

Buddhist Rituals In The Golden land of Myanmar



**The Golden land of Myanmar
And
Festive Loving People**

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PREFACE

Many of the Buddhist rituals that people have adopted in various parts of the country across the Golden land are hidden in legends and folks tales. It is very hard for the young's and olds to comprehend the background of the origination of the legends, local rituals and tradition.

This book is compiled and put in one place, most of the major festivals that are current and celebrated to this day in Myanmar.

Compiled for the serene Joys and the emotions of the pious and the tradition of the folks tales of the Golden land.

- 1. Tagu - March/April**
- 2. Kason - April/May**
- 3. Nayon - May/June**
- 4. Waso - June/July**
- 5. Wagaung - July/August**
- 6. Tawtalin- August/September**
- 7. Thadingyut- September/October**
- 8. Tazaungmon – October/November**
- 9. Nadaw - November/December**
- 10. Pyatho - December/January**
- 11. Tabodwe - January/February**
- 12. Tabaung - February/March**



Introduction:



To Myanmar's, it is a tradition of its people to have a fondness for *theatre* and *festivals*. Most festivals are called "*pwe*" in Myanmar; and are related to religion and most often, they are carried out under the patronage of a pagoda or a pagoda trustee committee. Long time ago, most of the famous pagodas in Myanmar had *paya-pwes* (pagoda-festivals) during winter and most are celebrated in the month of *Tabaung* (March). Pagoda festivals are literally religious and festive affairs.

During these festivals the entire towns and village take part in these events; people from all walks of life from neighbouring districts set up temporary stalls to sell the products from their hometown and local foods. Typical of folk events, people coming to the festival are joyous to watch the pwe, depicting the theatrical episode for *Jataka* stories and stories in the Buddha teaching from *Dhammapada*. Most of these festivals usually last a week or so. There is the *Ananda Temple Festival* in Bagan renown for one long month . Besides the pagoda festivals, there are also nat-pwes (spirit-festivals) like *Taung Pyone* (near Mandalay) famous for nat worshippers. Nat worshippers, especially spiritual mediums from various parts of the country congregate at Taungpyone.



Ananda Temple Festival

History

Ananda Temple is one of the largest and best preserved of all the Bagan temples. Ananda Temple suffered considerable damage in the earthquakes in history. The Ananda, built by King **Kyansittha** in 1090, is on a larger scale than the paonthamya and the Apeyadana and is significantly different in form. The temple is said to represent the endless wisdom of the Buddha.

Structure

The central square has sides of 175 feet (53m) and rises in terraces to the crown 168 feet

high. In the center of the cube are 4 famous standing Buddha images of 31 feet (9.5m) height. The base and terraces are decorated with a great number of glazed tiles showing scenes from the earlier lives of Buddha. In the western sanctum there are life size statues of the temple's founder and his primate while in the west porch there are two footprints of Buddha on pedestals. While the smaller temples have only a single seated image in the cellar, the Ananda enshrines four large standing



images of the Buddha in arched recesses on each side of a square central block. Instead of the single vestibule of the smaller temple, there are vestibules on all four sides, making the Ananda a Greek cross in plan. Two parallel ambulatory corridors run around the central block, with three tiers of arched niches in their walls, as well as smaller niches in the upper walls, to enshrine images of the Buddha and relief's of episodes from the Final Life. Light is provided by two tiers of arched windows in the outer walls as well as by dormer windows in the roof, so placed to illuminate the villages of the standing images.

The superstructure of the Ananda also differs from that of the pahtothamya and the Apeyadana. Three levels of sloping roofs are followed by three receding terraces and above this rises, not a dome, but a mitre-shaped curvilinear tower closely resembling the sikhara or tower of the nagara temple of northern India. The tower is horizontally grooved and has a lancet on each of the four sides in which are set a vertical row of five arched niches containing Buddha images; A stupa- surmounts the tower, its bell-shaped dome held in four cusps at the quoins of the tower. The shape of this superstructure is replicated in the corner stupas of the uppermost roof while those of the lower roofs have a bell-shaped dome.

The four standing Buddha images

The four standing images of the Buddha, represent the Buddha's who have already appeared in the present auspicious *Baddha kalpa* (world cycle), are placed in the standard locations with **Kakusandha** in the north, **Konagamana** in the east, **Kassapa** in the south and **Gotama** in the west. The two images in the north and south are original and contemporaneous with the building. Their hands are in the dharmacakra mudra (gesture of turning the Wheel of the Law), while their monastic robe takes a form which became current in India in the Gupta period: a smooth transparent sheath, with the mantle outspread on both sides of the body. The images in the east and west the images are later replacements, differing from the original in their delineation of the drapery of the robe. *The image in the east has the right hand in the varada mudra* (gesture of granting boons) (1) while that in the west has it in the abhaya mudra (gesture of reassurance).

The doors of the recesses in which the standing images are enshrined provide examples of traditional woodwork. A foliate or rosetted frame encloses a central panel which is latticed, and a miniature door-guardian occupies one of the lower corners.

Ananda Pagoda Festival in Bagan

Symbolizing the limitless wisdom of Buddha, there is *a month long sanctified festival* for the

temple Ananda, the most beautiful one out of 2000 holy monuments in Bagan, Myanmar. It is usually falls on *January every year*. The busiest day of the festival is on the full-moon day of the lunar month. Villagers and pilgrims around Bagan roll in the sacred site of Ananda for the consecration.



This is also the best time to see not only the ritual of Buddhists but the festival is also meant for social gathering, reunification, propagation and perpetuation of the religion that is Buddhism. During the festival, walk around in sea of vendors and shops that sell traditional Myanmar food-staff and enjoy the local atmosphere in locality.

At the Full moon day of each lunar month in Myanmar calendar, has its own festive occasion. Chronologically listed below are the well known festivals or ritual related to the Buddhism)

(1) – The image in the East at Shwedagon Pagoda – is the Kakusandha Buddha in the Varada mudra, slightly different from Ananda Pagoda.

TAGU (March/April)



Tagu is the first month in the Myanmar lunar calendar and usually it falls in *March and April* on the Christian calendar. "Thingyan"- Myanmar New Year Festival is held in Tagu, generally it falls about 13th April or environs. Thingyan was held since the *Tagaung Period* but it became more prominent in the Era of Bagan Dynasty. As water symbolizes coolness, clearness and cleansing of dirt and grime, by pouring or throwing water on one another is regarded that cleanness one and all of the dirt and grime of the old year and

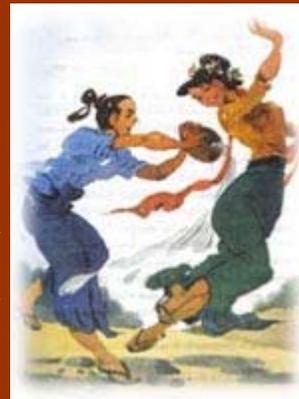
bring coolness and pacify the minds of the people for the new year. The most significant characteristics about Tagu are a merry making festival not only for Myanmar but also for any person who also wish to take part can enjoy the happiness just like Myanmar. Another aspect in connection with Tagu is commencing from the olden days up to the present time is during this period old and aged persons hair are washed and manicured with typical Myanmar shampoo called "**Tayaw**" (acacia).

Thingyan Festival All over the country



Celebrated to welcome Myanmar New Year for four days throughout the country during the second week of April. It also marks the end of the old year and beginning of the new. Young people gather together to sing and dance, and to joyfully throw water on each other. During the Thingyan Carnivals decorative floats and **water throwing pandals** are seen everywhere in towns and cities alike. If you do not mind getting wet, this high-spirited festival is one that you should not miss.

The Myanmar New Year falls on the second week of April. The New Year is ushered in by three days of Water festival. According to folklore, Thagyarmin, king of the celestials, will be on a visit to the human abode for three days



If you stay in this country for some time, you are sure to hear a lot about Thagyarmin, king of the celestials. He may be, as some scholars say, a deity borrowed from the Hindu mythology, or he may be a parallel of Zeus, but it doesn't really matter. What matters is that he is very close to the Myanmar Buddhists. His name pops up every now and then in everyday conversation. 'Thagyamin knows I'm telling the truth! May Thagyamin help me out of this.' People sort of believe in him

Who is Thagyarmin?

Thagyamin is the king of Devas, often mentioned in many of the Pali suttas. Thagyamin, like all celestial Deva, has a very long life- span, thousands of times longer than that of human life. The life of a celestial deva is counted in astronomical figures.

However, Thagyamin or any other celestial is subject to the round of rebirths, the cycle of rebirth, (samsara) like humans. Thagyamin is just a celestial being, who in his previous lives, was human, has done good deeds, the power of that merits him to be reborn in that state. The state of a human being is said to be the best for being to do kusala meritorious deeds to practice the Dhamma – **Dana-Sila-Bhavana** that will enable one to take a rebirth in the celestial world.

How to become a Thagyarmin or a celestial

In one of the **Jataka tales**, the tales that relate the former lives of the Buddha, there is a description of how the dynasty of Thagyamin

Once, there was a man named **Magha** who organized to do meritorious works, such as repairing roads, building bridges, digging wells. He gave all his energy and resources for the cause. When he died, he was reborn in the celestial world known as the King of the thirty-three Devas. Some of the details of his story will be repeated again in the story of the monsoon season in the month of June

The story of Thagyarmin has become a road map, an exemplary life style for all Buddhist, how one could take rebirth in the next existence in the celestial world. Thus many Buddhist to use him as example : repair roads, build bridges, dig wells, hoping that one of these days, you might be reborn in the celestial world of – the realm of thirty-three Devas

Thagyarmin's duties and obligations

The life of Thagyarmin's, the king of the Devas, is filled with bliss and sensual pleasures; with four chief queens and attended by beautiful nymphs. A life time of eons of years, but how long?. The life span in this world is pretty long ; but it will last as long as his good meritorious deed will permit. The current Thagyarmin has attained the first stage of sainthood- Sotapanna when he met our lord Buddha Gotama. He is always on the look out to do good deed to maintain his stature as King of Devas.

As the story goes, the Buddha before he enter the Parinibbana, he summoned the Thagyarmin and entrusted him with the responsibility of seeing that the Buddha's teachings – Buddha sasana – for the period of its natural life span of 5,000 years. It is his responsibility to see that humans being receive the Buddha teaching within the Buddha dispensation. In Theravada, Buddhist considered the period beyond 2,500 as the era of **Thagyar Sasana**

It is his way of helping and guiding human's beings by descending to earth on every new year days, as a reminder to people to practice the **Dana-Sila-Bhavana**. New Year is the time for people to cleanse themselves of the defilements (*Kilesa*) they might have accrued during the year and look forward to a better life ahead

The Spirit of New Year

Thingyan festival, as the Water Festival with legends filled with fantastic tales and folklore mostly related to Buddhist religion. Thagyarmin will be in the human abode to see that people live and practise the Buddha's teaching. On new year days, it is time to do good deeds and make up for all the neglect and omissions that-one might be guilty of; and of course, resolve to do better during the coming year. People keep sabbatical fast, give alms to Sanghas and do good deeds. Even the poor will help out to fetch .water for older folks; give them personal service, like-washing and shampooing their hair. Shampoo made of boiled soap acacia fruits and strips of lenden -bloom tree' bark is made .at home and distributed among friends and neighbours. The spirit of goodwill and loving kindness flourish on these auspicious new year days

True Spirit of the Water Festival

The true spirit of the water festival is to have nice clean fun with friends sprinkling scented water on one another. Among friends, all the teasing and playing and joking go with the spirit of the season. It is not all fun and play however; there are chores to do, like preparing shampoo water and giving personal service to older folks. With the sound of the Ohzie drums, cymbals and flute in the air, every task is a joy. With sacred duties to perform, the fun is more wholesome and enjoyable.

