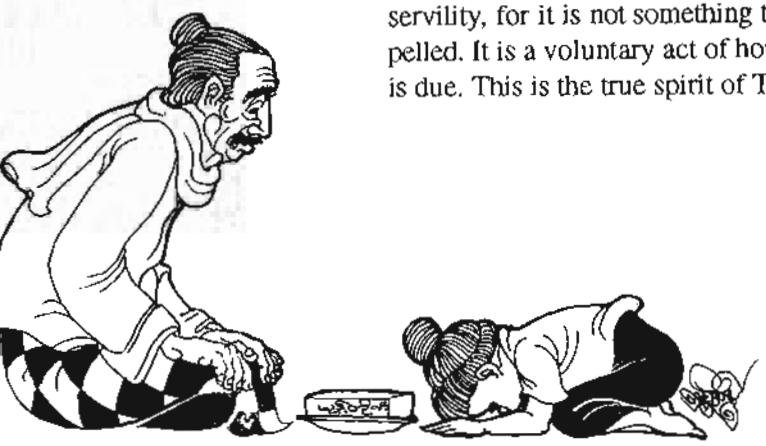
A season of remembrance and *kadaw*

There is a silver lining, though. Towards the close of the day before the twilight deepens into night, groups of young people and children can be seen walking with candles and gifts in their hands. They are going round to pay respects to their grand parents or elderly relatives and teachers. Thadingyut is also a season of re-

membrance, a *kadaw* season.

I cannot think of an English equivalent for the Myanmar word *kadaw*: it is more than paying respects, or doing obeisance. One raises clasped hands to the forehead and crouches humbly at the feet of the parents, elders and teachers, in the same way one does to worship the Buddha, The Dhamma and the Sanga. This is to *kadaw*, – to be humble and reverent, remembering with gratitude all that one owes to parents and teachers, and what is more, desiring to be purged of all the trespasses that might have been committed by word, thought or deed.

The reverent posture of crouching with clasped hands raised to the forehead should not be mistaken for servility, for it is not something that is forced or compelled. It is a voluntary act of honour to whom honour is due. This is the true spirit of Thadingyut.



Season of Love and Forgiveness

A season of lights and joy

The Myanmar calendar month of Thadingyut (October) is the month of lights festival. Some twenty-five centuries ago the Buddha came back from the abode of the celestials to the human abode; he was attended by the goodly company of celestials who created a pathway of starry jewels; and the humans on earth illuminated their houses and streets to welcome the Buddha.

Among the celestials up there was the one who was reborn after she died giving birth to the child who later became the Buddha. It was the Buddha's gesture of gratitude to his mother that he spent the three months of the monsoon there and taught His Law, to the *devas*.

Ceremony of paying respects

Thadingyut, therefore, is not only a season of lights and rejoicings, but also of remembering those to whom we owe gratitude. For the Buddhists, the Buddha, His Law, His Order of the Sangha, Parents and Teachers are the first to be revered, next come those who are older and those to whom we owe gratitude. Those who no longer have parents go to elderly relatives or friends to pay their respects. It is usual for a senior citizen in the street or residential quarter to receive respects from the younger people of the community. Such practices are much more evident in district towns than in cities like Yangon.

In cities like Yangon people try to keep up the tradition in spite of the rush and haste of city life, by organizing communal ceremonies.

In schools, paying respects to the teachers, during the season is organized; all contributions in cash or kind are voluntary.

Open house

On the three days of the lights festival, namely the day before the full moon, the full moon day and the day after, young people go round to the homes of their teachers and elderly relatives to pay their respect; so it means 'Open House', for many homes. Older people usually have some snacks ready for their young visitors, sometimes they distribute small cash for children to spend during the festival.

Young people usually bring gifts but it is not necessary; paying respects *(kadaw)* is accomplished by bowing down with humility in front of the older people. Children go to their elders with a bunch of bananas or packet of candles, they may go without anything, but the gesture of *kadaw* is no less appreciated.

The custom of *kadaw* is rooted in the Buddhist acceptance of the *samsara*, the round of being born and reborn; all beings, humans and all, go round meeting one another in amicable relationships or otherwise; there would be love and kindness, but there could be hate and enmity as well. There are surely wrongful actions committed consciously or unconsciously to one another in this present life.

Asking forgiveness

When Buddhist do the ceremony of *kadaw* to anyone, their parents, teachers, or elders, they not only pay respect with the gesture of gratitude, but also ask forgiveness for any wrongful action they might have done in this life and many many lives before.

The elders not merely receive the respects, they, in their turn, ask forgiveness of the young people for any wrongful action they might have done in thought, word, or deed. This reciprocal action is often called 'erasing the slate, which is the same as 'burying the hatchet' so that one can start life again with a clean 'slate'.

Well, come to think of it, I want to start this Thadingyut asking my friends and readers to forgive me for any offence or trespass I might have done unwittingly or intentionally and wish them a happy Thadingyut.

The Tazaungdaing Festival

Lights festival again.!

