

# PAGODAS AND WHAT THEY MEAN TO BUDDHISTS

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## 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 Irrawaddy. 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 *Ava* Bridge was built- we headed towards the long dark range of thickly wooded hills, crested with shining pagodas, and the tinkling bells from their *hti*, 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 foliage. 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 grandfather's 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 Burmese 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 its hands to receive the gift. Later the prince won the struggle 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 Ava, the Burmese 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 banks 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 filled with fierce war cries, and the soft silvery sands 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 Burmese 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 pagodas

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 the 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 Jātakas. 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 Buddha'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 sculpture round the pagodas.

## Religious lessons

As I helped my grandparents sweep the pagoda grounds, I knew I was doing a 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 of 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 on 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 good deeds they had done together in their past lives.

By doing good deeds together again in this life, they strengthen their bond of live, 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.

## Pagodas in 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 alms-giving 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 respect to the memory of the Buddha at the 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, *Pagan*; 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 *Anawratha* 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 Burmese 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 organized. 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 midst of life's turbulence.