Perhaps, this Buddhist traditional spirit is not so evident in the metropolitan areas like Yangon, where; there is rough play with water hoses. The revellers seem more intent to embarrass and aggravate than to be playful and give pleasure. Much of the finer aspects of the festival are to be seen in small towns and villages. Yet even in cities, while the wild celebrations are rampant, the monasteries and pagodas are teeming with people of all ages. Most of them are there with the serious purpose of doing good deeds. Young people sweep the grounds, wash buildings and help older people with the chores of cooking alms food for monks, while the old will go on for their meditation retreat. It is indeed a feast of doing merits, for both young and old, as the revelry goes on for three days.

A Season of Giving

The entire April days, there is music in the air. Wherever you go, you see temporary sheds (Mundhats) by the roadside. Inside are sets of yellow robes, alms bowls, umbrellas and leather slippers, laid out amidst flowers and coloured paper steamers. 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 is welcome. Such Mundhats [are centres of activity during the Water Festival. The centre is organized by people of the locality or by those who work in the same place, office or markets or stores or those who belong to the same profession, like trishawmen, taxi drivers or busmen. Such pool their resources to do deeds of merit like novitiation.

An Important Family Ritual

Novitiation is of vital importance, in a Buddhist family. Boys are sent to the monastery where they stay for a week or more. Their heads are shaved and they wear yellow robes, go on alms rounds with their alms bowls and keep Buddhist novice's 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 Sangha. Those who don't have sons of their own, novitiate other people's sons so as to accrue this deed of great merit.

It is a must for a Buddhist man to receive initiation into the novice hood at an early age of seven. People consider it to be a gross omission if they fail to novitiate their sons. One of the New Year activities is to organized novitiation with contributions in cash, in kind or personal services. Thus it is a common knowledge for a Buddhist boy will have to go through either private initiation or organized initiation. A novitiation ceremony can be simple or it can be done with all the trimmings of folk music troupes and processions. There is such a wealth of tradition and custom in the colorful processions that are part of the Thingyan Festival scene.

KASON (April/May)



Kason is the second Myanmar month and comes in **April-May**. It is also a sacred month for Myanmar Buddhists. The full-moon of Kason is a day of threefold significance:-

- Firstly, is the day that Buddha was born,
- Secondly Buddha attained Enlightenment on this very day , and
- Thirdly this is the day of his Parinibbana

Therefore, this day is commemorated as **Buddha Day** by Buddhists. Kason is the last period of scorching summer season, so it is very hot. The main activity on this festival day is pouring water at the **Bo Tree**. Pouring clean and cool water on the Bo Tree is done as a symbol of veneration to the Buddha who attained Enlightenment by meditating under the Bo Tree

Fullmoon Day of Kason observed at pagodas

On the Fullmoon Day of Kason (the Day of Buddha) which is a significant day for Buddhists.

The ceremony to pour water to Maha Bo tree, organized by Shwedagon Pagoda Board of Trustees, was held at Maha Bo Tree at the south-east corner of the pagoda.

First, the Sayadaws consecrated the Bo tree. Then, Sayadaw administered the Nine Precepts. Members of the pagoda board of trustees donated provisions to the Sayadaws. Then, Sayadaw delivered a sermon, followed by sharing of merits.



Next, the Sayadaws poured water to Maha Bo tree. The congregation participated in the water pouring ceremony.



At Sule Pagoda, the water pouring ceremony was held at Bo tree in the morning by members of the pagoda board of trustees, social organizations, well-wishers and pilgrims. Then, they watered the Bo tree.

A similar ceremony was held at Botahtaung Pagoda in the morning. Present were members of the pagoda board of trustees and religious associations.

At **Maha Wizaya Pagoda**, the ceremony to pour water to Bo tree was held. Members of the pagoda board of trustees and guests watered the Bo tree. Likewise, religious association members and people participated in the ceremony. .

Organized by Tooth Relic Pagoda (Yangon) Board of Trustees, the water pouring festival was held at Bo tree at the southern archway of the pagoda in the morning. Chairman of the pagoda board of trustees explained the purpose of the ceremony. Then, officials and guests poured water to the Bo tree



NAYON (May/June) **A Month of Thunder, Lightning**



Nayon is the third month in the Myanmar calendar, in summer, and fall in May-June. With the aims of propagation the Buddhism, especially Pariyatti Sasana the practice of holding examinations in religious scriptures in Nayon was held in the second Innwa period, when King Thalun reigned. Nowadays, the State sponsored Examination were held every year for Pahtamabyan, Dhamma Cariya, Abhidhamma, Visudi Magga and Tipitaka .Titles and Certificates for the flourishing of the Theravada Buddhism presentations of prizes and certificates are conferred on the Sayadaw, revered monks and nuns every year. Moreover, in commemoration of Lord Buddha's preaching of MahaSamaya Sutta to celestial beings from ten thousand solar systems, Maha Samaya Day was also observed in this month.

With **Nayon (June)**, the third month of the Myanmar calendar, the monsoon is in full swing. Gone are the lyrical dreams inspired by showers that fall like multicoloured bead strings through the sun-beams and fragrant vapours rising out of the sun-scorched earth, as gentle drops fall from heaven.

Now, everything is wet... just WET Dark skies, torrential rains and storms. Perhaps not as nice as one would wish, but a change from those hot days. The weather is ideal for story time when kids gather round the old granny

The Myanmar children will listen to the legend of the rains was caused by the warfare between the gods (*Asuras and Thagyarmin's soldiers*) The booming of thunder was the sound of the celestial drum whose frame was made of the shell of a giant crab who breakfasted on mammoth mastodons. The crab's claws served as drumsticks. Thagyarmin, King of the Devas (he's the same who comes down to bring in the New Year, remember?), strikes the drum to rally his forces.

Here we are again, another story featuring Thagyarmin. The whole thing began when the first Thagyarmin started the dynasty at the Abode of the Celestials.

Magha, the Good Samaritan

Thagyarmin, before he became what he is, was a human being. His name was Magha, Born of a rich and noble family, he devoted himself to good meritorious works. He formed a group of 30

men and organized people to do good deeds... repairing roads, building public rest houses, bridges, and digging wells

Magha's wife **Sujata** was a woman of beauty and charm and she was a happy-go-lucky type, content to enjoy a life of ease and pleasure. When Magha's life span ended, he was reborn in the celestial Tavatimsa abode. His thirty companions were with him. They' named their abode **Tavatimsa**, the Abode of me Thirty Gods. Magha was almost happy, but not quite, because among his good friends and companions, his beloved Sujata was missing. Thus, Thagyarmin, longed for his former existence wife Sujata

Thagyarmin waited and waited for Sujata to join him, but she did not come. With his omniscient powers he looked for her in other planes of existences. It was a sad day for him when he found that his beloved, fun-loving Sujata, lacking the strength of good deeds, was reborn in the animal world... a crane in the forest

It was fortunate that the life span of celestials was very, very long...(one day in the life of a **Tavatimsa Deva** is approximately equal to a thousand years in human life). So Thagyarmin had time to wait for Sujata and help her to gain enough merit to be reborn in the celestial abode

Thagyarmin went to Sujata, the crane and made known to her who he was and took her to see the grandeur, bliss and pleasures of his abode. He told her that all these could be hers, if she would only follow his advice. If she wished to be reborn in the celestial abode, she must do deeds of merit. She could practise self-denial and abstain from taking life, which was one of the five precepts humans observe on earth

It was pretty hard for a crane, a bird of prey living on live fish and insects, to abstain from taking life, but she promised to do so. Thagyarmin had made her realize how she had missed being reborn in the celestial abode, because of her failure to do her share in her husband's good deeds

Sujata was determined to do her best, she lived on things other than live ones; one day she saw a fish lying still like dead; she picked it up by its head but its tail wagged. Sujata dropped it. She would rather go hungry than kill for food. It was not long before she died of starvation

It looked as if Sujata had not done enough. She was reborn as a human being... a potter's daughter. Thagyarmin, ever watching her, saw that the family was poor. It would be difficult for her to do good deeds. So he took the appearance of an old man selling pumpkins. When Sujata saw the old man bowed down under the weight of his wares, her heart was filled with pity. She called the old vendor and offered to buy the whole lot of pumpkins just out of compassion

The old vendor, Thagyarmin in disguise, let her have the pumpkins at a token price and went away. Only when Sujata started to prepare the family meal featuring a dish of pumpkins, did she notice that the fruits were not fit for eating... they were of solid gold! So the family became rich overnight and Sujata devoted herself to good works. She simply gave away her riches in charity

While waiting for Sujata to join him, Thagyarmin was busy consolidating his position in the celestial abode. Some other celestials were there before him. They were called **Asuras**. Their deeds of merit of the past lives had blessed them with god-like appearance, super-normal powers and a place in the celestial abode, They, however, were too drunk in their blissful state to be good. They indulged in all kinds of wickedness

Naturally Thagyarmin did not want such strays in his abode. One day, while the Asuras were

drunk deep in the celestial liquor, Thagyarmin and his friends drove them out of their territory. The Asuras did not realize their fallen state until the season of coral flowers. Up in the celestial abode, there was a tree that bloomed exotic red flowers of incomparable beauty and sweetness. Only when the fallen Ones saw the common flowers without any scent on the bushes, did they realize of their loss.

The Asuras immediately rallied their forces to wage war on Thagyarmin. The beating of the war drums sounded like thunder and the flashing of arms filled through the skies like lightning. All the heavenly regions were disturbed and clouds' melted in raindrops.

It was a twist of fate that Sujata, after living a good and virtuous life, was reborn as the daughter of the king of Asuras. She was famed for her beauty and goodness and many celestial princes desired her. So a day was fixed for 'the choosing other bride-groom. On that day Thagyarmin joined the goodly company of celestial princes-and won her love. He carried her off much to the indignation of the Asura king. Thagyarmin made Sujata his Chief Queen and celebrated the happy event by taking the title Sujapati, the Lord and Husband of Sujata. It was his best loved and proudest title. Even as children listen enthralled to the story of Thagyarmin and Asuras, young people dream of the kind of love that lasted not just one life but many, many lives.

It is in this month of **Nayon** that scriptural examinations for monks and nuns are held. The lay people, mindful of the service of the monks and their life-long dedication to the study of the Buddha's teachings, do their best to supply the comforts and amenities of the candidates. It is necessary, to offer daily alms food to those who come from other towns to the examination centres. Contributions to the cause are donated by the community and organizations.