It's lights and festivals with a vengeance, since the monsoon months come to an end. Close upon Thadingyut festival comes the Tazaungdaing with more lights and festivities. Many households leave the decorations and lanterns on so that they do not have to put them up again in three weeks' time.

We all know that people hang out lighted lanterns in honour of the anniversary of the Buddha's descent from the celestials region. But why again the illuminations in the following month?

I used to think that some people wished to go on with the celebration as the Thadingyut festivities are often spoilt by rain. It is hardly so, although I strongly suspect that to be the reason with most of the merry-making folk. This festival seems to date back to pre-Buddhist days.

A folk festival

Tazaungdaing festival is, in fact, called *Kattika* feast. We find many references in the Jatakas, the Buddha's birth stories. This month is supposed to be the time thieves ply their trade; astrologers say that certain signs of the Zodiac are in the ascendant so that many people's thoughts are bent on mischief.

It is said that kings declared feasts to be held so that all the jollity and merry-making would take the people's minds away from mischief, a kind of psychological warfare.

It is the wont of the youths to steal things like flower-pots and clothes and pile them at the cross roads. In small towns and villages, where the people know one another, this is done in the spirit of fun.

Whole nights, young men go about stealing women's skirt which they hoist at the top of the pole. Sign boards would be put at the door of privies. In the morning, everyone has a good laugh. No serious harms is done and no one is offended. Of course it is different in cities where people are not so close to one another and such things are done more in mischief and even malice.

Illuminations are more elaborate than in Thadingyut. Jataka stories lend romantic and sometimes diverting touches to the celebrations. If you go down the lighted streets you may find a tableau or play in progress, a young maiden, resplendent in jewels, throwing flowers at a magnificently dressed regal person on a chariot.

Stories represented in tableaux

This is a story of a maid named Ummadanti, whose name itself is synonymous with dazzling beauty. She was born of a rich and noble family. One day, the king sent fortune-tellers to read the lineaments of her body, so that he might marry her.

The fotune-tellers, on seeing her, became so intoxicated by her beauty that they made a mess of the food offered to them. Ashamed of their own behaviour, they made a false report to the king that she was not fit to be the queen.

Ummadanti was given in marriage to the king's general. She never forgot the slight and with the rage of a woman scorned, she waited to take her revenge.

On the day of the *Kattika* festival, the whole city was illuminated and adorned. The king, in his royal splendour, was to ride the streets on the full moon day.

The general, before he left home to go on his duty to guard the city on the occasion said to his wife: "My dear, tonight the king will ride through the city and he will come to our door. Please do not show yourself for he will not be able to control his thoughts."

Fury of a woman scorned

Ummadanti made a noncommittal reply. As soon as her maid, in obedience to her order, came and informed her that the king's chariot had come to the door, the lady went to the open window.

From the strategic position, the beautiful Ummadanti threw flowers at the king. When he turned his eyes to her, she smiled with the charm of a sylph. The king could not contain himself. Ummadanti, seeing his agitation, withdrew to her chamber. The king, no longer able to continue his triumphant tour, bade his charioteer go back to the palace where he lay on the couch moaning in agony. The general soon knew what had happened. With his wisdom, he made the king see the folly of his passion. Then, like a loyal subject, he offered Ummadanti to his king who was deeply ashamed of himself. Cured of his infatuation, he went on with his just and fair reign.

The story is a favourite with strolling professional troupes and during the Tazaungdaing festival, the amateurs would enact the scene, where the lady threw flowers at the king. The dramatists' ingenuity would make the lady and king bandy wits. The king's part is often clowned to the great enjoyment of the audience.

The patricide king's remorse

There are yet solemn associations with this season. It was on the full moon day of this month that King Ajatasatu, tortured with remorse for having killed

his royal father who was good and virtuous, sought refuge in the Buddha's counsel.

Ajatasatu had followed Devadatta, the Buddha's arch enemy and it was at his advice that he had committed patricide. Devadatta plotted against the Buddha's life and he was swallowed up by the earth to roast in hell. The king feared a like fate for himself.

He wished to go to the Buddha and to be reconciled to Him, and to ask his guidance. However, he could not bring himself to go to His presence, so great had been his transgression.

So, when the *Kattika* festival came round, and by night Rajagaha was illuminated and adorned like a city of the gods, the king sat on his golden throne with the lords of his realm in attendence. Jeveka, one of Buddha's followers, sat among the lords. The king thought it would be a good idea to ask Jevaka to take him to the Buddha.

On such a night as this

Still it was difficult for the king to make this request. So he diplomatically led the conversation on, first praising the beauty of the night; "How fair, sirs, is this cloudless night! How charming! How lovely! What sage or brahmin shall we seek out, to see if he may give our hearts peace? "

The ministers, each in turn, recommended the sages they followed. The king listened in silence, waiting for Jevaka to speak. Jevaka, suspecting that the king wished him to speak, waiting to make sure.

The king asked him why he had not spoken. Only then did Jevaka rise from his seat and with hands raised in adoration towards the Blessed One, cried "Sir, yonder in my mango grove dwells the All-Enlightened One with Brethren; unto Him the Blessed One, let the king repair, to hear the Truth and put questions."