Organizations take charge of offering daily alms food to a large number of monks. Each household takes, in one or more monks, according to their means. Everyone is anxious, to do ..the meritorious deed of giving support to the monks, the Order of the Sangha, custodians of the Buddha's sasana



Apart from written examinations, there are those where the candidates have to recite all the scriptures by rote. It is a tremendous undertaking to commit to memory all the Buddha's discourses, known as the *Three Baskets of Learning*. There are but few who could pass the recitation tests and those who do are showered with honours and gifts. It is in deep gratitude to the Theras (monks) of olden times, who enshrined the Word, of the Buddha in their hearts, that the tradition of recitation by rote is still kept up to this day. It was only after 400 years after the demise of the Buddha that the discourses were written down on palm leaves. There were hard times when there was famine and monks had barely anything to eat. They buried themselves up to the waist in sand dunes to ease the rumblings of their empty stomachs and went on with their daily recitations of the discourses

In this way, the monks kept the Word of the Buddha alive even without sophisticated modern tools, tape recorders and microfilms. Today scriptural examinations are an important feature in Buddhist life. This month is a busy time for Buddhist households. The monk candidates who have to carry the torch of Buddha's banner, put all their effort by dedicated study and devotion

WASO (June/JULY)

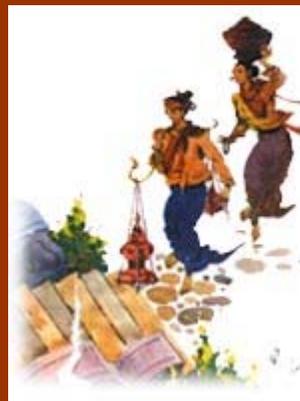


Waso, the fourth month in Myanmar calendar falls between June and July which is partially summer and partially rainy seasons. The full-moon day of Waso is very significant, because this is the day Buddha was conceived, the day that He renounced the worldly pleasure , and the very day that He preached the first sermon of *Dhamma Cakka Sutta* and the day that He performed the miracles of super natural powers. The day also marks the beginning of the Buddhist lent of three months when members of Sangha go into the rains retreat. A significant and meritorious deed of Buddhists in Waso is offering robes to members of the Sangha for use during the lent, and so these robes are called Waso robes. Moreover, there is a practice of young men and women going on outings of gathering flowers to be offered at Buddha images at pagodas and at homes

Waso, the fourth month of the Myanmar calendar, marks the beginning of the lent season. It is a time for sobriety, self-denial and religious contemplation. The fresh air of the early morning is filled with the tinkling of brass triangular gongs that summons lay folk to come and contribute what they can towards the communal offering of alms food for the monasteries.

How can anything go wrong on a day like this? The day began with the tinkling of *doo-wei-wei* from the brass triangular gong and the rich sing-song voice announcing: “Hear ye, *bawun-taw*, good friends, and our companions-in-doing meritorious deeds, please wake up, do wake up and prepare alms food for the revered *sangha*... bestir yourselves, good friends.”

The announcement is couched in poetic prose wreathed with familiar Pali words like *ba-wun-taw* (good people) thrown in for elegance and style. So, with the tinkling of the brass triangular gong in your ears, you roll in your bed from one side to the other murmuring, “So; it’s time to go down to the kitchen. Praise be to Buddha!” You listen to the lingering notes of the brass gong and unlatch your drowsy eyes, still sluggish with the last remnants of slumber.



(This is typical of a village life, in Myanmar).

After the usual ritual of writhing and stretching, you drag yourself down to the kitchen and begin to do the chores. It is still in semi-darkness, but not all gloomy, for the air is filled with the promise of the coming day. It is lovely to be woken up by the tinkling of the brass gong and the sing-song chanting of the neik-ban-saws.

How aptly are the organizers of these benevolent activities called Neik-ban-zaws, ushers-in-to-heaven. They are members of the voluntary service groups called wut-thins, which play an important part in the life of the community. Such wut-thin activities are still very much alive in small towns though rarely seen now-a-days in Yangon. In Mandalay, where old customs and traditions are still revered,, wut-thins operate in grand style. Members of these wut-thins wear all-white suits. They go round in procession collecting alms for monasteries. Some carry silver bowls to receive coins, and for receiving food, there are large three-legged lacquer trays with sets of small bowls inside. They are beautiful things with red domed covers. Each tray is suspended from cords attached to a yoke. With the tray hanging in the middle, two men shoulder the yoke at each end. The yoke is often painted red and splashed with gold and glass mosaic flowers. The huge brass triangular gong suspended on a pole is carried by two men, one at the rear striking in tune to the chanting while moving in step with the procession. No easy task, this.



Sometimes, the procession is attended by music troupes of drums, cymbals and flute. Even as the blinking stars fade away and the dawn steals over the horizon, lights shine through the window panes and people come out with offerings. The air is filled with music interposed with recitations and the tinkling of the brass gong.

People bless the *neik-ban-zaws*, who facilitate things easy for people to do meritorious deeds that would open the gates of celestial abodes. They see that monks are supplied with their needs during the lent season when they are not allowed to-stay over-night outside the monastery precincts

Waso is the time when people do meritorious deeds and practice contemplation and self-denial. People make it a point of fasting and observing special precepts one day in the week. Even habitual drinkers take a vow of abstinence, for the season, at least. It is good in a way for people to be reminded of the need for self discipline.

However, the lent season is not as dull as it sounds. Even as the senior citizens are making preparations for offerings to the monasteries, the young people busy themselves with organizing music troupes. On the full moon day people flock to the monastery with offerings; and, of course, there will be music troupes in attendance. There will be playful teasing songs that run something like this:

Mother is a scold
Off to Wazo Pwe we go.
Oh my love, fell a kokko tree,
And cut it quick,
Make a cart...
But, no... 't will take too long:
Why worry, love,

There's Ma Boke Sone,
Her ample hip for us to ride
To ride merrily,
Merrily, merrily all the way

Marriages are taboo during the lent. This has nothing whatsoever to do with any religious concept. Monsoon season is a busy time for the farmers and it is more convenient to celebrate weddings after the harvest is safely home. But, some impatient lovers often rush off to wedlock before the lent begins

The full moon of Waso month is the anniversary of the Buddha's First Sermon, at *Isipatana*, woodland of *Migadhaya* or Deer Park. The Buddha's first sermon was heard 25 centuries ago. The Four Noble Truths:

- *Suffering,*
- *The Origin of Suffering,*
- *Cessation of Suffering, and*
- *The Path that leads to the Ceasing of Suffering.*

The Light of the Four Noble Truths still guides us the way of enlightenment to those who are groping in the dark.

The Path laid down by the Buddha is not hidden in a maze of terms and phraseology. It is the simple middle way between the two extremes of devotion and pleasures of the senses and the practice of self mortification. It is the Noble Eightfold Path:

- Right View,
- Right Resolution,
- Right Speech,
- Right Action,
- Right Means of Living,
- Right Exertion,
- Right Mindfulness,
- Right Concentration.

The Right View comes first, because it is the key to the attainment of Wisdom. The minds of worldlings are often influenced by wrong views. The worldlings are driven by their own desires that result in Suffering. Only Right View can help men see this truth and attain wisdom that will quench the desires as dust is by rain showers.

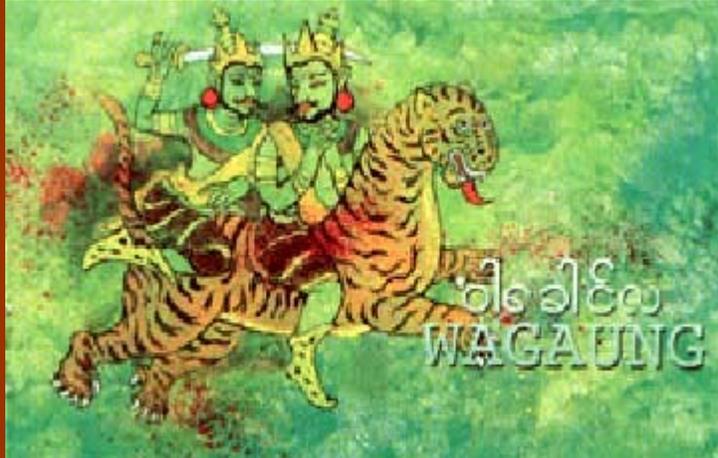
Perhaps many may not be able to grasp the Truth of the Buddha teachings, but whatever little effort they put in contemplation and meditation gives men strength to face life. With the Dhamma (the Buddha's teachings) enshrined in the heart, one can spread goodwill and loving kindness to all. The worldlings may have their feet deep in the mire of desires, but their hands may reach out or rather strive to reach out for the blossoms of enlightened wisdom

Blossoms of the Dhamma! That reminds one that this season is also a season of flowers. There comes the sound of music that leads young people who will roam the woodlands to gather flowers. The flowers gathered in joy and love will be offered to decorate the shrines and pagodas. As young people bow down before the stupas and the Buddha images, serenity comes even to the

most boisterous and mischievous of the gang as they recite the prayer

“May we, in future-one of these days,
Don the Blossoms of the Dhamma.”

WAGAUNG (July/August)

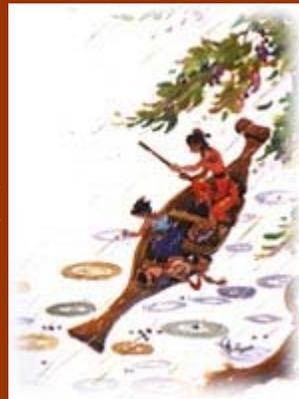


It is the fifth Myanmar month. It is in July-August, wet days of torrential rains, when rivers are in spate. In the time of Buddha, when the lord was staying at **Jeta's Grove** (Jetavana) *Anathapindaka* Monastery in Yazagyo, some disciples supplicated to him the matter of individual disciples having some difficulty to donate meals and alms for all the Sangha at the monastery at the same time, whereupon Buddha laid down a way of disciples drawing lots to determine which monk to offer meals and alms.

Waso-Wagaung, - “ *the rivers swell with rising billows* “so goes the saying. The monsoon is now in full swing and it is a busy time for paddy growers. Fields are ploughed and paddy plants are now ready to be transplanted.

Living in cities one can hardly appreciate the monsoon Heavy rains do not encourage going places. Nothing to do but gaze out of the window and coin epithets to describe the massive sheet of showers outside.

Only in the rural areas does one see the beauty of the rains. On the outskirts of small towns and villages, fields stretch out endlessly white panorama of rippling waters under torrential rains. Once the showers thin out, a few trees scattered over the landscape take a bow.



Then there comes forth a burst of mass singing as the farm girl-Tran planters respond to the young men playing drums and cymbals as they walk along the ridges of the fields. Since they have already done their share of work which is ploughing, they are strolling with their musical instruments to entertain the girls. They wear wide brimmed coolie hats made of palm fronds.

The young men look dashing arid gallant. Their coolie hats, drums and cymbals are decorated with gaily coloured silk tassels.

The music they play is suggestive of thunder rolling from miles afar culminating in a deluge of rain showers. The songs they sing are playful and teasing:

Listen-oh, listen, my love,
'The peal of my drum
Resounding like a brass gong.
Come, oh come closer, my love,
My little bird of sweet trilling notes!
Sometimes the girl's response is not very encouraging.
Love me, love me,
So they sing,
So they say,
Those idling swains
Walking on the ridges.
Daily they sing,
Daily they stroll
Love you? Indeed
No, no, not me,
I'm not free,
I've got my own lover!



Rice planter girls have to work in rain and mud and they wear rough home-spun clothes, but they do not allow themselves to be shorn of feminine charms, as one of their songs shows:

Let's put the golden bark
The fragrant bark,
On the stone slab,
And grind-grind-grind,
Then let's put the paste
Thick and smooth
On the face so fair.



One item among the beauty aids of Myanmar women, high and low, young and not so young, is **thanakha bark**. The bark is used as skin conditioner or face pack or make-up foundation. No rice planter girl will go into the fields without her face made up with thanakha paste a beautifier as well as protection against weather

The young men of the drum music troupes often sing complaining that they have no way of knowing whether a girl is unattached or not, so cute and winsome with blobs of *thanakha* paste on her cheeks how are they to know that she may have a couple of kids at home?

To such an outrageous affront, the girls retort saucily:

Oh, you men,
Strolling the ridges
With drums and cymbals
Oh, you—with kids and wife back home
Go—go—get lost!
You, eye-sores!

After they have had their fill of teasing and quips, they begin to strike a tender note:

Oh. My love
How the sun's rays lash you,
You drooping at the edge of planting field

As the sun blazes right on the heels of heavy showers and the rays are none too kindly, the girls respond:

Sweetheart, hoist your blanket
On a rope,
And please make a shade.

Paddy fields are rural folks' life and hope. When the fields come forth with a bright promise of plentiful harvest, the farmers' thoughts turn to alms-giving. There are sons and grandsons to be novitiated and so many celebrations like settling in a new home, or anniversaries to be observed with alms-giving.

Deeply rooted in the Myanmar character is a feeling that their worldly goods are not worth having unless they serve the good cause of the Buddhist *sasana* (Teaching) which is the very foundation of the Buddhist way of life. Every Buddhist does his share of supporting the Buddha's Order of Monks (**Bhikkhu & Bhikkhuni**) by giving a morsel of rice volitionally to the monks, which is in itself a contribution towards the cause

As the rice planters labour in the fields braving the weather, they sing of the time when the golden grain is ripe on the stalks. Then will the newly wedded couple do the alms-giving together; this act will seal their bond of love that will last not only one life but all the lives to come

Wagaung is a month for alms-giving by casting lots. According to the custom, communal groups solicit donors to prepare alms bowls, one or more each, depending on the means and will of the donor. Each bowl is filled with a portion of rice meal with curry and accompaniments like sweets and fruits

Monks are invited to receive the bowls and lots are cast. Each monk receives whatever bowl his lot falls. Casting of lots does not end there. Each donor is given a number of his bowl and lots are cast again for the winning number. The lucky donor often receives a sum of money. Usually the winner, overjoyed that he is being given the opportunity to do more deeds of merit, uses the money for yet another alms-giving. He often adds something from his own pocket to make the gift substantial.

Casting lots for alms-bowls is a festival full of fun and promise. It is called the **Maha Dok festival**. It all began with a man called Maha Dok, who lived during the life time of the Buddha. The story runs as follows

Maha Dok was a very poor man who never had a chance to do any deed of merit. One day some citizens invited the Buddha and his monks to the city and people were asked to help with the offering of alms food. Each citizen took the responsibility of offering alms food to one or more monks, according to his volition and means

Maha Dok, poor though he was, promised to host a monk. He and his wife worked hard to earn to (let an alms bowl and food to go with it. The man took a job of cutting firewood and he did it singing happily as he worked. His employer was struck by his cheerfulness and asked him what he was so happy about. Maha Dok said he had a very rare opportunity to offer alms food to a monk. The employer, glad at heart to see. Such a man, gave him choicest rice grains to cook alms food. The wife, who took the job of winnowing and pounding rice grains, did her job singing happily. When the lady of the house was told of the reason of the poor woman's happiness for the prospective alms-giving, she gave her some ingredients for cooking, like butter and groceries.

Maha Dok and his wife, happier still because of the good will of their friends, prepared the rice meal. So great was their enthusiasm that **Thagyarmin**, king of the celestials abode, came to them disguised as a labourer and helped them with their cooking. He, though a powerful celestial, was anxious to gain a share of merit, by helping them.

When the day came for allotting monks to their respective hosts, it was found that Maha Dok's name had been overlooked. The poor man was numb with grief. He was to be a poor man, without a single deed of merit to his credit, not only in this life, but for many more lives to come. At least this was what he thought

What Maha Dok did not know was that his efforts to do the 'good deed and his goodwill that went with them all 'amounted to a meritorious deed. Thagyarmin, king of the celestials had yet to play his trump card. He himself had caused the slip to occur in the allotment of monks. It was the Buddha himself who was left without a host, as it turned out!

So the lot fell to Maha Dok to offer alms food to the Buddha. There was a great uproar. Princes, lords and rich men ran after Maha Dok, offering bales of silver, gold and jewels to buy the privilege of offering alms food to the Buddha. But Maha Dok did not even give a glance at their offers. He was ecstatically happy that he was to host the Buddha

The Buddha partook of the alms food Maha Dok offered and praised his good deed. Thagyarmin, because he helped Maha Dok to do the deed, was also blessed. He then caused a shower of gold and jewels to fall in the yard of Maha Dok's house. As a good disciple of the Buddha, Maha Dok spent his wealth in good meritorious works. When his life in the human abode ended, he was reborn in the celestial abode.

The story of Maha Dok is favourite with Myanmar Buddhists. It offers hope to the poorest; anyone can do meritorious deeds and rise up in the ladder of existences. If only one has the will. The story is dramatized on the stage and it is represented on the precincts of pagodas in paintings and sculptures

In rural areas; trades people move from place to place in bullock carts or boats. For them it is a time for clan gatherings; friends and relatives meet on the festival grounds in happy reunion.

Such is the ingenuity of the people that they go on pleasure trips to places, make good business, meet people, and gain merit for the hereafter by paying respects to elderly relatives and making offerings for the repair and upkeep of the pagodas

In the days of the Myanmar kings, this month is the time for military displays. The Four Elements of War, namely, chariots, infantry, cavalry and unit of war elephants were turned out in full colour and glory. Horse racing, polo matches, war dances featuring swords, spears and shields were attended by boisterous music

One of the thrilling events was the shield dance with the music of the brass gongs in attendance. Members of the gong regiment, as the military music troupe was called, were virile, fleet footed and full of the joy of life. Their war-like spirit was tempered with love of nature, that moved them to sing rapturously of the idyllic surroundings, the golden pagoda on the hill, the meandering rivers and flowing woodlands

Here is the shield dance song written in 1343 by King Ngarsi Shin Kyaw-swa, who led the dance himself:

We belong to the good-regiment,
Are you true sons of valiant fathers?
True, true.
We see a pagoda at hand,
Is it the Buddha of the Holy hill?
Reclining Buddha.
The Thindwe canal floods and flows,
Is it a river, a roaring river?
Roaring river

Even as the war cries and music of the gongs blended with the roar of the rushing waters of Thindwe canal, men turned their eyes towards the royal city, the many-towered Myinsine, that had defied the invading forces:

City walls are on all sides,
Are these the battlements? Are these the towers?
Battlements.
The palace floor is of strong timbers.
elephants tread on them?
Tread on them

Then the memory of the Tartar invasions of yesterday and the valour of the bowmen who defended their homeland was honored in the action packed lines.

The Tartars came. Horde upon horde.
Horde upon horde.
Arrows rained, shower upon shower,
Shower upon shower.
Vultures filled the field. Month upon month.
Month upon month.
A multitude of cavalry, round and round.
They never won.
Lightning flashed, in the gathering gloom.
In the gloom.
The clouds were dark. Were they dark?
Very dark.
Rain followed the clouds. Did thunder roar?
Thunder roared

TAWTALIN (August/September)



Tawthalin is the sixth month in Myanmar calendar (August- September). Tawthalin being around September, the sun's path is approaching the equator so that it one of the times when the location of the country (between 10 N and 28 31'N) places its on the belt nearest to the sun. Therefore the dark, weeping clouds are often swept away to be overtaken by bright and clear skies reflected in the smooth vast expanse of the flooded fields and rivers, accented by stately palmyra showing off serried ranks of sun-ripened shiny jet-black fruits. sometimes continuous days of sunshine warms the water in the paddy fields so much that another saying connected with this month says

" The sun in Tawthalin kills off land crabs ".

As there is no rain and not windy, the surfaces of water in the rivers are very still and smooth, it is figuratively compared as smooth as the mats used in Myanmar houses. Thus, in ancient times, during the reign of Myanmar kings it has been a tradition to hold regatta festivals due to favorable weather conditions. While the regatta was in procession, the king surrounded by his entourage watched the event from his royal barge called "Pyi Gyi Mon Barge". Regattas were held not only for fun but also as a test for improving the skills of the Royal Marines. The flower of the month is the fragrant "Yin Mar", blooming in sprays of pale yellow blossoms with red -tinged stalks on the tree *Chukrassia tabularis*, the tawny golden hardwood from which is ideal for carving and turnery

Monsoon is thinning away and the skies are clearing. As the sun's rays steal through the drizzle, rainbow coloured showers swing in the wind like bejewelled strings.



Sunny days ahead-you say hopefully, as you rake out the mildewed rugs, blankets and coats, all hungry for a wisp of sunshine. There is romance in the air, as the ban on weddings is to be lifted with the end of the lent season which is next month. Lovers who have been waiting all these months are now busy with their wedding plans

The weather is fine and the wide brimming Ayeyarwady river spreads out like a roll of matting.

The month of Taw-tha-lin: rain softly pat-patting,
The mighty river rolls out like matting

So goes the saying. The river, calm and tranquil with dimpling waves, invites aquatic sportsmen. This is a month of boat races

From what we learn from songs and poems of old, boat races during the time of Myanmar kings displayed not only speed but also skill and grace. There are 37 styles of rowing on record. Each style has a name suggestive of a symbolic image and it is up to the people of today to stretch their imagination to visualize what it might look like

Take names like `fairy plucking flowers', and `fairy offering flowers'. Did the boatmen gesticulate with their oars to suggest the picture of fairies revelling in the sylvan glades? Strokes named `seagulls weep' and `sea-gull-soar' create pictures of racing boats sweeping and soaring over the river's surface

Regattas of olden days were held under royal patronage. The royal family, the king, queen, princes and princesses, had their own boats participating in the race. There was fun, colour and music galore. Boat songs were composed especially for the occasion. The boatmen wore varicoloured liveries matching the banners of their boats. Music boomed as the supporters of the competitors hurled picturesque limmericks at one another.

It was on such an occasion that **King Bodawpaya**, who reigned from 1791 to 1819, won a somewhat dubious "victory" over the queen's. The royal regatta opened with the king's boat racing against the queen's. It so happened at one time that the king lost the race for three years running.

The king had a favourite courtier named **U Paw Oo**, who was his chum and playmate in his childhood days. U Paw Oo was wise and learned and above all was gifted with irrepressible wit and humour. When the king was in need of guidance or criticism or even remonstrance, there was not one minister who could dare the royal wrath and say what had to be said. It was then U Paw Oo who would play the court fool, and point out the way to sanity and better judgment

As the month of Taw-tha-lin drew near and the preparations for the royal regatta was underway, the king was embarrassed by the veiled jibes and quips thrown at him by the queen and her ladies. They were sure that the queen's boat would win again that year. Bets were made and the king's boat had but a few takers

For three years running, the king had taken defeat with good grace, but on the fourth year, he felt that he could no longer be a good loser. Enough was enough. He had to win, that year, by fair or any other means. He had no one to fall back upon but U Paw Oo. He hinted that U Paw Oo, as the king's trusted henchman, should do something about it. How could a faithful servant suffer such a disgrace falling on his royal master'? The king, of course, would not stoop to command U Paw

Oo to conspire something unsportsman-like: rather that his clever servant should" do something about it" on his own

U Paw Oo, as if sensing what the king meant, assured his master that things would be different that year. He added that he was the kind of servant who knew his master's wishes by the mere nod of the royal head. The audience, U Paw Oo said, would see something different, something unpredictable that would take everyone, including the king himself, by surprise. Since U Paw Oo was cleverly evasive about the details of the plan, the king had to be content with, "Just wait and see, my royal master"!