The king immediately ordered the royal elephants to get ready and went in royal state to Jevaka's mango

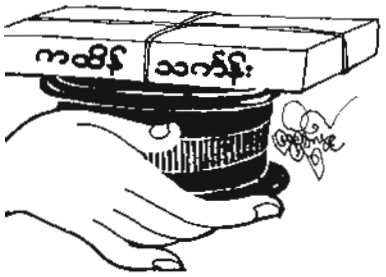
grove, where he found in the perfumed pavilion, the Buddha amid the Brotherhood.

The king at the Buddha's feet

All was tranquil as the ocean in repose. Look where he would, the king's eye saw only the endless ranks of the Brethren. He bowed low and spoke words of praise. Then, saluting the Buddha, he seated himself and asked Him the question; "What is the fruit of the religious life?"

And the Blessed One gave utterance to the Samaphata Sutta. Glad at heart, the king made peace with the Buddha at the close of the Sutta and departed with solemn obeisance.

Offering of yellow robes



One important rite associated with the season is the offering of the yellow robes to the monks. This offering is considered one of the most meritorious deeds. The robes so offered are called the *Ka-htein* robes. The offering is made communally with all the trimmings of music, folk dances, professions and refreshments.

The highlight of the *Ka-htein* offering is the weaving of the non-stale robes – so- called because the robes are not allowed to go stale, that is to say, they are woven within the space of the night.

In rural areas, people organise the ceremony of this weaving. This ritual, apart from gaining merit, glorifies the common labours of the rural folk.

Weaving of non-stale robes

The weaving of the non-stale robes is a gala celebration enjoyed by the young and old. Young men would play drums and flutes as the lasses go into the cotton field to collect the bolls. All through the night they beat, dress and spin to be ready for the loom. All these are done within the night so that the robes would be ready for offering at dawn.

Often there were contests among neighbouring villages. Moonlight, music and dances must have made their toils light and cheerful. It is a great honour for a maid to win the contest of weaving the robes, for in a village it is essential for a maid to be good at weaving.

The tradition of weaving the non-stale robes is still carried on even in the city of Yangon amid the glare of electric lights, through which moonbeams have hardly any chance.

An annual weaving contest is held on the platform of the Shwedagon Pagoda. Of course there could be no actual picking of cotton from the fields but the young ladies weave the robes the whole night. There would be music and dances as befits the joyous occasion. The centuries old tradition is thus kept alive in the truly Myanmar spirit of fun and laughter.

The Season of *Pa-de-tha* Tree

Why no more *pa-de-tha* trees?

One of the best loved stories I heard in my childhood was the story of the *pa-de-tha*, the wonder tree that bears all the things that the human heart could wish. If you feel like eating a succulent dish of noodles, you just go to the tree and pluck it. If you want a dress for your important date, there you could have your choice from the most exotic creations from the Tree. The Tree would give just about everything you wish for, you only have to go there and pluck.

The Tree grew at the beginning of the world and later it disappeared. It happened like this, I was told. One rule the humans must observe was that no one must take more than he could use at one time. The human, however, mistrusting one another, began to pluck more than they needed and stocked things in their homes. When one began, others soon followed suit. Quarrels and fights followed and the Tree was destroyed.

Like Christmas tree

The word *pa-de-tha* in Myanmar is synonymous with plenty, and inexhaustible wealth. In this season of Tazaungdaing festivals, we can see that the *pa-de-tha* tree is back. Go anywhere in town, in streets and markets, you will see preparations for the *ka-htein* offering of robes to the *sangha* in progress. There, standing in front of the decorated marquees are wooden triangular structures, hung with things like packets of yellow robes and other gifts, like a Christmas tree.

They are the *pa-de-tha* trees to be offered to the *sangha*, who after staying in the monastries during the lenten season, may be going to their home town or on their mission, once the ban on travelling is lifted at the end of the lent. It is the time when they will be in need of robes and other articles of use.

Even though the robes could be offered to the *sangha* at anytime of the year, the seasonal offering is considered more meritorious. The offering of *ka-htein* robes at this season is an important date in the Buddhist calendar.

Putting a 'fruit' on the tree

One of the beauties of the *ka-htein* offering is that it is a communal offering, eveyone contributing whatever he can; however little. Even the poorest can be a donor. Contributions in money or in kind are accepted. Any chance passer-by can gain merit by putting a 'fruit' on the *pa-de-tha* tree be it a one Kyat note, or a napkin, or a small tea cup.

Last but not least, it is an occasion for songs, music and dances. What more could you ask with all the fanfare of music and songs, people enjoying themselves, as if there had grown real pe-da-tha trees of olden times. Perhaps, because they have done meritorious deeds, they would be reborn in the land where such trees grow.

A *pa-de-tha* tree on your door-step

There are stroies of how the act of *dhana* (giving) bears fruits, and the *pa-de-tha* tree often plays an important part. Go to any pagoda and when you put a coin in the donation box, the man sitting with a triangular brass gong accepts the gift striking the gong and intones a prayer for you, and amongst the good things he wishes for you; he will say, "May you have a *pa-de-tha* tree on your door-step," and "may you never have occasion to hear the word, 'want' or 'no more'."

Never to hear 'want' or 'no-more'

I like especially the story of the man who, after doing an act of dhana, wished that he might never hear the word 'want' or 'no-more'. He was reborn a prince, and one day while he was playing with his friends, his mother sent him some eatables, which naturally, were shared with his friends. The prince sent for more but his mother sent word that there was 'no-more'. The young prince, not understanding the word, asked his mother to send the said 'no-more' to him. The mother sent him an empty hamper, but the *devas* (gods), because of the deed the prince had done in the past filled the hamper with the choicest of delicacies. From that day on the young prince and his friends declared' no-more' was the best they ever tasted.

There is the story of a poor man who offered his one and only nether garment to the Buddha; he was later reborn a rich man with a *pa-de-tha* tree that blossomed forth clothes, right on his door-step. One is simply thrilled at the idea.

A Blessing indeed

The *pa-de-tha* tree cannot be planted by a green-finger expert, but it can only be nurtured by acts of *dhana*.

Today, during this season, it is heart-warming to see lots of *pa-de-tha* trees growing among festivities. They represent the spirit of *dhana* and people's unswerving faith in the Buddha's teaching and also the trust and kindliness among the people in the community. All these go to make the annual ka-htein offering a great joy.

It is a nice feeling that you too could contribute to the planting of a *pa-de-tha* tree, by simply hanging a kyat note or any small gift on the tree. Perhaps, you too might have a *pa-de-tha* tree right on your door-step and if you have done in the right spirit you shall never hear the word 'want' or 'no-more'.

It would be a blessing indeed.

The Harvest Festival– *The Htamanai*

Respect for top priorities

Come Tabodwe (February), the eleventh month of the Myanmar calendar, we have the harvest festival and the making of *htamanai*, a concoction of glutinous rice, coconut slices, sesamum seeds, peanut and a generous amount of cooking oil.

Among the Myanmars, there is a tradition to observe a custom which is called "top priority for those to whom respect is due".

In small towns and villages rice is still cooked in an earthen pot with a humped lid, so the cooked rice has a peaked shape at the top. This crown of rice is reserved for the shrine and monks. If a Myanmar comes by a rare delicacy, he would set aside a portion for 'top priorities'. The rarer the thing the more care he would take to do so.

Among the agrarian people in the country, it is the custom to set aside the first and choicest products of the farms for alms-giving. Hence the tradition of making *htamanai*, which include most of the fruits of the farms and orchards.

Htamanai feast is either celebrated communally or done just in the private circle of family and friends. The nature of the feast is such that, in whatever way the feast is celebrated, it means a big gathering because many hands are needed. In a communal feast people come around with contributions of glutinous rice and other ingredients. It is an option though; one can just give his service if not anything else.

The joy of doing the chores

There are lots of things to do. Girls usually do the winnowing of the rice grains and sesamum seeds. This

is done with flat circular bamboo trays. Each girl has a tray with a heap of grains in it. She holds the tray in both hands and with an expert movement she tosses the grains up in the air. The grains fall into the tray while most of the dust and trash are blown away.

The next thing is to 'roll' the grains moving the tray in circular motion, so that all the dust and trash will separate from the good ones. This task is an art that calls for the highest form of virtuosity.

Boys and men tear away the fibres of the coconut until the shell inside makes its appearance. This also calls for dexterity, strength and experience. The shell is broken and the milk inside is shared by the deserving workers. The kernel is taken out and sliced on a carpenter's plane.

Girls shell the peanuts; the seeds are put on a flat tray and a fair-sized bottle is rolled over them to remove the thin husk. Meanwhile a great concave iron pot is put over the fireplace, a pit dug for the purpose. Cooking oil is sizzling and shredded ginger is the first to go in, and then the glutinous rice which has been soaked in water.

"Sprinkling sesamum seeds"