The great day dawned. The king, queen and courtiers took their places in the royal marquee. The air was tense with expectation and thrill, as the flourish of drums, cymbals and gongs announced the race open. The first to come into view was the queen's canoe flying coloured banners. People cheered as the boatmen displayed their skill and grace with their rowing styles. But where was the king's boat? The king cast an inquiring glance at U Paw Oo, who just grinned and nodded. His twinkling eyes relayed the message, "Just 'wait and see, Your Majesty!"

So the king had no choice but to "wait and see" hoping to see something different from the preceding years. But he had no idea how different it would be. Even as he fought with his misgivings, a discreet titter rose among the courtiers and ladies. Fearing the worst, the king strained his eyes towards the waterfront. He was dumbfounded to see a huge barge that

..... like a burnished throne,
Burn'd on the water

"Look-look-His Majesty's boat is coming in to the race", the voices sang out. Music was sweet and haunting suggestive of lotus blossoms floating on the water admiring their own beautiful reflections. So did the barge, as the silver oars "to the tune of flutes kept stroke and made the water which they beat to follow faster, as amorous of their strokes.

So the royal barge bowled along, dignified and stately, oblivious of the queen's canoe skimming away towards the goal. At the prow a bejewelled figurehead dazzled in the sun. At the helm was a comely fairy steering with her flowery soft hands. A bevy of nymphs threw roses and jasmynes from aboard. They so perfumed the air that the winds were lovesick with them.

There was a loud burst of cheering from the queen's supporters. They threw quips at the king's men. There were peals of laughter, no longer discreet or controlled. More jokes at the expense of the king.

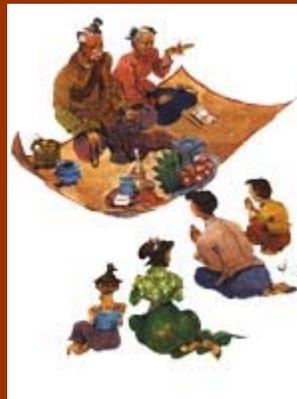
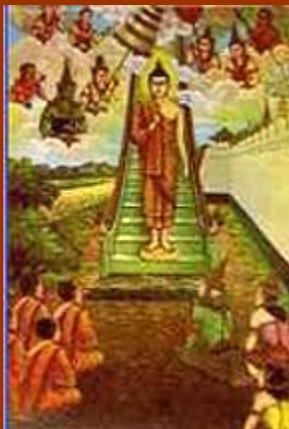
The king was aghast. He wished that he could sink and sink miles underground. He could not very well yell for U Paw Oo and give him what he thoroughly deserved. He would only make a bigger fool of himself. U Paw Oo came closer to his royal master's side with a smug grin on his face. The king glowered at him threateningly. But U Paw Oo was not rattled. He said, "Your Majesty, can't you see how your barge has won a decisive victory, like a fighting cock preening his feathers while the poor loser of a little canoe runs away for her dear life in the vanguard. Never mind what common people say. It is only the wise and the great that know a victory when they see one!"

The king's unseemly expletives were lost in the peals of laughter and cheering. The show went on with more mirth and fun

TADINGYUT (September/October)



Thadingyut is the seventh Myanmar month in (September- October) towards the end of rainy season. Lord Gautama Buddha preached The Abhidhamma to His reincarnated mother in Tavatimsa , abode of celestial beings for three months of rain retreat and returned to the abode of men on the full- moon day of Thadingyut . The King of the celestials created three stairways, gold, silver and ruby for him. Buddha took the middle ruby stairways radiating six hues of aura. The celestials came along by the right gold stairways and the brahmas by the left silver stairways . On account of that, Myanmar Buddhists celebrate **Tavatimsa Festival** on the full-moon day of Thadingyut by lighting multi-coloured lanterns. For the Sangha it is the time known as **Pawayana**, which means inviting, entreating, urging. In practice, since the times of the Buddha, it is to beg on other monks for forgiveness of any deed that might have displeased any other among Sangha. Like wise, there is also the practice among the laity of paying obeisance to parents and elders.



Thadingyut, the seventh month of the Myanmar calendar, marks the end of lent. Monsoon is on the way out and the skies are clearing. Sunny days are here to stay.

The austerity, sobriety and restraint of the lent season together with the damp murky gloom of the monsoon-all these have given way to fun and festivities. With the ban on weddings lifted, there is the scent of eugenia leaves and lilies in the air. The soft breeze whispers the music of flutes and harps.

The three day lights festival, namely the day before the full moon, the full moon day and the day after, will be those of music, dances and fun. Illuminations are there to celebrate the anniversary of the Buddha's return from the celestial abode where he had spent the lent teaching the gods above His Law.

Among the gods was the one who was the mother of the Buddha, reborn there. It was on the full moon day of Thadingyut month that the Buddha descended to the abode of humans. He and His disciples were attended by a heavenly host of celestials King who created the stairway for Buddha. Humans on earth illuminated the homes and streets to welcome the Buddha and His disciples.

Among the gods was the one who was the mother of the Buddha, reborn there. It was on the full moon day of thadingyut month that the Buddha descended to the abode of humans. He and His disciples were attended by a heavenly host of celestials King who created a pathway of stars. Humans on earth illuminated the homes and streets to welcome the Buddha and His disciples

Streets, houses and public buildings are illuminated and festooned with coloured electric bulbs. One feature of the festival in small towns and villages lighting; small earthen bowls are filled with sessamum oil and a piece of cotton is soaked in each bowl and lighted.

These lighted oil bowls are placed on the terraces of pagodas. The lights last longer than candles and the little tongues of flame quivering in the breeze lend an uncanny beauty to the scene steeped in silvery moonlight. Such lights are sometimes seen on the pagodas in Yangon city

The scene of the Buddha's descent from the celestial abodes is often recreated in the streets or pagoda precincts, all done in poster paintings and of course, lights, The festival is often called the Tawadaintha feast (heavenly Tavatimsa feast), being the name of the celestial abode where the Buddha spent the lent season

Thadingyut is not only a season of festivals and rejoicings, but also a time for remembering those to whom we owe respect and gratitude. The Buddha's visit to the Tavatimsa heaven was to teach the great Truth he had found through rigorous striving for many many lives, to his former own mother. It was a gesture of gratitude, an example for all to follow. The Buddha made the greatest gift of all, namely the gift of Dhamma (the Law) that would deliver her from Suffering once and for all.

It is interesting to note that most of the war campaigns and military sports are found recorded in classical songs and poems. One other spectacle in military parades was the unit of elephants which formed the major strength of the armed forces. Royal princes were expected to master the art of riding and combating on elephant's back. One of the most challenging feats was how to manage a raging elephant.

According to the Buddhist teaching, there are **Five Most Revered Ones**, namely the Buddha, His Law, His Order of Monks, Parents and Teachers. During the Thadingyut season Myanmar Buddhists go round paying respects to parents, teachers, elderly relatives and friends.



It is quite usual for the senior citizens in the street or residential quarter to receive gifts and respects from the younger people of the community. Sometimes it is an organized affair, but this does not prevent them from going to older people individually to pay respects. This way, it is more intimate and pleasant..

On the third day of the festival, people go round paying calls. It is 'open house' for many homes. Older people have light refreshments ready for the young visitors. They give away sweets and small change to children. Young people bring small gifts like candles, fruits and cakes, but it is not compulsory. Paying respects is accomplished by the act of kadaw, genuflection

The word kadaw is an everyday expression in Myanmar life. When you have to say something indelicate or impolite, you say it with the word kadaw; the same word is used as an apology for any transgression like, bumping into someone or stepping on another's feet. On such occasions the word is synonymous with 'sorry', but with a deeper feeling

When you have the necessity to touch someone's hair, like brushing away a wisp of dust, you do not do so without first saying kadaw, even though the person concerned may not be an older person.

The custom of doing the act of kadaw, is rooted in the Buddhist acceptance of the samsara, the round of rebirth, being born and reborn; all beings, humans and others go round the cycle, meeting one another in amicable or hostile relationships. Consequently, among people meeting one another in this present existence there would be love and kindness as there would be hate and enmity as well. There might be wrongful actions committed consciously or unwittingly to one another throughout the unwitting journey of samsara

When Buddhists do the act of kadaw to anyone, their parents, teachers or elders, they not only pay respects as a gesture of gratitude, but they also ask forgiveness for any wrongful action, *by thought, word or action* they might have done in this life and many, many lives before.

The elders, even as they accept the kadaw from young people, ask forgiveness in return for any wrongful action by thought, word, or action, they themselves might have been guilty of. This reciprocal action is called the 'erasing of the slate', which is the same as 'burying the hatchet'. After this act of 'erasing the slate', friends and kinsmen can start with a 'clean slate' with nothing but love and kindness

Paying respects or kadaw ceremonies are organized and held in schools. Paying respects or kadaw ceremonies are organized and held in schools. Paying respects to teachers, one of the Five Revered Ones, is still practised. Buddhist parables illustrate the good influence of teachers on their students, even though the latter might have become ruling kings

Once, a short time after the demise of the Buddha, the kings of India assembled to claim their share of the Buddha's relics. It was a goodly company of crowned heads, each attended by their infantry, cavalry, chariots and war elephants. Swords and spears and shields burned in the sunlight as the caparisoned steeds and elephants dug their heels impatiently, as they waited for action

There was dispute over who should get how much of the relics. Tempers rose and angry voices rang through the air and the steel clanged as the warriors made ready their weapons. Horses and elephants let forth a fearful trumpeting. A wave of blood and destruction was imminent

At the crucial moment, an authoritative voice rang out above the noise: "Silence, all of you!" The kings turned their heads towards the voice they knew so well, the voice that had dared to command them. There stood **Dona** the Brahman, who was their teacher, who had taught them the princely arts, in their student days.

There was silence, as the king bowed down to the one who had been their teacher. Without so much as a word of dissent, the kings accepted their share of the relics handed out by Dona the Brahman, and went away in peace

So this is the spirit of Thadingyut season... paying respects to those to whom respect is due and remembering those to whom we owe gratitude.

TAZAUNGMON (October/November)



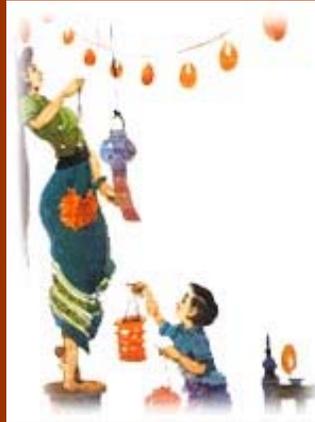
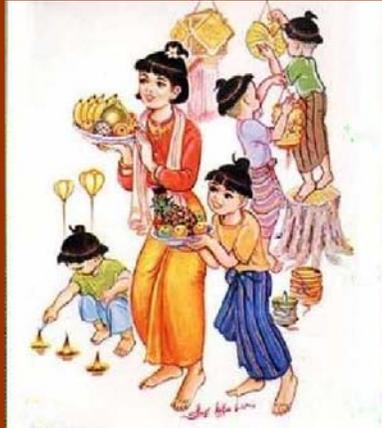
It is the eighth Myanmar month (in October-November) time for offering of *Kathina*, *Matho Thingan* , *Panthagu offering* , lotus offering and lighting . Kathina monk's robes are offered at this particular time of the year. It is held most communally . In connection with the offerings of monk's robes, for a Buddhist , the donation of this kathina robe at this particular time is regarded as the most meritorious , as the monk who received this robe was chosen in accordance with the unanimous decision of Sangha after the plenary session of Sangha were held

There is also a practice of eating salads of Mezali leaves with the belief that it is medicinal if it was taken at this special time (i.e. at mid- night) on the full-moon day of Tazaungmon

After four month of rain comes successions of festive months starting with *Thadingyut lights festival*. Come Tazaungmon, still another lights festival even more elaborate with the usual trimmings of music, dances and show. It is rather convenient, so say fun-loving Myanmar that the paper lanterns and decorations are still in fairly good condition to be put up again in three weeks' time.