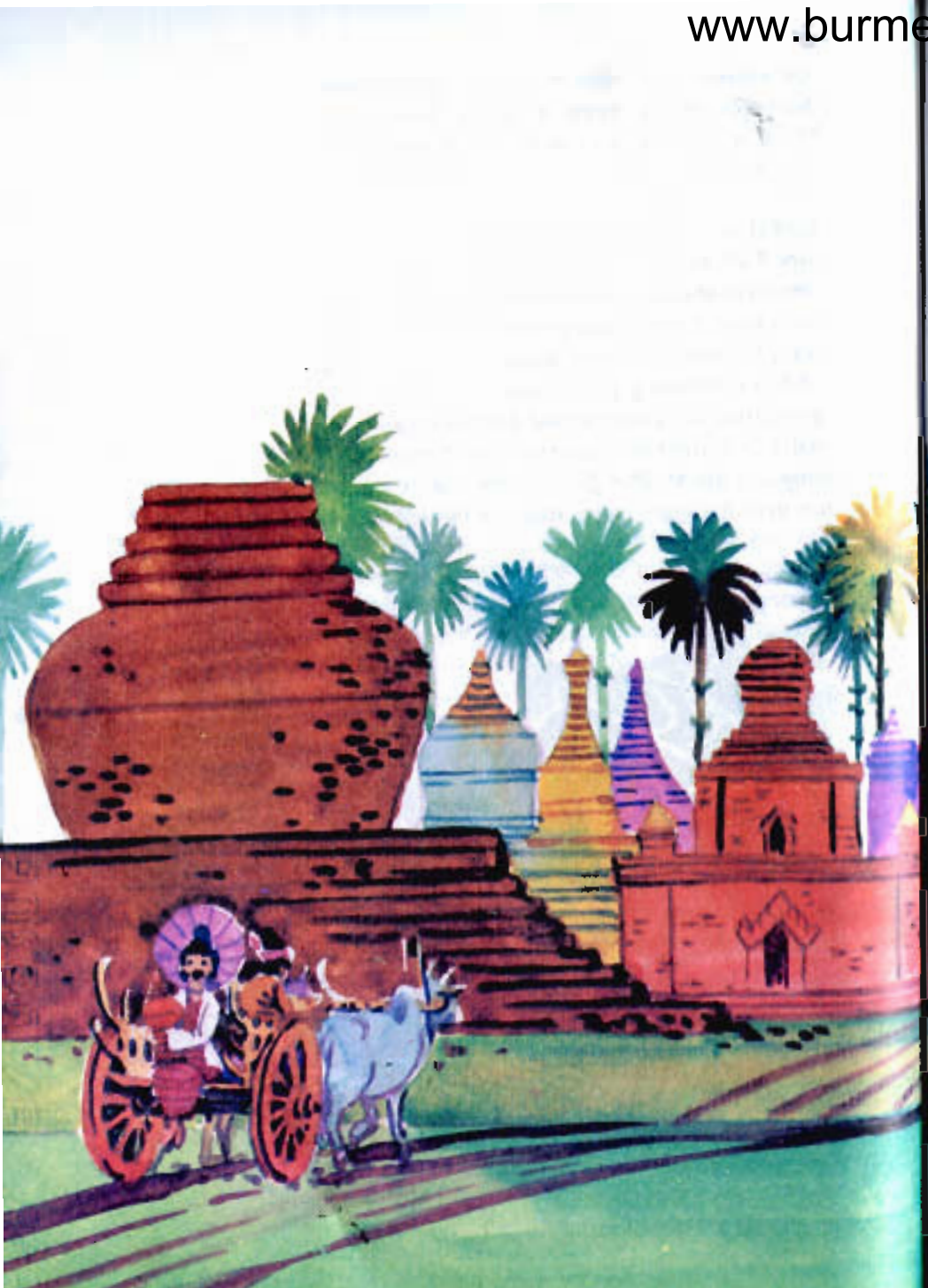
A large cauldron of water is kept ready to be added to the glutinous rice cooking in the pot. When the rice is soft enough, the pot is removed from the fire and two stalwart men, each with a huge wooden ladle, begin to stir the rice crushing it between the ladles. Even as they stir and crush, the glutinous rice gets stickier and they have to use not only their strength but their skill to make the coagulate mass yields to their ladles.