Tazaungdine festival, as the lights festival in the month of Tazaungmon is called, is more or less a folk festival, probably pre-Buddhist, so originally without any Buddhist significance. *The festival, in honour of the guardian gods of the planets*. It is said that certain planetary signs of the zodiac are in the ascendant during the month. The influence of the planets in ascendance is such that people's thoughts are bent on mischief. It is during the month that thieves are moved to ply their trade.

Kings of the olden days decreed that feasts were to be held and all kinds of jollity and merry-making were licensed, so that people's thoughts might be channelled away from serious mischief, a kind of psychological warfare. There are stories of how men normally sober and steadfast were so moved by the spirit of the season that they did unseemly things. Perhaps the pleasant weather with cloudless starry skies and silvery moon beams may have something to do with it.



Though Tazaungdine lights festival began in the times immemorial as a folk ritual, it is regarded today as an essentially Buddhist festival. The month is the time for offering robes should be offered to the monks

Of course, there is no restriction whatsoever when robes should be offered to the monks. Anyone can make the offering any time to any monk; but this month's offering has a special significance. This is a special time, the time, when, after long months of seclusion in the monasteries, monks make preparations to go on trips to see the pay respects to their teachers and parents, now that the ban on travel during the rain retreat (only for monks) has been lifted

At such a time, many monks are in need of new robes. Offering of robes and other gifts, in this season are made not to any individual monk, but to the Order as a whole so that the needy ones shall get the robe. Offering of gifts to monks, if it is to bear highest fruition, must be made to the Order as a whole and not to an individual monk. Donors being human, are often moved to offer gifts to monks by personal feeling, like partiality or attachment. Although such other acts are, in their own way, meritorious deeds, the fruition is not as great as the act of giving to the Order of monks or the *Sangha*

Once, during the lifetime of the Buddha, his foster mother, Gotami, made a robe for the Buddha. It was made of finest material and marvellously elaborate. When she offered it to the Buddha, he suggested that it should be offered to the Order as a whole. It was then that he explained the desirability of such an attitude in making the act of offering

The Buddha in his infinite wisdom, saw that in the far future, his teachings would not last, unless the Order of monks that carried on with their study and contemplation is supported by the laity. The Order of monks must be supported by the laity. If lay people offered gifts to the order of Sanghas, the community of Sanghas will receive them and distribute among the needy.

Offering of special robes and other gifts made to the Order of monks during the season keeps alive the true spirit of offering, as taught by the Buddha. All the gifts are offered to the Order so that the needs of the poorest monks are suitably supplied. According to the rule a group of monks who have spent the lent under a senior monk in a monastery is eligible as an institution to accept the gifts called the *Kathina* gifts

It is the custom of the community to organize the offering of gifts, everyone contributing in cash

or in kind. Member of the same profession or trade or people working in the same office form such groups for this purpose and collect gifts for the monastery

Therefore, during this season, you will see wooden triangular structures standing in market places or in decorated marquees by the wayside. Each structure is hung with gifts, like sets of yellow robes, towels, napkins, cups and such useful things big and small. They are *Kathina* gifts and anyone is welcome to hang whatever he wishes to contribute, a kyat note, or a handkerchief or a cake of soap-no matter however small

Those structures hung with gifts are called **padetha trees**. The word *padetha* tree is synonymous with plenty and inexhaustible wealth. The story of *padetha* tree dates back to the beginning of the humankind (as said in Abhidhamma or Agganna sutta) world when people were pure of heart. They had a *padetha* tree which bore everything that humans could wish for food, clothes and plucked it from the tree. If one wished to wear an exotic dress, it was right there for the taking.

The only thing is that one must take only what one could use for the day and no more. Humans, however, were weak; they wanted to have things abundantly in their possession; they did not trust others, who might take more than they needed. One person troubled by such thoughts, began taking more than he needed and the next person followed suit. People began stocking things and there rose quarrels and fights and the tree was destroyed. From then on, men have to live by the sweat of his brow.

The original *padetha* trees are taken in triumph to the monastery, attended by music and dance troupes and bevy of damsels dressed in bright silks

It is a beautiful idea, to have a *padetha* tree on your doorstep. Perhaps you can grow it by hanging a small gift on those *padetha* trees of the *kahtein* offerings

The highlight of *kahtein* offering is the weaving of non-stale, that is to say, they are woven within the space of the night. This, of course, is optional, not necessarily an item in the religious programme. *It is perhaps a folk traditional to encourage the art of weaving*. This ritual glorifies the common labour of the rural folk

Even today this weaving of the robes is organized in rural and urban areas. Music, dance and prizes for the best weaver who can finish earliest and best add colour and enjoyment to the festival. The weaving starts at sunset and finishes at dawn when the finished robes are offered to the Buddha and His Order, of course the stupas and images representing the Buddha

In rural areas the weaving contest is even more elaborate. Picking of cotton and spinning are also included, and they are done within the space of the night. Cotton fields are reserved for the event. Village tracts organize the contests; organizing teams for picking cotton, spinning, dyeing and weaving.

Moonlight, music and dances lighten the labour. Yangon men with drums, flutes and cymbals entertain the girl throughout their chores of picking cotton, spinning, weaving and dyeing. The best teams and the best weaver are awarded prizes

The tradition of weaving the non-stale robes (*matho-thingan*) is still carried on at some of the pagodas in Yangon. Under the glare of neon lights, moonlight hardly has a chance to work its magic. This season is a festival one in the truest sense of the word. Illuminations, show, music,

all this a *padetha* trees too

On Such a Night as this

There are lots of interesting things that happened during the Tazaungdine season. Some of the events are tragic, some comic but all of them full of human feeling.

In Buddha's time, on such a night as this, the full moon of Tazaungmone, the city of *Rajagaha* was illuminated like the city of the gods and the sound of music and rejoicings filled the air while the whole city gave itself up to the joy of the moment. King *Ajatasattu* lay on the royal couch tortured by remorse. The king who had killed his own father could not find solace in his power or glory

The story of King *Ajatasattu*

When his ministers and courtiers gathered at his feet to pay him respects, he could only remember his royal father, so good, so virtuous and so well-beloved. **Ajatasattu** had done the foul deed at the advice of Devadatta, the Buddha's arch enemy, who plotted against the Buddha's life.

"You kill your father and be king; and I will kill the Buddha and be the Buddha in his place..."

Devadatta had said. Devadatta's misdeed was such that the earth gaped open with hell's fires and swallowed Devadatta

Ajatasattu heard the news and was filled with fear that a similar fate might overtake him. Moreover he understood too late how a father could love his son, because a son had been born to him. It was a moment of truth for the patricide king and he knew that he must go to the Buddha for the refuge. But how could he, a patricide?

Among his ministers was **Jivaka**, his half-brother, physician to the Buddha and his disciple. Perhaps he could ask Jivaka to take him to the Buddha. But a king could not make such a request in the presence of his courtiers. So, the king began the conversation praising the beauty of the night: "How fair, sirs, is the cloudless night! How charming! How lovely! What sage or Brahman shall we seek out to see if he may give our hearts peace?"

The ministers, each in turn, recommended the sages they themselves followed. The king listened in silence, waiting for Jivaka to speak. Jivaka suspected that the king wanted him to speak, but he would rather wait to make sure.

Finally the king asked Jivaka why he had not spoken. Only then did Jivaka rise up from his seat and with his hands clasped in adoration towards the Buddha, said: "Sire, yonder in my mango grove dwells the all-Enlightened Buddha with his disciples; 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 he went in royal state to Jivaka's mango grove. As he approached the grove, his heart was filled with awe because all was so quiet that not a sound was heard but the stirring of the gentle breeze. Why all this uncanny silence and quiet? Was Jivaka, his own half-brother, up to some kind of treachery?

His fears were put to rest when he saw the Buddha himself surrounded by his disciples. How

could such a great number of monks be so quiet! If only his little son could be so only for a moment, Ajatasattu thought, his heart greatly moved.

All was tranquil like an ocean in repose. Look where he would, he saw endless ranks of disciples. Then saluting the Buddha, the king asked:

"What is the fruit of religious life?"

And the Buddha answered the king's question in a discourse called the *Samaphata Sutta*. Glad at heart, the king made a solemn obeisance and departed.

The story of Ummadanti:

One of the stories associated with the Tazaungdine festival is the story of a beautiful maid named **Ummadanti**. She was born of a rich noble family. Her father thought that she was worthy to be a queen. So he sent word to the king who become interested. Before any girl could be selected to be queen, the king's wise Brahmins had to go and see her. They must read the lineaments of the body and decide if she was fit to be a queen

When the Brahmins were treated to a banquet at Ummadanti's house, they were so intoxicated with the lady's beauty that they made a mess of everything at the table. Ummadanti was indignant that the king should send boons on such an important mission. She ordered her servants to throw the brahmins out of the house.

Now the brahmins could not very well report the matter to the king since they had made perfect fools of themselves. So they sent in a report to the effect that the lady Ummadanti was not worthy of being a queen

Rejected by the king, Ummadanti was given in marriage to the king's general, a man of great courage and integrity. Ummadanti, with all her love and respect for her husband, could not get over the slight the king had given her. With the rage of a woman scorned she bided her time for vengeance

Then came the full moon day of Tazaungmone and the city blossomed forth in lights and festivities. The king was to ride the streets in full grandeur. It was a busy time for the general, Ummadanti's husband, who had to take charge of all security matters

The general, before he left home to go on duty, said to his beautiful wife: "My dear, the king will ride in state through the city streets and he'll surely come to our door. Please do not show yourself, lest your beauty should do harm where such is not intended."

Ummadanti's non-committal reply was lost in the tender cares she bestowed on her departing spouse. She gave him a loving sendoff and waited for what was to be her finest hour

As soon as her maid, in obedience to her order, came and informed her that the king's chariot had come, Ummadanti went to the open window. In pride of power and beauty's bloom, she stood with a basket of flowers in hand. She then threw the sweet blossoms at the king, whose eyes turned to her in pleasant surprise. She smiled the smile of a sylph, alluring and tantalizing. The next moment she banged the window shut leaving the king in the dizzy heights of desire and covetousness

After that the king was in no condition to continue his triumphant tour. He returned to the royal palace to fling himself down on the couch and moan in agony

From that time on it was impossible for the general to see the king and take his counsel on important matters of state. He was informed that the king was suffering from a strange malady. The general knew instantly the cause of the king's sickness. The king suffered in secret, ashamed of the unseemliness of his passion.

The general suggested that someone should be sent to the huge banyan tree where a powerful spirit lived and ask what should be done. He then put a trusted man in the hollow of the tree with instructions what to say. When the messenger came to the tree, the man in the hollow let forth an astounding oracle that the king was infatuated with the general's wife.