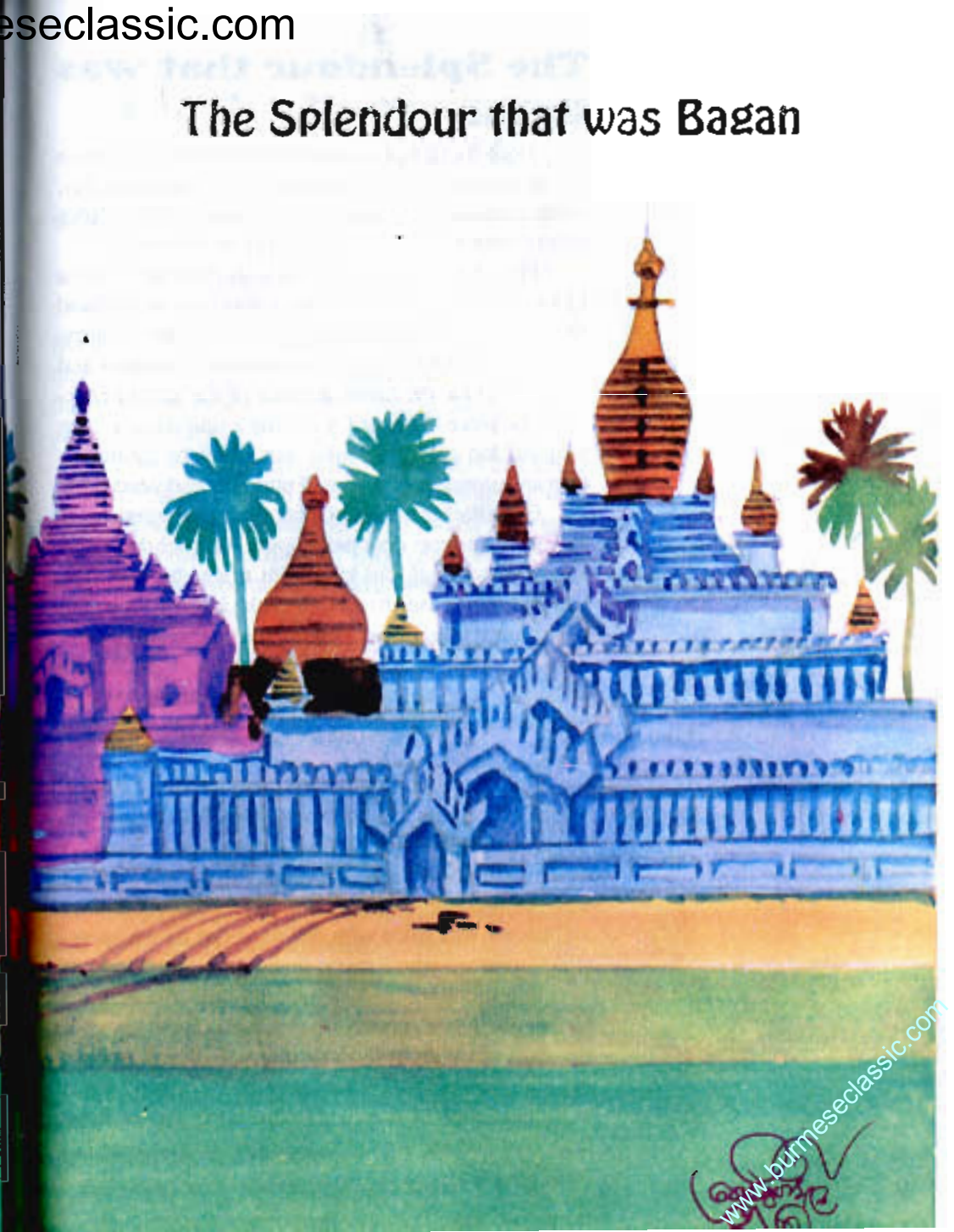
After some time of vigorous stirring and crushing, people come round to add sliced coconuts and peanuts to make the whole thing a good mixture. Sesamum seeds are added last. This last does not call for strength, but it needs skill, so they say. While the men are pitting their strength to stir and mix the glutinous rice, coconuts and peanuts, the one 'who spreads sesamum seeds' sits by, sprinkling the seeds by handfuls at regular intervals. The blend and the flavour of *htamanai* depends on the sesamum seed sprinkling, it is said.

'Sprinkling sesamum seeds' is a Myanmar idiom, not meant, I am afraid, to describe some commendable work, but to disparage something done by some one, only after others have already done the dirty work.

Come to think of it, I am perhaps doing the same thing. Whatever participation I have in the festival is my appreciation of *htamanai* and the propagation of the creed. I am sprinkling sesamum seeds, figuratively, by writing this article. This goes to show that the pen is mightier than the giant ladles that stir the *htamanai* pots.

The Splendour that was Bagan





The Splendour that was Bagan

Since the days back in the nineteen twenties, when I went along with my grandfather, U Pe of Mandalay, on his archaeological expeditions to Bagan, I have fallen in love with the city and her people of the past.

He once showed me a terra-cotta plaque with a Pali inscription, which he said, was written by the hand of Anawrahta, King of Bagan in the eleventh century. He made an exact copy of the inscription on paper and read out to me the name and title of the king. I cherished the piece of paper for as long a time as an eleven year old kid could; for who would not be thrilled to own an autograph of a king of nine hundred years ago?

Grandfather spoke of historical characters as if they were our next door neighbours. He once described Anawrahta as *kalatha* king with a wander-lust. The term *kalatha* is used to describe wild, boisterous young men, or men about town. Grandfather called Anawrahta a *kalatha* king, because of his shrewdness and insight in the affairs of the state, When he said that, Anawrahta became a real person, not a cold printed name in a text book.

Trudging through the hot dusty lanes of Bagan, waylaid by thorns and brambles, grandfather made me forget the discomforts by transporting me to the days of the past when the very ground I stood on trembled with the throb of the elephants' tread and horses' hooves and the air was filled with the war-cries of the spear-slinging heroes who rode on their backs.

Even though the demands of adult life took me farther away from my youthful dreams, the memory of the days when the splendour that was Bagan opened out to me never forsook me entirely. Every trip I made to Bagan on my hard earned holidays excited me more than ever and the urge to make those people alive became stronger.

A Letter to my grand-children

Will you ever know what you have lost?

My dear grandchildren

Tonight your grandfather and I have just come back from a dinner, where we met journalist. They were talking of the latest news, that had just come over the wires- the news of the earthquake that destroyed many of the pagodas of Bagan.

I cannot go to sleep until I have written this letter to my children, because only a few days ago, I was saying "I'm looking forward to the day when I can take my grandchildren to Bagan." I thought I would wait two years when you twins would be nine and be able to enjoy the trip all the more.

One day, my dears, you will understand what tonight means to your old granny – what a great personal loss it is to me, and to you too. Oh will you ever know what you have lost, my children?