The general went to the king and told him what the oracle said and generously offered Ummadanti to his lord and king. Ashamed that his secret passion was known to *nat* and man, the king was brought to his senses and lived in peace, ruling his subjects justly

The story is a favourite with the professional theatrical players and amateurs. During the Tazaungdine festival the scene where the Lady Ummadanti threw flowers at the king is highlighted. The dramatists' ingenuity often makes the lady and the king bandy wits and the part of the king is clowned to the delight of the audience

NADAW (November/December)



It is the ninth month in Myanmar calendar at the onset of the cool season, with misty mornings in November-December. In ancient times, the seasonal festival was offerings of Nats, but this tradition had vanished in 1885. In the year 1944, a special kind of festival emerged, i.e. a celebration in honour of the literati (**Sarsodaw**). In the history of Myanmar literature, a day which is dedicated to U Pon Nya, who was a very famous, prominent and poet and renowned writer, and playwright in Konbaung Dynasty was held annually in this month. So, the present Sarsodaw or literati day has some connections with this past event. At the present day, it is the time for presentation of National Awards by the State for the writers, poets and translators in various fields for their talented and superb tasks.

Dry and sunny days with a touch of coolness in the evenings begin with the month of Tazaungmone. By Nat-taw, cold season is in full swing. In lower Myanmar towns like Yangon the weather is just pleasant, not too hot or cold, but in upper Myanmar towns and northern hill areas it is really cold.

Agrarian people in the countryside have a spell of leisurely days now that the fields are golden with ripening grain. The air is filled with music and song as a succession of local pagoda festivals and ritual feasts go on in the neighbourhood.

It is almost incomprehensible to foreigners that animism and Buddhism should exist side by side in Myanmar society and Myanmar personality. For an ordinary Myanmar Buddhist it is natural for him to believe in the existence of nats and to give offerings to them if he wishes.

When **King Anawrahta** of Bagan established **Theravada Buddhism** in the 11th. century, images of nats are given appropriate places in pagodas (Shwezigon, Pagan for instance). People were allowed to go on with their traditional offerings to their nats. The non-serving of the animistic ties was helpful in introducing the new faith, Theravada Buddhism. Any form of

offering to nats is within the teachings of Buddhism. Any form of offering to nats is within the teachings of Buddhism so long as people observed the Five Precepts. Hence sacrificial offerings of live animals are prohibited in the Buddhist teachings.

One of the basic tenets of Buddhism is that all beings, humans and nats of all levels are subject to the round of rebirths, the cycle of lives meeting one another in amicable or hostile circumstances. The state of level of all beings is decided by one's own deeds, good or bad

Nats are mentioned in many of the Buddha's discourses. The Buddha himself, before he was reborn as Prince Siddhatha, later to become the Buddha, was a Tusita celestial abode high above. When as Buddha, he preached sermons, nats form a great part of his congregation. Nats became his devout disciples



Consequently, when a Buddhist makes offerings to nats, it is done in the spirit of kinship and loving kindness, as one might do for a friend. Nats are beings like humans going round the cycle of life; they exist on a different plane of existence, but sharing kinship and continuity of life. Many nats are given niches on pagoda precincts because they too are disciples of the Buddha. They are there to look after the welfare of the pilgrims, as many people believe.

It is in this month of Nat-taw that ritual feasts in honour of nats are held. Even when the feast is held by an individual family, friends and neighbors join in to share the music, songs and dances

When a ritual feast is held either by a family or a community, professional mediums are called in. These mediums have images of nats. A marquee is built and all the images and accessories and offerings of flowers, candles and fruits are placed in there on an elevated dais.

A space is reserved for the orchestra, with the elaborate decorations of mythical figures like dragons and *pyinsayupa*, an animal with the body of a horse, winged like a bird, horned like an antler and scaled like a fish.

Dances are spirited as might be expected, as the mediums are possessed by the nats and the music is rollicking. It is a colourful affair and the audience can join in and people often do

Ritual feasts are, if anything, clan gatherings with all the romance, mirth and fun. Many of the songs, dances and plays of the Myanmar theatre have their roots in the ritual feasts

There are often practices that overstep the bounds of propriety and not in keeping with the teachings of the Buddha. Some of the ritual feasts run wild like drinking bouts. Such behaviours are frowned upon by good Buddhists. But things go on and will go on so long as people have their need for feasts and rituals and above all, to let off steam once in a while

PYATHO (December/January)



It is the tenth month in Myanmar calendar during the cool season (December-January). Pyatho, formerly was a time when Myanmar royalty displayed its strength with military parades. Nowadays, however, this particular period is reserved mostly for local pagoda festivals. During the reign of Myanmar kings it was the month for the equestrian festival held for virtually the whole month. Indeed, this festival is closely related with military affairs or martial arts, because various kinds of competitions in horsemanship, sword fighting, lancing, bowman-ship and maneuvering with elephants are involved. Indeed it is an occasion to select heroes for the defense of the country. A few major paya-pwes (pagoda festival) are held in Pyatho. The famous Ananda Temple festival of Bagan falls at this time

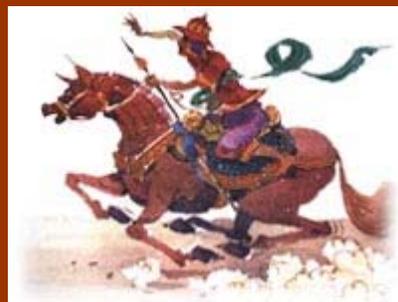
Pyatho is completely free from rains. Just sunny days, and cool, dew-drenched nights. The festive season, ushered in by Thadingyut (October) the end of lent austerities, monsoon and hard grinding work in the fields is in full swing. Most of the pagoda festivals are celebrated during the month.

This means long winding rows of stalls wherein products of various localities are displayed for sale: glazed earthen wares, boxes, baskets made of cane, bamboo or palm fronds, hand-woven cotton pieces in bright colours; all the things attractive, useful and decorative. It is a good time to shop for cotton wool fillings for pillows, cushions and mattresses.

These stalls shift from one festival to another and they are part of the pagoda festivals as are the merry-go-rounds, Ferris wheels and musical shows.

In rural areas; trades people move from place to place in bullock carts or boats. For them it is a time for clan gatherings; friends and relatives meet on the festival grounds in happy reunion

Such is the ingenuity of the people that they go on pleasure trips to places, make good business, meet people, and gain merit for the hereafter by paying respects to elderly relatives and making offerings for the repair and upkeep of the pagodas



In the days of the Myanmar kings, this month is the time for military displays. The Four Elements of War, namely, chariots, infantry, cavalry and unit of war elephants were turned out in full colour and glory. Horse racing, polo matches, war dances featuring swords, spears and shields were attended by boisterous music.

One of the thrilling events was the shield dance with the music of the brass gongs in attendance. Members of the gong regiment, as the military music troupe was called, were virile, fleet footed and full of the joy of life. Their war-like spirit was tempered with love of nature that moved them to sing rapturously of the idyllic surroundings, the golden pagoda on the hill, the meandering rivers and flowing woodlands.

Here is the shield dance song written in 1343 by King Ngarsi Shin Kyaw-swa, who led the dance himself:

We belong to the good-regiment,
Are you true sons of valiant fathers?
True, true.
We see a pagoda at hand,
Is it the Buddha of the Holy hill?
Reclining Buddha.
The Thindwe canal floods and flows,
Is it a river, a roaring river?
Roaring river.

Even as the war cries and music of the gongs blended with the roar of the rushing waters of Thindwe canal, men turned their eyes towards the royal city, the many-towered Myinsine, that had defied the invading forces:

City walls are on all sides,
Are these the battlements? Are these the towers?
Battlements.
The palace floor is of strong timbers.
elephants tread on them?
Tread on them.

Then the memory of the **Tartar invasions** of yesterday and the valour of the bowmen who defended their homeland was honored in the action packed lines.

The Tartars came. Horde upon horde.
Horde upon horde.
Arrows rained, shower upon shower,
Shower upon shower.
Vultures filled the field. Month upon month.
Month upon month.
A multitude of cavalry, round and round.
They never won.
Lightning flashed, in the gathering gloom.
In the gloom.
The clouds were dark. Were they dark?
Very dark.

Rain followed the clouds. Did thunder roar?
Thunder roared

It is interesting to note that most of the war campaigns and military sports are found recorded in classical songs and poems. One other spectacle in military parades was the unit of elephants which formed the major strength of the armed forces. Royal princes were expected to master the art of riding and combating on elephant's back. One of the most challenging feats was how to manage a raging elephant.

One of the poems describes a viva voce between a prince and his instructor:

Instructor:

Strong and fierce, gallant and proud, the elephant defies you, my lord. Supposing you break the goad while striking the beast. So, with only the broken handle your stay, how would you manage the raging elephant?

Prince:

The elephant defies me and I only with a wooden handle broken, I will with aim straight and unerring, strike at the point between his eyes. Strike hard right and left, until he turns round and round, his strength ebbing fast. This is how I shall win

Instructor:

Suppose, even as you strike hard, you break the wooden shaft. Now, left only with your bare hands, what will my lord do?

Prince:

While on the back of a fierce raging elephant, I am left defenseless, without weapons. With my bare hands, I can still win. I will, with one quick movement, bend my body forward and thrust my fingers right into the eyes of the animal, until he reels and staggers helpless and weak with giddiness. This is how I shall win.

Perhaps, this month is the time to visit old Myanmar capitals like Mandalay or Bagan and browse over books of poems and songs, and work up your imagination to visualize the military displays and martial sports of the olden days

TABODWE (January/February)



Tabodwe is the eleventh month of the Myanmar calendar, as this is the last period of cool season it is very cold, in January and February. The month of Tabodwe is the harvest festival, all the products of the farm and garden go in to make "**htamane**" a concoction of glutinous rice, sessamum seeds, peanuts, shredded coconut, flavoured with ginger and mixed with cook oil. Htamane 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



Come Tabo-dwe (February), the eleventh month of the Myanmar calendar, the Myanmar have the harvest festival. All products of the farm and garden are made into *htamane*, a concoction of glutinous rice, coconut slices, sessamum seeds, peanuts and generous amount of cooking oil.



Among the Myanmar, there is a custom which is called 'top priority for those to whom respect is due'. It is best illustrated today in small towns and villages where rice is cooked in earthen pots with humped lids and the cooked rice has a peaked shape in the top is crown of rice is reserved for offering to monks and senior relatives and the household shrine. If a Myanmar comes by a rare delicacy, he would set aside a portion, however small, for "top priorities". The rarer the food, the more care he takes to do so

Among the agrarian people in the country it is customary to set aside the first and the choicest

products of the farm or garden for alms giving. Hence the tradition of making *htamane*, which includes most of the fruits of the land.

Htamane feast is either celebrated communally or done in the private circle of family and friends. But with the Myanmar whose way of life includes 'extended families' it is always a fairly large gathering. The nature of the feast is such that it needs lots of helping hands. There is such a lot of work to do and there is no dearth of willing hands to help.

Even in family celebrations the harvest festival calls for a lot of people to rally round to do the chores. Girls do the winnowing of the rice grain. This done with flat circular bamboo trays. Each girl had a tray half filled with rice grains. She holds the tray with both hands, one on each end, so that her hands stay on the two opposite points of the circular shape. This position is important, because the next movement is to toss the grains up in the air and catch them again on the while most of the dust and trash are blown away in the wind. Then she rolls the grains in the tray so that the trash will separate itself from the highest form of virtuosity.

Since winnowing is for experts, the less talented might try their hand at shelling peanuts. They are put in a flat bamboo tray and a fair-sized bottle is rolled over them to remove the husks. Then the tray is made over to the expert winnower to do away with the husks. Since separating the husks from the seeds is not so difficult as winnowing the small rice grains, some girls might try the tossing and rolling themselves. This is good apprentice training for future expert winnowers.