To me it is a dream lost – a dream that one day I might hold your little hands and lead you through the great wonderland which was our proud heritage. I have dreamt of doing the same thing that my grandfather did to me half a century ago.

My dear ones, your great-great-grandfather was a well known scholar and archaeologist who was responsible for the discoveries and translations of the ancient city of Bagan. Of course I did not know that when I was young. I only knew that he loved Bagan and he taught me to love Bagan too.

I hope, one of these days, your father will tell you of the wonderful trip we made twenty years ago, to the wonderland of Bagan. I tried then to work up the magic of my younger days with my grandfather for him. I

hope I had been able to give him enough to pass on to you – the heritage of wonder and pride.

Tonight, my heart is full and heavy with sorrow. Words are inadequate to express my feelings. Every heart beat says: "Lost, lost, lost." Will you ever know what you have lost, my children? Will you ever know what Bagan means to you? Shall I ever be able to teach you to love Bagan?

Perhaps, one day you may read ANAWRAHTA OF BURMA, your old granny's love song to Bagan and I hope you will learn to love and take pride in Bagan and its glories- but for the present "Lost, lost, lost."

Your Granny
July 1975.

Look Ye The Stars Shine Still

Even as the pall of grief falls over us, happy memories of the days we spent in the great wonderland of Bagan shine through the darkness like the stars. The memories bring tears, but they are not wholly of sorrow: for there is a joy, the joy that we experience when we see something that is glorious and sublime.

I retrace, in my mind, the steps of pilgrimage I had taken as a child in a perpetual state of wonder bubbling with questions, and as an adult with an insatiable thirst to find out more about the marvel that was Bagan.

This journey of the mind is one through the vale of tears, but there comes in the end the realization of the Buddha's teaching – impermanence. The magnificent stupas themselves are not above this law. Perhaps it is the message that is driven home by the tragic catastrophe.

Men's faith in the teaching of the Buddha had inspired them to raise these beautiful stupas, but perhaps, it is not so much their physical beauty as the spiritual that should be meaningful to us:

It is in ancient Bagan that the teachings of Theravada Buddhism found its footing and spread all over Myanmar – a unifying force that reached all the indigenous races of the country. For the first time in history, our people were freed from fear and superstition.

Man became an exalted being; Buddha was a man enlightened; all other beings, spirits and gods were his subordinates to help men in their mission to bring peace and happiness through the teachings of the Buddha. Men did not have to grovel in fear of gods and spirits.

Human dignity was enhanced; men became individuals each in his own right to seek strength and *Nibbana* within his own self. This is (or was) seen in

the Shwezigon Pagoda; all around the stupa are statues of *nats* or spirits who were once worshipped by the peoples of different ethnic groups. Each was giving a niche, for they too have become the disciples of the Buddha and they too were entitled to the benefits of the merit gained by the people's good deeds.

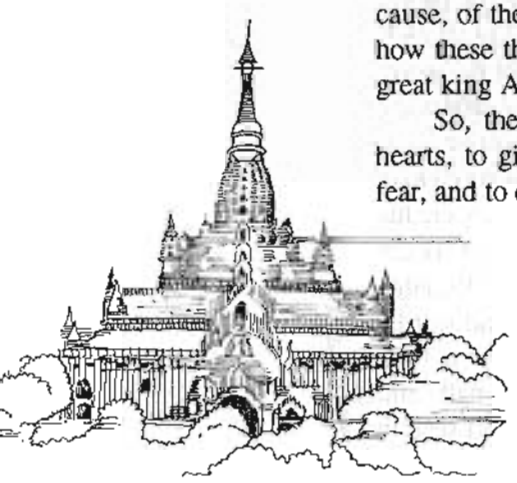
There is to be seen the spirits of tolerance, freedom of worship and above all, respect for man, Anawrahta began the construction of the stupa and it was Kyansittha who finished it. The story says that the king of the celestials and his retinue helped in the building of the stupa, by laying bricks. "Men and celestials lay rows of bricks by turns- " people say even today.

There is the Ananda temple built by Kyansittha – well , I could go on and on. All these beauties are subject to decay, only the words of the Buddha can shine for ever with immutable truth.

The essence of the Buddha's teaching was given by Assaji, the youngest of the five disciples who heard the Buddha's first sermon on the full moon day of Waso, in a stanza: "Of all things that proceed from a cause, of the cause the Tathagata hath told, and also how things cease to be, this too the mighty monk hath told"

And later a version of the same was found on a terra-cotta tablet: "Of all things that proceed from a cause, of the cause the Tathagata hath told. And also how these things cease to be, this is the creed of the great king Anawrahta".

So, these are the words to be enshrined in our hearts, to give us strength, and also to free us from fear, and to enhance our human dignity.