Boys and men tear away the fibers of coconuts, which sometimes have to be taken down from palms soaring up to twenty to thirty feet. The bare cylindrical trunk is none too easy to climb. It is an exciting thing to watch men with ropes and knives go up the palm, and from a precarious foot hold, tie a rope to the bunch is slowly slid down to the ground where eager hands await to receive the prize



Now to break open the coconuts, the first step is to tear away the fibers. The built-in defense which Mother Nature has provided for her rare delicacy does not easily yield to human hands. Not only brute strength, but also an understanding of the intricate ways the fibers are interwoven is required

At long last the shell appears, but go slow, please. Do not spoil the shape. The shape must be in a condition that could be sliced on the carpenter's plane leaving minimum scraps. The clear sweet milk inside is shared by the deserving workers

Meanwhile, a giant concave iron pot is put over the fireplace, a pit dug in the ground for the purpose. with huge logs blazing fire underneath, the oil in the iron pot sizzles and shredded ginger is the first to go in, followed by glutinous rice which had been soaked in water.

A large cauldron of water boiling in another dug-out fireplace is kept ready to be added to the glutinous rice cooking in the pot. Hot water is added slowly in small portions, stirring the mixture as things go along. When the rice is soft enough and there is no water left, the pot is removed from the fire

The glutinous rice in the pot is soft and pliant with oil oozing out. The big pot is secured with bricks and stones, its base begin to stir the rice, crushing it between the ladles. Even as they stir

and crush, the rice gets stickier, so they have to use not only strength but skill to make the coagulate mass yield to the ladles

After some time of vigorous stirring and crushing, people come round to add slices of coconut and peanuts, slowly and in small portions to make the whole thing a good mixture. By this time crushing and stirring can no longer be done by two men; another pair is called in. Now two men are at the top end of the ladles while the other two take hold of the lower ends. Those at the top end guide the movement while the two at the base exert all their strength to bring the mass of glutinous rice together between the ladles so that they are thoroughly crushed.

Sessamum seeds are added last. This last portion does not call for strength, but it needs skill, so they say. While others are pitting their might to stir and crush and mix the glutinous rice and other ingredients, the one who 'sprinkles the sessamum seeds' sits by, sprinkling the seeds by handfuls at regular intervals. The blend and the flavour and the taste of the *htamane* depends on the art of the sessamum seed sprinkler--so it is claimed by the sessamum seed sprinkler

'Sprinkling sessamum seeds' is Myanmar idiom is equivalent to putting icing on the cake, a phrase meant, to describe some commendable work, but to disparage something people do only after others have done the dirty work.

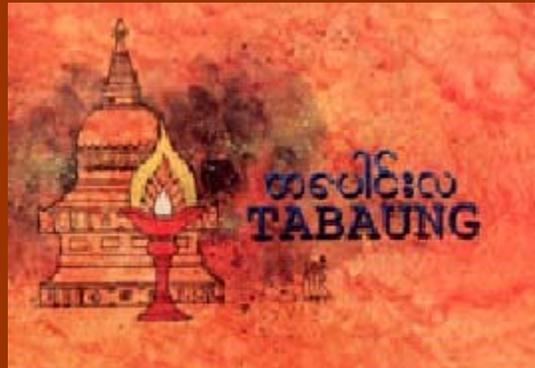


Shin Pyu for boys (Novitiation)



Ears Piercing Ceremony for girls

TABAUNG (February/March)



It is the twelfth Myanmar month and the last month in the Myanmar calendar and usually falls in February-March. It is the time of transition from the cold to the hot season. It gets hotter during day time while the mercury drops down at night, so that a saying comments " Hot days and chilly nights, making wayward Tabaung month". Meanwhile, deciduous trees lose their foliage to be taken over by tender leaf-buds, their waxy glossiness contrasting against the delicate tracery of twigs and branches. Gossamer clouds drift over clear blue skies and streams and rivers have changed over from their rolling boisterous role in monsoon to a sedate, limpid demureness in accordance with their losses in volume and rates of flow. Thus, it is no wonder that poets through the ages have waxed eloquent in praising the scenic beauty associated with this month. With the fall in the water levels of rivers and streams, sand banks appear on this pristine sand. In the ancient times of Myanmar Royalty, as there were a lot of splendid sand banks emerged during this period and as the weather is very pleasant and favorable for recreation. The king, queens and their entourage surrounded by guards went to these lovely sand banks in the rivers and create Stupas which are made of glittering white sand.

The raising of stupas made of sand and festivities surrounding this activity used to be a prominent feature of this month.

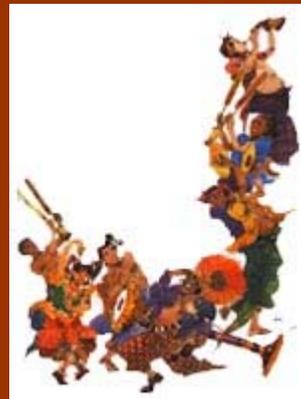
This consisted basically of moulding river sand into the shape of a stupa using concentric rings of bamboo matting or rattan cane to form the outline and decorating with various religious motifs such as pennants, banners, real and artificial flowers. To day, this festivity is too much more likely to be celebrated in song and literature rather than in actual fact. Now, the practice is on the wane, except in some cities and towns in upper part of Myanmar, but the time is still held sacred for holding of Buddha Pujayanti ceremonies, that is, occasionally for rededication of the pagodas. The most salient fact about this very month is that most of the prominent Paya-pwes (Pagoda Festivals) are held during this month, for instance, Shwedagon Pagoda Festival at Yangon (Capital City of Myanmar).

The last month of the Myanmar calendar falls in March. Days are getting warm and each morning the singing of the birds greets the new day. Nights are cool and pleasant especially in moonlight when gossamere wisps of mist lend an ethereal touch to the atmosphere



Tabuang is a month of pagoda festivals. The harvest is safely home and people can look forward to leisurely days of enjoyment. Each month of the Myanmar calendar is marked by a festival and Tabuang festival is marked by the building of **sand stupas**. Not content with having festivals in honour of the existing local pagodas, people have to build pagodas of their own, even if they are ephemeral ones built of sand

(Sand Stupa Festival In three different Mandalay quarters. Stupas are built with sand within a night. Sand stupas are built up with five segments gradually converging to the top. Each layer of white sand is supported by bamboo-mats and -posts. The celebration dates are not the same and depend on the different quarters where the festival is held)



The first man ever known to have built a sand stupa was a poor labourer who lived during the time of Tanhin-gaya Buddha, one of the many Buddhas who had come and gone before the one whom we know as the Gotama Buddha. The man was feeling unhappy because he could not do any deeds of merit like building stupas. One day he saw silvery sand dunes shining in the sun. Inspired, he mixed the sand with clay and built a beautiful stupa and decorated it with flowers.

Because of this good deed the man, as he went through the innumerable lives in the cycle of rebirth, never knew what want meant. Then came the time of the Gotama Buddha, and he was

born in a rich and noble family. He renounced his lay life and entered the Buddha's Order. As a monk, he had gifts given by his lay disciples; they were more than he could use. So he gave them away to his brethren. He attained the highest stage of enlightenment and he was also gifted with the super normal powers of knowing his past lives. He told the story of how he once built a sand stupa, and the blessings that resulted from this deed of merit

The festival of sand stupas is a communal one, everyone participating, from senior citizens to children old enough to dig the sand dunes. In **Twante**, a town on the other side of the Yangon river, well-known for potteries, this festival is celebrated on the full moon day of Tabaung month. Twante is about three hours' journey by motor launch from Yangon

Shwedagon Pagoda Festival

One of the highlights of the season in Yangon is the Shwedagon Pagoda festival celebrated on the grounds around the hill where the great pagoda stands. It is impossible to miss the pagoda festival. The grounds are filled with rows of bamboo and thatch huts which are market stalls or show rooms. There are also merry-go-rounds and Ferris wheels and musical shows

Products from all over the country, from the arid plains of central Myanmar, northern hill tracts, lowlands and the delta areas of the south, are there- baskets, mats, trays and boxes made of cane or bamboo or palm leaves; cotton wool quilts, fillings for cushions and mattresses, cotton rugs, bags and hand-woven textiles in colourful patterns; paper Mache dolls, some of them grotesque yet attractive; glazed earthen-wares, pots, vases, ash trays; lacquer ware useful as well as beautiful

This part of the festival grounds is a wonderland where you may wander and browse for hours and come away finally laden with beautiful things, most of them useless.

Perhaps, you might like to stroll along the rows of food stalls and try varieties of Myanmar snacks, just for once, which I am afraid, would be quite enough. There is *mohn-hin-gar* a vermicelli dish with hot thick fish soup. But what are those ringlets floating therein? Oh, they are slices of young tender banana stems, very tasty, just try. Sprinkle the shredded green celery for special flavour.

You might try a dish of Myanmar noodles with chicken curry, the gravy of which is made with white bean flour and coconut milk (that is the milk squeezed out of finely shredded coconut kernel), very thick, rich and delicious.

As you walk through the never-ending gastronomical paradise, the air is thick with the heavy aroma of frying. Right before you is a grand carnival of crispier and pan-cakes. The most popular is the gourd crispies (Bothekeyaw). Young and tender gourds are cut into fingers, coated with rice flour batter and deep fried. They are eaten with green lettuce leaves, celery and sauce made of tamarind pulp and hot red chillies. Hot green tea serves as chaser

Ba-yar gyaw is the kind of crispies made of lentils, crushed into a pulp, mixed with spices, and deep fried. Other varieties are shredded onions, prawns and all kinds of beans and peas. You see crispies floating in hot steaming oil in huge iron cauldrons. Just watch the shop woman expertly fish them with a sieve-like ladle and lay them on the bamboo tray, hot and inviting

There are many other toothsome delicacies, which you may not know for what they are: for

instance, those white tall bamboo sticks standing in threes and fours, propped like rifles. What are they really? No, they are not lethal weapons, they are glutinous rice cylinders; for, inside the hollow of the menacing sticks are chunks of glutinous rice, which have been baked on open fire in their containers. There you have the most hygienic packing ever devised.

You can buy those bamboo sticks and take them home. When you have peeled off the bamboo strips (this calls for expert hands!) you have a lovely cylinder of glutinous rice encased in a thin film from the hollow of the bamboo... it gives a pleasant flavour.

Glutinous rice comes in various kinds of packing: banana leaves, palm fronds, each having a special flavour, as they are steamed or baked in their packing. They also have fillings, coconut, or banana or jaggery.

There are stalls with mountainous heaps of wafers made of glutinous rice flour, paper thin and light as air and very brittle. You buy them in bunches of fives or tens, strung on bamboo strips. They are crunchy and munchable. You enjoy them showering white flakes on yourself and your fellow beings as you chew and jostle your way through the crowd. You see hot steaming griddles on which flat brown pancakes are being fried. They look nice with sprinklings of sesame seeds and peanuts. It is mohn-see-gyaw, a favourite sweet. The main ingredients are glutinous rice flour and jaggery. There are 'bracelet' crispies, glutinous rice flour kneaded and shaped into bracelets, and deep fried. They are taken with jaggery syrup.

Crispies and snacks are a-plenty on the festival grounds. Most of them are no good taking home to eat- They are best eaten right on location. With the aroma of frying (which you have to breathe in anyway), why give yourself a splitting headache by just taking in the smells? Give yourself a good time, tasting, munching and chewing all varieties. Never mind the headache and the stomach upset. After all, it is worth every spasm of pain that comes the morning after.

Source:

1. <http://www.modins.net/myanmarinfo/festival/tapaun.htm>
2. <http://www.modins.net/myanmarinfo/festival/tabodwe.htm>