Bagan, A Challenge

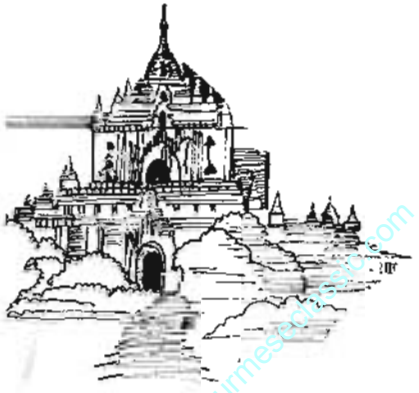
The destruction of the old stupas of Bagan by the recent earthquake is a challenge to the Myanmars of today: "Your ancestors of long ago had build the beautiful stupas, the architectural wonders with their bare hands. Now with your technical know-how and the most sophisticated tools, see what you can do to restore your cultural heritage."

In my mind's eye, I can still see the glory that was Bagan with the eyes of a child full of wonder and with a heart full of love. Words fail me and I will not even try to describe what I see, the beauties now lost. No, I say firmly to myself, no more emotional outbursts, enough is enough. Instead I try to contemplate on things other than destruction.

Even to this day, people use the Myanmar idiom, 'it rains gold and silver.' It is an expression that describes the affluent days of the Bagan era. There are legends of how an alchemist succeeded in making 'a philosopher's stone' which brought wealth to the whole country. As the story goes, everyone became rich, so much so that even a widow can build a pagoda.

Legend or no legend, the evidence is there – that Bagan at a certain period of history did enjoy an affluent age: this happened everywhere. Take for instance, Italy in the renaissance period; with the fall of Constantinople the ancient civilization of the Greeks found its home in Italian cities.

It was then that rich and powerful people found good use of their wealth in patronizing fine arts. There are genuine lovers of art like the Medicis and also others who just followed the vogue of the day. At any rate fine arts flourished.



So, when it rained gold and silver in Bagan of old, people just built stupas ... kings, queen, lords and commoners, all of them. Bagan had its source in Buddhism and looked to the teachings of the Buddha for inspiration. It was a great period of creativity: it was a time of grandeur.

Because the men of ancient Bagan embraced Buddhism, they expressed their creativity and human desire to leave traces of their grandeur behind in building stupas. In doing so, they not only left for posterity objects of beauty but also their testament of faith in the teachings of the Buddha.

One thing that stands out the whole scheme of things is that the people of Bagan, whether they were kings or commoners did not leave their likenesses or magnificient tombs. The statue of King Kyansittha (perhaps the only statue of a King) is represented kneeling with his hands raised in prayer a posture that bespeaks of humility and attestation of his faith in the Buddha's way.

The people of old Bagan did not glorify their personal power in the building of those memorials. They only expressed their faith in the teachings of the Buddha; their own selves and their wordly achievements were not important, since the paths of glory lead but to the grave. No storied urns or animated busts for them, since all must turn to dust in time. The only thing that shall shine through is their faith.

It is their faith and their inspiration that made them give away their wealth towards the building of the stupas. It is gratifying to see even today how generously and spontaneously contributions are pouring in towards the repairing of the stupas. I rejoice wholeheartedly in the deed of the many who are giving all they can... *thadu, thadu, thadu.*

A Practical and Poetic Guide to Myanmar Culture

by

Bronwen Hammet

UNESCO Features

(Reprinted in The Guardian 19/ 7/ 76)

Khin Myo Chit – whose name means, appropriately, nation-loving maid has collected in Colourful Myanmar a number of sketches, stories and essays that together will do much to explain for foreign readers everything they can want to know about everyday life in Myanmar.

Here we discover the year-long procession of feasts which enliven and consecrate each successive season; a sometimes bewildering culture (under which heading the author includes, together with "nonsense songs" and nature legends, betel-chewing , various waves of making glutinous rice, and different kinds of hairstyles, with the esoteric meaning conveyed by each); the dramatic arts, such as "*zat-pwe*", which can only be appreciated by consenting to "a complete suspension of disbelief"; the country's difficult language and complicated system of proper names.

There is a good deal here about the role of Myanmar women. Myanmar is proud, Khin Myo Chit tells us, of the tradition of freedom enjoyed by her women, but for a long time this merely meant that they were not kept in purdah and their feet were not bound. It was not so long ago that a girl who played badminton in her own backyard was frowned on as "modern"and "westernised"!

But today the professional woman has come to be almost universally accepted, while women take part as a matter of course in political life.

Myanmar seems, in fact, to be evolving at the same pace as western societies and Khin Myo Chit, life-long feminist as she is, deplores that "today's trend seems to be that women are brain-washed to think that a woman without a job is nothing and to be a mere housewife means failure".

Buddhism is still the basis of life for most Myanmars and several stories and sketches deal with the all-important "novitiating ceremony " when Buddhist boys are "ordained" with great pomp before spending a short period in some monastery. Khin Myo Chit is herself a devout Buddhist and devotes a section of her little book to a clear, simple explanation of what Buddhism means to herself and her people and how the law of *Kamma* calls forth the noblest of human feelings and emotions.

Khin Myo Chit described the country she knows and understands so well with wit, tenderness and a sort of detachment which allows her to see how puzzling much of its life must appear to an outsider. This is a disparate collection of pieces, but taken together they will provide a practical and poetic guide for the visitor who wants something better than a tourist view of Myanmar.